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The Plagiarism Plague

By Justin Kestler

Thomas Jefferson didn't just write the *Declaration of Independence*. He also invented one of the world's first macaroni machines and founded the University of Virginia (UVA). UVA has the distinction of being the university with perhaps the oldest honor code in the nation. On every test and paper they write, UVA students must pledge not to "lie, cheat, or steal" in carrying out their work. They must also promise to report any honor code violations they observe. The only penalty for breaking the honor code is immediate expulsion from the university.

In 2002, UVA responded to reports of a widespread plagiarism scandal by conducting a 20-month-long investigation that led to the permanent expulsion of 48 students. Most of the students involved in the UVA case were caught copying other students' research papers word for word, the most obvious form of plagiarism and a clear violation of UVA's honor code.

Most student plagiarism results from a misunderstanding or ignorance of what plagiarism means in all its forms. So we'd like to clear up the fuzz and set the record straight while we're at it:

What is plagiarism and what does SparkNotes really think about it?

SparkNotes and Plagiarism

At SparkNotes, we never include disclaimers in our books because we trust that students who care enough about school to use SparkNotes value their education and therefore won't cheat themselves by plagiarizing our study guides.

We'd be dishonest if we claimed that students never cross the line and use SparkNotes content without proper acknowledgement in their papers. Sometimes they do. SparkNotes has always aimed to support and improve education, not undermine it. SparkNotes condemns plagiarism in any form.

Here's why we think plagiarizing SparkNotes content (or any content) is a very bad move:

- Plagiarism is stealing someone else's property, and that's just plain wrong.
- Plagiarism cheats students out of their education and can lead to grave consequences in their educational, personal, and professional lives.
- Plagiarism is a plague on teachers: it makes their jobs tougher and less rewarding. It also gives teachers a warped perception of what SparkNotes is all about.

Many schools acknowledge that students they expel due to plagiarism claim to have had no idea they were doing anything wrong (see "Paraphrasing" below). That's not an acceptable excuse, of course, but it is an indicator of a greater plague: ignorance.

We view students' misunderstanding of plagiarism as a failure in education, not a downfall in morality. We believe that services that purport to "detect" plagiarism are mostly aiming to profit from a gap in education that's given rise to the recent plagiarism plague, rather than trying to stop the problem at the source. Students need to know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. So we're here to help clear things up.

What is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is copying the words or the ideas of another person or institution without acknowledging that you got those words or ideas from that source.

It's as simple as that, and guess what? We took that definition almost verbatim from the explanation of plagiarism posted on the webpage of Emory University's writing center. If we had not acknowledged our source and just kept on writing the rest of this article, you'd probably never know, but we'd be guilty of plagiarism and somebody at the Emory University writing center might end up justifiably pissed.

A quick way to understand plagiarism is to think of thoughts as you think of property: you should get the same feeling about stealing words

and ideas as you do about stealing cars—they both belong to someone else and can't be taken without serious repercussions. In the academic world, we're not talking about jail-time, but the most frequent penalty for proven plagiarism is suspension or expulsion. Many students slack off in their senior year of high-school or college, plagiarize a paper, and end up not graduating or being rejected by college admissions departments or potential employers.

Most people think of plagiarism only as copying someone else's essay word for word, but as the definition above shows, it's more subtle and sprawling than that. Here are the three most common types of plagiarism, with a brief explanation of each:

I. Copying Verbatim

The most basic form of plagiarism happens when you copy someone else's ideas word-for-word without acknowledgement (a sentence, a paragraph, or more) and call it your own work. An obvious no-no.

II. Copying Verbatim, but Including Acknowledgements

Students often think that if plagiarism is all about providing "acknowledgements" for your sources, then it's OK to just copy word-for-word as long as footnotes are included. That's kind of like saying it's OK to steal a car as long as you leave a long apologetic note addressed to the owner. No dice. If you ever use verbatim language from anywhere, you must include it in quotes. Alternatively, you can express the ideas contained in your source entirely in your own words *with* attribution to the source via a footnote or endnote.

III. Inappropriate Paraphrasing, or "Patchwriting"

Take heed because this one's the real killer. What's the difference between "inappropriate paraphrase" and expressing ideas in your own words? Think of paraphrasing as a half-assed attempt to present someone else's ideas as your own. It's for people who know full-on copying is wrong, but who think "expressing ideas in your own words" means changing the source's word choice a bit and maybe throwing in an extra word here or there. That's paraphrasing, or "patchwriting," a.k.a plagiarism.

For example, let's say you decide to write your own declaration of independence from your family. You include a line early in your declaration that reads something like this, "Everybody's equal and there are a few rights everyone deserves. For example: life, liberty, and the right to have a good time." Clearly the source of both your ideas and your word choice is **the** *Declaration of Independence* (1776), but you haven't acknowledged the source—instead you present the idea and its phrasing as your own.

Notice how in the above example the word choice is not exactly the same as the *Declaration*'s language. Remember: you don't have to use the exact words from your source to commit plagiarism. If you use unoriginal ideas expressed in language even vaguely close to your source without proper acknowledgement, you're plagiarizing. That applies to all previously published work, even if it's in the public domain like the *Declaration of Independence*.

How to Avoid Plagiarism

Now that you know precisely what plagiarism is, the next step is to figure out how *not* to do it. Here are two guidelines you need to commit to memory to avoid plagiarism.

1) Acknowledge **All** Non-Original Words *and* Ideas

Every book begins with "acknowledgements" in which the author thanks everybody without whom "this book would not have been possible" or something like that. You need to acknowledge everybody who helped make your papers possible too, even if that's Thomas Jefferson or William Shakespeare. If you express someone else's ideas entirely in your own words *and* properly acknowledge the source of every non-original idea in your work, you won't plagiarize and you don't have to worry about getting booted from school—unless you do something comparably heinous.

What's proper acknowledgement? Usually it means including quotations to indicate language you're using verbatim and keeping thorough footnotes or endnotes to document the sources of ideas that are not your own. Your "sources" can be everything from a teacher's lecture to an interview to a professor's textbook to a SparkNote (ahem). Requirements tend to differ among educational institutions, so check with your school's policies to be sure your work meets their expectations.

2) Make It New

The aim of all academic research is to use existing ideas as a springboard for your own "contribution to the field," as college professors like to say. You make that "contribution" by infusing all of your academic work with your own ideas (and citing the ideas of others whenever you use them to support your own arguments). That's not to say all of your ideas must be 100% original—thousands of papers have been written on stuff like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Romeo and Juliet*—but they must come from you and your thoughts.

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Remember in *The Catcher in the Rye* when Mr. Spencer tells Holden that "Life is a game that one plays according to the rules"? Whether you

agree with Mr. Spencer or not, plagiarism is one of the rules everybody has to abide by in the educational game. If you know the rules, which we've tried to spell out clearly here, you'll play the game and graduate with ease. If you don't play by the rules, or worse—if you don't even know the rules and then break them—you could end up having done a ton of work for nothing.