Recognising plagiarism

1. Introduction

If you are new to academic study, you may have heard of plagiarism but not be sure what it is. This activity helps you to recognise some of the forms plagiarism can take, so you can avoid it in your work.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this activity you should be able to explain what is meant by plagiarism.

2. What is plagiarism?

The Oxford Dictionary of English (3d ed.) defines plagiarism as "the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own".

Within the world of study, plagiarism is described as a form of cheating; in other words, of trying to gain better marks by using the ideas or words of another person without giving that person proper acknowledgement.

There are other forms of plagiarism that exist beyond academia. Read three different examples of plagiarism below.

Then answer the quiz questions to test your understanding.

Music: sampling or plagiarism?

There are many well publicised cases of intellectual property theft within pop music; famous cases that were overturned in 2020 involved US singer songwriter Katy Perry and 1970s rock band Led Zeppelin.

With high tech sampling involved in the creation of so many modern hits, artists are becoming ever more concerned about the misuse of their original work.

You can read more about how difficult it is to distinguish between inspiration and misuse in this March 2020 Guardian article, "A hit, a writ: why music is the food of plagiarism lawsuits"

Industrial espionage

Sometimes called corporate espionage or competitive intelligence, industrial espionage can take many forms, but often involves the theft of ideas from a competitor for economic advantage.

Samuel Slater provides an historical example. He emigrated to America having memorised much of the design detail of James Arkwright's water mill.

Called "Slater the Traitor" by the British, his knowledge was vital in helping set up rival cotton mills in the US.

You can read more about Slater's story on his Wikipedia Biography.

Do you think he plagiarised Arkwright's designs?

Journalism: originality is essential

The UK's National Union of Journalists has twelve principles in its code of conduct, the twelfth is "Avoids plagiarism".

In a profession where writers earn their living by the sale of their original work, using the work of a fellow journalist without due credit is tantamount to theft.

You can read more about the nature of Internet journalism; how its ever increasing demand for new content puts writers under pressure, but also, paradoxically, makes it easy for writers to credit their sources in Anthony Zurcher's 2014 BBC News website article "Much ado about Buzzfeed's plagiarism".

3. Plagiarism quiz

Test your knowledge of plagiarism by answering the multiple choice quiz questions.

Question 1

Which one of the four following statements about plagiarism is correct? Choose one and then check our feedback to see if you're right.

1. Plagiarism is the name of software used by some universities to teach correct referencing.

2. Plagiarism is referring to a work which is copyrighted.

3. Plagiarism is using someone else's work without identifying where it came from

4. Plagiarism is a type of false memory syndrome.

Question 1 feedback

1. No, this is not plagiarism. Universities may use plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin or Copycatch to identify where students have used material without acknowledging the source.

2. No, this is not plagiarism. All material used for study or work purposes should be clearly and accurately referenced so others can find it if need be.

3. Yes, this is known as plagiarism. Good academic practice is about acknowledging others' work in your own writing.

4. No, this is not plagiarism - although forgetting what sources you have used in your work can lead to inadvertent plagiarism.

Question 2

Read the statements below and select all those you think are examples of plagiarism:

1. Putting a paragraph together by cutting and pasting a few choice phrases from a number of different sources, and adding in some words of your own.

2. Cutting and pasting a paragraph by placing it in "quotes" and citing the original source.

3. Copying a paragraph, but making small changes, such as replacing a few verbs or adjectives with words that mean the same thing

4. Copying a paragraph word-for-word from a book, journal, web page or other printed or electronic source without any acknowledgement.

Question 2 feedback

1. Yes, this is plagiarism, because it involves using other people's work without acknowledging who did it.

2. This is probably acceptable academic practice, and therefore not plagiarism. It shows that points being made are supported by other people, and the source has been acknowledged. However, lengthy quotes - for example, copying whole paragraphs - are to be avoided. This only shows you can read and write.

3. Yes, this is plagiarism, because it involves paraphrasing. Even if some of the words are your own, you must still acknowledge where you got the ideas from.

4. Not recognising the intellectual input someone else has made to your work, and passing off their work as your own, is clearly plagiarism and is unacceptable. If you have not written in your own words, it is also likely that you have not understood the point you are making and this may cause you problems in your later studies, for example, when revising for exams.

Plagiarism quiz reflections

In the first question on what plagiarism is, you may have easily spotted the right answer. However, the next question shows that not all instances of plagiarism are clear-cut, and it is possible to be caught out inadvertently.

Even when you have referenced sources correctly, it is important to be sure that you have integrated them into your work in a way which demonstrates your learning.

4. Summary

Summary

Using other people's work without acknowledging it is plagiarism, even where you have made small changes. The Open University defines plagiarism as "using the work of other people to gain some form of benefit without formally acknowledging that the work came from someone else".

Plagiarism does not just occur in academic assignments. It may happen when you relay content in online forums or other social networking sites without acknowledgement. In a workplace situation, if you do not acknowledge evidence and statistics you have used to inform reports or presentations, for example, you will be

committing plagiarism. You may be aware of some high-profile public figures who have lost their jobs when it was discovered they were guilty of plagiarism.

To sum up, plagiarism can involve:

- **Copying** a portion of text without giving credit to the resource, for example, copying and pasting some text from a website into your assignment.
- **Paraphrasing** text without crediting the source, for example, changing a few words from an article and including it in your work
- **Incorrectly citing** a source, misleading the reader as to what is yours and what is from the source.

Reference

'Plagiarism' in Stevenson, A (ed.) *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford University Press. 2010. Available at https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0637200 (Accessed: 3 Jul 2020).