

II HOW TO AVOID PLAGIARISM

1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

1.1 ‘Words, words, words’

The dictionaries are full of words, and words are common property. This sentence itself is made up of words which can all be found in any English dictionary – and yet the sentence is not common property. This is because words are not used in isolation, but are put together by the writer, and the resulting phrases and sentences are products of his mind. An idea may be quite commonplace: for example, the first sentence in this paragraph contains a perfectly common idea, which most of you will have thought of at one time or another. Yet the way the idea is expressed, with those particular words in that particular arrangement, is entirely the writer’s own, and it is possible that no one else has written exactly the same sentence before.

The first lesson you will need to learn about plagiarism is this: **you cannot just copy the words that someone else has written and pass them off as your own writing.** If, for some reason, you want to quote the exact words used by an author, you should put them in quotation marks, and acknowledge the source properly (see Section 2 below on how to cite publications). Other than that, *every sentence that you write will have to be your very own.*

1.2 Common Knowledge

While it is obvious that, if you ‘borrow’ someone else’s *words* without acknowledgement, it constitutes a straightforward case of plagiarism, it is not always so clear-cut when it comes to *ideas*.

If it were possible to list everything that an average person ‘knows’, much of it would almost certainly belong to the realm of what may be called ‘common knowledge’. It is not easy to define with absolute precision what is common knowledge and what is not, but most of us have no problem telling them apart most of the time. ‘Common knowledge’ includes all easily accessible facts or beliefs which are known and shared by many people, and which are not attributable to any single source.

Here are just a few examples:

- Pure water boils at 100 degrees Celsius at sea level;
- President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on 22 November, 1963, apparently by Lee Harvey Oswald;
- The first man to climb Mount Everest and return alive was Edmund Hillary in 1953;

- Chinese (Putonghua) is the language with the largest number of native speakers in the world, and English the largest number of non-native speakers;

and so on and so forth.

If you are satisfied that what you are referring to in your written work is part of common knowledge, you need not acknowledge its source. This is so even if this knowledge can be found in reference books and other publications.

1.3 What Needs to Be Acknowledged

In the course of your writing, if you make use of an idea, observation or discovery which belongs to someone else and which is not part of common knowledge, academic integrity demands that you acknowledge its source.

There are several reasons for doing this. Firstly, honesty. You should not give the impression that a particular idea or discovery is your own when in fact it is not. Secondly, fairness. Whoever conceived that idea or made that discovery deserves to be given due credit for it. Thirdly, accountability. Readers have a right to know the source of your information, so that they can evaluate its reliability and check it if they wish to.

The type of content that requires acknowledgement in your writing includes not only other people's ideas, observations and discoveries, but also facts and figures which you have obtained elsewhere and which are not part of common knowledge. For example, while it is common knowledge that English has the largest number of non-native speakers in the world, an actual figure, such as 350 million, is someone's estimate (one of several in fact), and the source should be duly cited. Or if you reproduce a map or chart showing the distribution of native and non-native English-speakers in the world, it is not your own work and should also be acknowledged.

One common misconception among students is that, as long as they paraphrase or re-write what they have read elsewhere, then it is not really plagiarism, and they can legitimately pass the ideas off as their own. That is to say, they have a narrow view of 'plagiarism' as applying only to the literal (or near-literal) copying of someone else's words. This notion is unjustified. Words are merely vehicles for ideas, and it is just as possible to steal the ideas without stealing the words. To take a different kind of example, if you take a musical theme from the movie 'Titanic' which is originally scored for pipes, and re-arrange it for the guitar, can you call it your own? (If you try to publish it under your name, you will certainly be sued!)

This then is the second lesson you must learn about plagiarism: **it is not acceptable to paraphrase someone else's idea and call it your own.** As long as the idea itself does not originate from you (and assuming it is not part of common knowledge), you must acknowledge its source properly. This includes ideas which you have read about in one language (such as Chinese) and which you make use of in your writing in another language (such as English, or vice versa).

1.4 Forms of Plagiarism

Most people tend to associate plagiarism only with published (or printed) sources. Though this was traditionally the most common form of plagiarism, the source itself is, strictly speaking, irrelevant. Every time you ‘borrow’ someone else’s words or ideas and pass them off as your own – from whatever source and in whatever medium – you have committed an act of plagiarism.

Straightforward examples of plagiarism from non-published or non-printed sources include the taking of words or ideas without acknowledgement from:

- a talk;
- a radio or TV programme;
- a website on the Internet;
- other students’ assignments or notes, etc.

Of these, the Internet has become (by far) the favourite source for those looking for a ‘quick fix’, and radically changed the face of plagiarism. We’ll need to say something more about it in the next section.

1.5 Internet Plagiarism

The popularization of personal computers and the Internet in recent years has brought about a major revolution in the way knowledge is disseminated in the world today. Never before has so much information been made available so freely and easily – literally, at our fingertips. Search engines make it possible to instantly retrieve any amount of information on virtually every topic under the sun – from ‘throat singing’ to ‘head hunting’. It would not be an exaggeration to say that never in the history of the world has learning been made so easy and accessible.

Unfortunately, it would also not be an exaggeration to say that never in the history of the world has plagiarism been made easier, or the temptation to plagiarize greater. Unlike in the past, present-day plagiarists no longer have to search laboriously in the library for books and particular passages containing the information they need. They do not even have to copy the materials by hand – all they have to do is to copy as much text as they want from the Internet, and paste it onto their assignments, with or without minor changes. Teachers have noted with increasing concern the rising incidence of Internet plagiarism among students at all levels, a practice which has now become endemic, and far and away the most widespread form of plagiarism today.

Because the temptation is so great and the offence so easily committed, we urge all students to be especially on their guard against succumbing to Internet plagiarism. Like all other forms of plagiarism, it deprives them of the learning that they should be doing at the university, and ultimately they are cheating themselves more than they are cheating their teachers. What’s more, the very ease of Internet plagiarism makes it relatively easy to spot. It is not that difficult for a teacher to notice the differences between the language (vocabulary, grammatical structure and style) as well as the intellectual content of a text which has been copied and pasted onto a student’s assignment or project, and the student’s

own work. All that the teacher has to do when suspicions of plagiarism arise is to call up the students concerned and ask a few follow-up questions on the suspect texts: their answers will quickly betray the fact that these texts are not their original work. There are other ways of detecting Internet plagiarism too, including the use of search engines to look for particular strings of words or sentences. There are commercial plagiarism–detection software applications (such as Turnitin) which can detect plagiarism by searching for “present and archived” information on the Internet, commercial databases of journal articles and periodicals, and even assignments previously submitted by other students. These applications are now in use by many academic departments in HKBU. In short, the Internet may have made plagiarism easier and more widespread, but it has also brought greater risks, both to the students’ intellectual development and to themselves personally.

1.6 Grey Areas

Team work and group discussions are something of a ‘grey area’ with respect to the issue of plagiarism. Suppose you participated in a group discussion where ideas were freely exchanged. If you want to use some of the ideas arising from the discussion in your assignment, how should you acknowledge them? It is not always easy to decide where a particular idea has come from, especially after it has been shaped and reshaped by a group of people, including yourself. So there are no hard and fast rules here. But if you are clear that the idea originated from someone else, then academic integrity requires you to acknowledge it, even if only in the anonymous form of ‘The view has been expressed that...’ or ‘I have come across the idea that...’

If your assignment is a product of team work, this fact should be clearly established at the beginning, and what follows should not be misrepresented as solely your own work. Sometimes the division of labour is so clear-cut that it may be possible for you to identify precisely those parts which are essentially your own.

2. HOW TO CITE PUBLISHED SOURCES

The basic principle, then, is to acknowledge whatever words or ideas contained in your work which are not your own, and to cite the sources from which you have taken them. There are well-established conventions on how to cite published sources. These may differ slightly from discipline to discipline, and some departments may have laid down their own rules and practices. Students are advised to consult their own departments for guidance on citation practices in their respective disciplines.

Precise details of form need not concern us unduly here. The crucial point is that any idea or discovery which you have borrowed from elsewhere ought to be acknowledged in your writing, and that sufficient details should be provided for readers to identify the source, and to follow it up if they wish to. Here are some general guidelines on how to cite different types of published sources:

- (i) Books: provide name of author, title of book, publisher, year and place of publication, and page number(s) where the idea or quotation is found. For

example: Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 28.

- (ii) Articles in edited books: provide, in addition to the above, the title of the article or chapter, and the name of the editor of the book. For example: K.P. Mohanan, 'The Organization of the Grammar', in John A. Goldsmith (ed.), *The Handbook of Phonological Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), 24.
- (iii) Articles in journals: provide name of author, title of article, title of journal, publisher, date and place of publication, volume, issue and page number(s). For example: Matthew Y. Chen, 'Competing Sound Changes', in *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* (Berkeley: Project on Linguistic Analysis, June 1992), 20:2:194. [NB. The last item means 'Volume 20, No. 2, page 194'.]
- (iv) Articles in newspapers: provide name of author (if known), title of article, name of newspaper, place of publication, date of issue, page number(s). For example: Editorial, *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), June 4, 1999, 30.
- (v) Websites on the Internet: provide name of author (if known), title of article, date of article, full http address of website. For example: Hong Kong Education Department, 'Medium of Instruction Policy for Secondary Schools', 21-3-98, http://www.info.gov.hk/ed/dept/moi/med-i_e.htm.

It would generally be too cumbersome to provide all these details in the body of the text itself. Therefore, the preferred practice is to give only the author's last name and the page number(s) in brackets in the appropriate place in the text, e.g. (Pinker, 28), and furnish the full bibliographical details either in a footnote at the bottom of the page, or in the 'Bibliography' (or 'References') section at the end of your article. Different disciplines may adopt different practices, so seek the advice of your tutor/supervisor.

One further note: If you cite an author whom you did not read first-hand, but only through a 'second-hand' reference in the work of someone else, you should acknowledge both the original and the intermediate sources. This is to avoid giving the impression that you have read the original and extracted the reference directly from it, when in fact you have not. For example: Rod Ellis, 'Can syntax be taught?', quoted in William Rutherford, *Second Language Grammar* (Longman, 1988), 26.