

Understanding and avoiding plagiarism

A guide for students

Version 1, 20.09.2021

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Access for students: https://www.en.uni.lu/luxembourg_learning_centre/resources/academic_information_skills/plagiarism

Access for staff: https://intranet.uni.lu/the_university/tr/Pages/VRA-Documents.aspx

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About this handout

This handout is intended as a guide to help you understand, be aware of, and avoid plagiarism in your written work(s) submitted for assessment at the University of Luxembourg.

You should use this guide when preparing for, and writing, your assignments, at any point during your studies. You can download this handout from the [webpages for academic skills resources of the Learning Centre](#).

The University expects you to know and observe the rules and values regarding academic integrity, as set out in point 15 of the *Charte des usagers*, which is annexed to the Study regulations ([Règlement des études du 5 mai 2020](#)):

L'utilisateur s'engage dès le début de sa scolarité et jusqu'à la fin de ses études au sein de l'Université à respecter les règles de l'honnêteté intellectuelle, notamment à ne pas avoir recours au plagiat, à la fraude ou à toute autre méthode illicite ou contraire à l'intégrité scientifique.

The user undertakes, from the beginning until the end of his/her studies at the University, to respect the rules of intellectual honesty, in particular not to resort to plagiarism, fraud or any other practice that is illicit or contrary to academic integrity.

The standards of academic integrity to which the University of Luxembourg subscribes include the assumption that the author of an academic work owns the original ideas and arguments exposed in that work. This assumption of intellectual ownership extends to the text – the words, phrases and text structure – through which the ideas and arguments were expressed. It implies that wherever a text or something expressed in it has informed or is used by another author, this author must acknowledge it. An author that fails to do so is guilty of **plagiarism**: of stealing the ideas, arguments or text owned by another.

This aspect of academic integrity also applies to the academic work you submit for assessment as part of your study programme at the University. It demands that this work, for which you claim authorship, must be your original work. You are expected to appraise and engage with the works of others as far as pertinent to your subject of inquiry, and to properly acknowledge these works where they have informed, or had an impact on the originality of, your own writing. No matter whether you write an undergraduate essay or prepare a master thesis, it is your responsibility to adhere to the ethical standards of honesty and integrity in your work, and to avoid plagiarism. This brief guide is intended to support you in this process.

Understanding plagiarism

What is plagiarism?

The [University's Disciplinary procedure in cases of fraud and plagiarism](#) defines plagiarism as “the act, voluntary or involuntary, of copying another person’s work and passing it off as one’s own”. Plagiarism occurs, in other words, when you reproduce, use or present an idea, line of reasoning, insight, data or else of which you are not the author or that has been presented by somebody else before you, without properly acknowledging the source.

To understand plagiarism, it is important to be aware that whenever you present an idea, argument, or data without including a citation, readers must assume that you are claiming it as your own. If it is not, i.e., if the argument has been made by another author before you or the data were provided by somebody else, you are guilty of plagiarism. This means that plagiarism occurs even if you did not deliberately pass an idea off as your own, e.g., because you forgot to include a citation or you did not cite the original author or because you mistakenly assumed that the idea was common knowledge and therefore did not need a citation. It also occurs if, rather than reproducing an entire argument, you merely built on it, selecting and modifying elements as you developed your own. Failure to acknowledge other people’s work that has informed your own always constitutes plagiarism.

Avoiding plagiarism is, therefore, first of all a matter of correctly citing all your sources (see for how to do so the University’s handout [Academic writing: A style guide for students](#)). It goes beyond that, however, as only by familiarising yourself and engaging with the literature are you able to judge the extent to, and ways in, which your own ideas are original. An essential aspect of academic integrity is thus the expectation that you survey and appraise the literature that is pertinent to your subject of inquiry, and make an appropriate effort to understand what others have written and argued in relation to your question or topic. What is considered ‘appropriate’ and how much is expected in this respect depends on the type and context of the assignment, and should be clarified with the course instructor beforehand.

The following fictitious situations address different forms of plagiarism and are meant to help you understand what constitutes plagiarism in academic writing.

Further practical advice on how to identify and avoid plagiarism, as well as on its potential consequences, is provided below.

Raising awareness: Frequently asked questions

The following fictitious situations address different forms of plagiarism and are meant to help you understand what constitutes plagiarism in academic writing.

Further practical advice on how to identify and avoid plagiarism, as well as on its potential consequences, is provided below.

Q1. I have a class for which we have to submit an individual assignment, but we all need to answer the same essay question. What about writing my assignment together with my classmates and sharing notes, resources, etc.?

Closely working together with fellow students on an individual assignment is referred to as collusion and is considered a form of plagiarism. You can and may often even be encouraged to discuss the content of the course with your classmates. When it comes to preparing an individual assignment, however, you need to work on your own. Otherwise, you risk using the same arguments, approach, structure, format, etc., as your classmate(s), which constitutes plagiarism. Preparing an individual assignment on your own will also help you develop your own understanding of the topic and your own argument.

Q2. What about splitting the assignment with my classmate(s)? We each write several sections of the assignment and then share them.

Splitting the writing task for an individual assignment is a severe form of collusion (s. Q1 above) and is considered plagiarism. Feel free to discuss your ideas and test your reasoning with classmates, but you need to write your assignment individually, unless otherwise indicated. Trust in your competences and knowledge on the subject. Work alone.

Q3. My best friend knows that I am very stressed about this assignment. She/he has offered me to have a look at her/his work, which is finished but not yet submitted. I think it is a good idea. I will just look at how it is done and the structure, nothing else.

Not recommended, neither for you nor for your classmate. If you read someone else's work, you may be influenced by it. Although most likely unconsciously, it is very easy to copy ideas from someone else and come to believe that they are your own. Avoid reading your classmates' work while still preparing your own. And avoid sharing your assignment with others. Instead, discuss your arguments with colleagues and then write them up on your own.

Q4. I have a dilemma and I do not know what I am supposed to do. My best friend in class has asked me to have a quick look at my assignment, just for inspiration. What am I supposed to do?

It is not recommended to share your assignment, even with your best friends (s. Q3. for the reasons). The same applies to your personal notes on your assignment. Instead, you can support your friends by offering them to discuss their ideas with them, share advice on note-taking or writing strategies, or help them to overcome procrastination, e.g., by inviting them to join you for a writing session at the Learning Centre, or similarly.

Q5. There is a part of my argument that I am taking from one of the articles that I have read. I cannot remember which one and I read so many papers that it would take me ages to find it again. What if I just include it without mentioning the source? In fact, it is only a small part of the overall argument.

Re-using someone else's ideas or arguments without giving them credit by citing the source is one of the most blatant forms of plagiarism. And it is plagiarism, independent of how (in)significant the idea is for your own work. The same applies to the uncredited reproduction of images, graphs or data. When doing the research for your papers, make sure you work with a consistent system for note-taking that will allow you to locate and retrieve the original sources of passages you may want to quote or that have informed your arguments. Whenever possible, save a copy of the works you have consulted, note down the full reference, and mark your notes with a short reference to their source, e.g. using the author-date system and page numbers. This will save you time when editing your assignments and is essential for avoiding plagiarism.

Q6. There is a short passage from an early work in my field that I would like to quote. Unfortunately, I did not manage to get hold of the original publication. I found the same passage quoted in an unpublished working paper, but the citation is incomplete. I am wondering whether I should cite that working paper, use the incomplete citation, or just leave out the quotation marks and not cite the source at all?

Not marking as a quote text that you copy verbatim is blatant plagiarism. A subtler and rather common form of plagiarism is to include inaccurate or incomplete citations in your work. No matter whether you quote (you keep the original words) or paraphrase (you express the idea in your own words), you need to acknowledge the source by citing in accordance with the applicable citation style. To that end, follow the citation rules provided by your course instructor or study programme, or refer to the University's handout [Academic writing: A style guide for students](#). If you cannot find the complete reference for a source, ask your course instructor or librarian for help. Also, always make sure you cite – and consult – the original publication that contains the quoted passage or idea. It is your responsibility to be faithful to your sources. Do not rely on others, even if they are respectable scholars, to do this work for you.

Q7. I am working with this argument from an author in my field and I have found a very good summary of it by a third author on the internet. I have paraphrased a good part of that summary to explain the argument in my paper.

Unfortunately, I do not know the exact source for the summary. It could be an unpublished paper. I am afraid of citing it inaccurately, so I am considering to just leave out the citation.

Paraphrasing without citing the original author constitutes plagiarism. If you are unsure about the source, e.g., because it is an unpublished paper you have found online, you have several options. You can consult your library catalogue or online search engines to locate a published version of your source (using, e.g., the title, author, or keywords from the text). If unsuccessful, you can ask your librarian or course instructor for help. Please do not contact the author without consulting your course instructor beforehand. If none of this is successful, you should cite the website on which you found the source (see also the University's handout [Academic writing: A style guide for students](#)).

Q8. My text is based on an argument by one of the leading authors in my field. It is quite complex but I found a passage of four paragraphs in an article of the author that explains it really well, much better than I think I could ever summarise it. Before risking to misrepresent the original argument, I prefer to quote the full passage, even though it is rather long.

Strictly speaking, this is not plagiarism if properly quoted, but it is not acceptable either. You should not quote lengthy passages (beyond 4-5 lines/one paragraph), in particular if they are central to your own work. Instead, synthesize them in your own words and in view of your own line of reasoning. If you have doubts about whether you are doing justice to the original argument, make it clear how you interpret it, consult the secondary literature to learn what others have made of the argument, and allow for the possibility of alternative interpretations. You can also discuss your doubts with your course instructor.

Q9. My paper contains a passage in which I collate ideas from several authors to develop my reasoning. Unfortunately, I cannot recall exactly which parts come from which source. I think the argument I am making is pretty original, so I wonder whether I even need to cite all these sources? As a matter of fact, I have only taken inspiration from little bits and pieces...

You must cite all sources that have informed your work, even if you combine and significantly develop the respective ideas further. This kind of plagiarism is sometimes referred to as 'mosaic plagiarism', insofar as it consists of assembling and combining ideas and arguments taken from multiple sources into a larger whole. The term can also refer to attempts of rendering copied passages unrecognisable as such, by adding, leaving out or replacing certain words or phrases, or by changing their order. Both cases are plagiarism and not acceptable. When taking notes and drafting your texts, make it a habit to mark the building blocks of your line of reasoning with the sources from which you take or that have informed them (e.g., using the author-date system). This will help you save time when inserting the correct source in your text.

Q10. I wrote a paper on almost the same topic last year. My ideas on the issue have not really changed, so I will just update that paper a bit and submit it. In any case, it was with a different course instructor.

This is considered self-plagiarism. Your work is supposed to be new and original, and that is what is expected of you by your instructor. Recycling content from a previous assignment is not OK. However, you can refer to parts of your previous work, as long as the information is cited correctly. In the situation described above, consider choosing a different topic or asking your instructor to assign an alternative topic, or try to approach it from a different angle.

Q11. I found on Facebook a place where I can hire someone to write my assignment. They claim that 99 per cent of what they write is never detected. What if I try? The service is a bit expensive but it might be worth it.

This is called contract cheating and is one of the most severe forms of academic dishonesty. When you put your name on a paper and submit it to the University, you declare on your honour that you are its author. If you are not, you are violating University rules and the ethical code underlying academic practice. Doing so harms you in your studies, jeopardizes your professional future, and puts the reputation of the University at stake. It's a no-go.

Q12. I have found a paper published on the internet that perfectly matches the instructions for my assignment. A good friend has this software that puts a spin on texts such that they elude Turnitin. Nobody will notice. A couple of clicks and it's done!

You are taking someone else's work and you are appropriating it as your own. This is deliberate and conscious stealing. It is one of the most severe forms of plagiarism and it is a violation of intellectual property rights. Engaging in it harms you and your professional future. It also puts the reputation of the University at risk. Software such as Turnitin can not only detect similarity between texts, but is also designed to uncover manipulations intended to obscure similarity. Your course instructors have ample experience in marking student papers and detecting plagiarised work. It's simple: don't do it.

These examples illustrate some of the more common forms of plagiarism. In short, plagiarism in academic writing includes, but is not limited to:

- The presentation of a work as exclusively your own that you have developed with others ('collusion');
- The verbatim reproduction of someone else's text, or poor paraphrasing that stays very close to the source, without use of quotation marks;
- Using the same structure or framework of someone else's argument without acknowledging the source;
- Paraphrasing another author's idea without citing that author, presenting another author's idea as 'common knowledge' and not including a citation, or failing to clearly attribute the whole extent of an idea to an author cited previously/elsewhere in your text;
- Paraphrasing another author's idea based on a third author's interpretation of that idea, without citing that third author;
- Assembling and mixing passages from multiple sources or weaving them into your text without, or with incomplete, citations ('mosaic plagiarism');
- Copying somebody else's text and replacing, removing or adding a few words or phrases ('patchwriting');
- Copying or reproducing work that you have submitted previously, e.g., in another course or during previous studies ('self-plagiarism');
- Attributing a source to another than its original author or providing an inaccurate or incomplete reference;
- Falsifying or fabricating data;
- The uncredited reproduction of images, graphs and data;
- The submission under your own name of a work produced entirely by someone else.

Consequences of plagiarism

Plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct as well as a violation of the University's honour code as laid out in the *Charte des usagers* (cf. the first annex to the University's Study Regulations). Being found guilty of plagiarism will cast doubt on your honesty and respect for the norms and ethical standards adhered to by the academic community. It thereby harms your standing at the University. It can also jeopardise progression in your studies and future career. And it risks affecting the reputation of the University as a respectable institution of higher education.

Plagiarism is also an offense against University rules that is subject to disciplinary procedure. Please consult for more information the [University's Disciplinary procedure in cases of fraud and plagiarism](#).

Being found guilty of plagiarism entails the cancelling of the grade for the concerned assignment, which will be marked with a zero (0). In addition, the University may impose disciplinary sanctions student. Sanctions are based on article 43 of the law of 27 June 2018 (amended) on the organisation of the University of Luxembourg and include:

- The cancellation of all grades obtained in examinations for the concerned module or the entire examination session of the respective semester;
- The prohibition for up to five years to participate at any examination as part of a study programme offered by the University;
- The retroactive withdrawal of the degree, diploma or certificate awarded by the University.

Avoiding plagiarism – Recommendations

Avoiding plagiarism is, first of all, a matter of understanding what constitutes plagiarism. This document draws attention to some common forms of plagiarism and describes situations in which poor decisions could lead to plagiarism. A wealth of additional resources on plagiarism awareness can be found online, and a selection is listed below. If you are uncertain whether some element of your work constitutes plagiarism or how best to avoid plagiarism, you should ask your course instructor or librarian for help. The following recommendations are meant to help you, in advance of your writing or before submission, to reduce the risk of accidental plagiarism and avoid situations in which plagiarism may seem tempting.

Plan your assignments—Good time management right from the beginning of the semester is key to study success and can spare you situations in which plagiarism may seem like your only way out.

- ▶ Map out the assessments for all your courses over the semester and make an estimate of the time it will take you to prepare them.
- ▶ Divide preparations up into different steps for that purpose.
- ▶ Identify periods during which work risks to accumulate, and try to spread preparations out more evenly across the semester.
- ▶ Varying types of activity during self-study (e.g., literature search, reading for papers, collecting data, analysing data, studying for exams, writing, preparing presentations, etc.) rather than doing only one thing for an extended period of time can help motivation.
- ▶ Start thinking about topics for written assignments early and try to use preparations for class (readings, notes) as first steps towards your papers.
- ▶ Set yourself deadlines and review your planning as you progress.

Ask for clarification—Plagiarism is also a question of the instructions you receive for a given assignment, e.g., concerning group work and collaboration with other students, or the extent to which you are expected to have reviewed the literature.

- ▶ If in doubt, clarify with the instructor what is acceptable and what is not.
- ▶ Try to anticipate questions you may have regarding your assignments and pose them early in the semester.

Do your own work and trust your own judgement—If you are only beginning to familiarise yourself with a literature, it may seem hard to be original, so you may wonder, why bother? Scores of people have pondered your question, including students in higher years. This can make it tempting to lean on their work. But writing tasks are also there to help you to develop your own ideas in relation to a given literature. Seeing assignments as an opportunity to train your own judgement and receive feedback on your ideas, and to discover not only a body of scholarly work, but also your own voice and unique perspective, can help you steer clear of plagiarism.

Practice good note-taking—Take notes while surveying the literature and annotate these notes, so that you do not need to rely on your memory alone when going through them later:

- ▶ Connect notes to sources by inserting short (e.g., author-date) citations in your notes.
- ▶ Keep track of where in a work the ideas or passages you intend to use come from, by including page numbers in your notes.
- ▶ Use labels throughout your notes that help you reconstruct what comes from the consulted source ('[author's name]'), and what are your own thoughts and comments about the source ('me').
- ▶ Compiling notes using a note taking application allows you to quickly search your notes by keywords later on.
- ▶ Review your comments and ideas in relation to what else you find as you continue with the literature search, and put cross-references into your notes where applicable.

Manage your sources—Write down the full reference for a source when/as soon as possible after you access it (in a reference management software or your own bibliography¹). If possible, save an electronic copy of the sources you think you may use in your work, and store them in a way you can easily find them again (e.g. by consistently naming the files using the author-date system).

Annotating references based on their role in a given field or scholarly debate (e.g., 'original source for argument A', 'rebuttal of argument B'), in view of the content you plan to use ('source for data X', 'good summary of literature Y'), or regarding their relation to your reasoning

¹ If you maintain your own bibliography, consider working with a single file. Like this, your bibliography will grow over time and you do not need to re-create references you have used previously. Applying a single reference style to all your references during note-taking will make it easier to convert references into other styles where necessary.

and ideas ('supports my idea of...', 'use to show that...', 'challenges my argument that...'), or similarly can help you to integrate sources in your paper during the writing process more quickly.

Learn to know when to stop—You will always find reason to continue the literature search. Each new source you consult contains new references and opens up new aspects of your question. The search needs to come to an end, however, if you want to have enough time for writing, revisions and editing (including a thorough check of your citations and references).

There is no quick-and-dirty rule that could tell you when you have sufficiently surveyed the literature.

- ▶ Bear in mind the instructions received and use the assigned readings as orientation.
- ▶ Look out for repetitions in references. When the more prominent references in a consulted work are becoming familiar, you may take that as a sign that you have found at least some of the important contributions to the field.
- ▶ Handbooks can also give you a sense of the main aspects of a research field to look out for.

Actively guide the reader—No matter how carefully you cite, in-text citations alone may not always be enough to signal to the reader what is yours and what comes from others.

- ▶ Where paraphrasing or summarising an argument or debate requires longer passages or several paragraphs, make sure you mark the different voices in the text, even after the first in-text citation, by explicitly attributing passages to their authors (e.g., 'X continues by claiming that...', 'the authors also submit that...', 'after having shown this, the authors...', 'X concludes by...').
- ▶ Do not hesitate to present your own arguments, findings, conclusions, etc. in the first person singular where that is necessary or useful to delimit them from those of others ('from this, I conclude that...', 'contrary to X, I will argue that...').

Hone your paraphrasing skills—Good and acceptable paraphrasing requires practice. When first reading a text and taking notes, we often tend to stay close to the source.

- ▶ Do not content yourself with replacing a few words or changing the order of sentences. Re-work passages in which you paraphrase until you are confident that you have expressed the idea in your own words.
- ▶ Be especially critical with yourself when using phrases such as 'according to author X' or 'author X claims that' as they may invite you to stay too close to the original in what follows.
- ▶ Look out for passages in which you unwittingly switch the subject from the original author to an impersonal, generalising 'it' or 'we' (e.g., 'Author X claims A. It is therefore important to understand B.' – where B is still part of author X's original argument).

Check for similarity—Use Turnitin, a software that checks your paper against a vast text corpus and that is provided by the University through Moodle (ask your course instructor), to see how much of your text is identical, or comes very close, to what others have written.

The 'Similarity Report' generated by Turnitin can help you identify passages that may need a citation (where you forgot to include one) or require re-writing (e.g., if a paraphrased passage stays too close to the original and would hence need to be turned into a direct quote). Be aware, however, that a low similarity score in Turnitin is no guarantee that your text is free of plagiarism (and the instructor marking your assignment knows this as well). You should always be confident that you have properly cited all your sources.

Learning how to avoid plagiarism is an essential part of your studies and crucial for professional academic practice. And it has advantages that go beyond merely avoiding disciplinary consequences:

- Honesty, integrity, and professionalism in relating to other people's work are essential qualities expected in any professional context.
- Effective time and knowledge management, as well as careful planning of assignments and projects, not only helps to avoid plagiarism, but can significantly reduce stress, instil confidence, and will generally contribute to study success.
- Avoiding plagiarism is in some important respects about honing essential transferable academic skills such as reviewing a body of literature, synthesizing ideas and tracing back arguments, reflecting on one's own ideas and relating them to what others have argued, and expressing your ideas clearly and in relation to others, all of which are expected from University graduates.
- Efforts to avoid plagiarism make us engage critically with the academic community and its scholarly debates, provide proof to the reader that we have done so, and thereby also lend credibility to our work.
- Similarly, they force us to discover our own voice and originality, and to give them expression through our own words and writing style.
- Insofar as we receive feedback on our own, rather than somebody else's work, they help us to train our judgement and build trust in our own intellectual capacities.

References

The following sources were consulted in the preparation of this handout. They can be used for complementary guidance on the topic of plagiarism and how to avoid it. The Open University's *All my own work* (2019) offers a game-based, interactive way of familiarising yourself with the topic of plagiarism. Many additional resources exist and the inclusion of the sources below makes no claim that they are preferable over others.

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