

III AN ILLUSTRATION

1. EXAMPLES OF PLAGIARISM

Given below is an excerpt from the book *The Meaning of It All*, by the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Richard Feynman:

- 1.1 What is science? The word is usually used to mean one of three things, or a mixture of them. I do not think we need to be precise – it is not always a good idea to be too precise. Science means, sometimes, a special method of finding things out. Sometimes it means the body of knowledge arising from the things found out. It may also mean the new things you can do when you have found something out, or the actual doing of new things.

[Richard P. Feynman, *The Meaning of It All* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1998), 4-5.]

After reading the above passage, if a student wrote something like the following paragraph without acknowledgement, he would definitely be guilty of plagiarism:

- 1.2 The word ‘science’ is usually taken to mean one of three things. Firstly, it may mean a special method of finding things out. Secondly, it may refer to the body of knowledge resulting from what is found out. And thirdly, it may mean the new things people can do when they have found this knowledge.

Notice that the student has merely cut or changed a few words here and there from the original text. Basically, it is still Feynman’s writing, not that student’s. And nowhere does he mention that the main idea in this paragraph actually came from Feynman’s book.

Now, what about the following attempt:

- 1.3 The word ‘science’ is often loosely used with one (or more) of three possible meanings. Firstly, it may refer to a special method of investigation and discovery; this we may call the ‘scientific method’. Secondly, it may mean the body of knowledge which results from this method of investigation, that is, ‘scientific knowledge’. Lastly, it may also refer to what can be done with this type of knowledge, i.e. ‘technology’.

You will agree that this is much better than 1.2. The student has made a genuine attempt to avoid copying the original. He has expressed the main idea basically in his own words, and in fact added some pertinent elaborations. However, he has still failed to acknowledge that the basic idea is not his, but Feynman’s. He gives the impression, whether deliberately or unwittingly, that the points made are all his own. So this student

too is guilty of plagiarism, though less blatantly than the first. He has ‘stolen’ someone else’s ideas, though not his words.

2. ACCEPTABLE PRACTICE

Now, what would constitute an acceptable use of someone else’s ideas? One option, of course, is to quote the original passage literally, with proper acknowledgement (as in 1.1 above). But this option should not be over-done. Used too frequently, direct quotations can be taken as a sign of mental laziness, and they give no indication that the writer has really understood and assimilated what he is quoting. An essay filled to the brim with quotations is hardly an essay – it is more like an anthology.

A better option, in most cases, would be to rephrase the idea *in your own words* and set it in an appropriate context, not forgetting to acknowledge its source. Taking the passage in 1.1 again, here is an example of how this can be done:

- 2.1 How can we define the term ‘science’? Different people have different answers. A simple yet comprehensive definition was given by the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Richard Feynman. He points out (Feynman, 4-5)¹ that the word ‘science’ is often loosely used with one or more of three possible meanings. Firstly, it may refer to a special method of investigation and discovery (which we may call the ‘scientific method’). Secondly, it may mean the body of knowledge which results from this method of investigation (that is, ‘scientific knowledge’). Lastly, it may also refer to what can be done, or what has in fact been done, with this type of knowledge (in other words, ‘technology’).

¹Richard P. Feynman, *The Meaning of It All* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1998).

How is this better than 1.3 (and needless to say, 1.2)? Firstly and most obviously, it gives due credit to the author from whom the main idea of the paragraph was taken, and provides all the necessary information about the source. Secondly, this writer has successfully integrated Feynman’s idea into an appropriate context, which is clearly set out in the first two sentences of the paragraph, so that it reads like part of an organic whole, rather than something tagged on. Thirdly, the basic idea may be Feynman’s, but the words are the writer’s own. He shows clearly that he has understood the given idea, and written about it in his own way without being glued to the original text.

It is not all that difficult to produce something like 2.1, even though it does take a little more thought and effort than 1.2 and 1.3. But then, that is the whole point of any academic exercise – to learn how to think, and to do so honestly.