

# Understanding Plagiarism

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Evangel subscribes to an Internet program, Turnitin.com, through which you will submit papers that will be checked for plagiarism. The reason for this program is (1) to bring an awareness of honesty in writing and (2) for faculty to know that student work is not plagiarized from the Internet or from previously submitted papers of other students.

Many people don't understand exactly what plagiarism is. They know it has to do with stealing someone else's writing but are not aware of the specifics. Others understand the concept but choose to plagiarize anyway. Many well-known writers, actually, have been discovered plagiarizing and have lost important things: positions, reputations, or money through lawsuits. Many students, too, have lost much from the act of plagiarism.

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## What, exactly, is plagiarism in writing?

Two distinct types of plagiarism exist. *Blatant plagiarism* is an act in which the writer tries to deceive the teacher or readers—either for a grade or acclaim—into believing he or she is totally responsible for the content. *Technical plagiarism* occurs when the writer is not trying to cheat or deceive but fails to follow accepted methods of using and revealing sources. Blatant plagiarism can result in automatic failure of a course or dismissal from school. Technical plagiarism, though not subject to disciplinary action, nevertheless will lower the grade on the project. (Click the link at the end of this paper to see what one prominent American suffered partly because of technical plagiarism.)

It is **necessary** for Evangel students to study plagiarism and find out how to avoid it.

Understanding plagiarism is not as simple as some think because it involves several components.

Plagiarism is the act of:

- submitting under one's own name for a grade, publication, or public display
- any whole work or portions of a work that the "submitter" either
  - did not personally create, draw, or compose— OR for which the writer
  - did not reveal details of origin
  - (one who had the *idea*)
  - (one who wrote the *original words*) OR
- did not change the sentence structure or some of the original phrasing
  - (even though many of the words were changed and credit was given to the source)
- did not place quotations around exact words of the source

The above definition is complex enough that we need to look at it closely in order to understand and avoid plagiarism.

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## How can I avoid plagiarism?

1. Understand that using **any portion of someone else's writing** without attribution (giving credit to its source in both a citation and a bibliography or works cited page) is **dishonest under any circumstances**.

- “any portion” = a line pasted from an Internet site, a paragraph, an outline, a thesis lifted verbatim from a source
- “someone else” = a friend, a relative, an Internet or print author
- “any circumstances” = your personal illness, a family emergency, forgetting an assignment, long work schedules

2. *Understand that providing or writing **any portion** of a paper for a friend carries the same penalty as blatant plagiarism because it, too, is an overt act of deceit.*

3. Learn the basic attribution principles in order to avoid plagiarism:

- All ideas borrowed from a source, even if put into your own words, *must be cited*.
- Not one word may be omitted from or added to a quoted passage unless *you signal the reader* with
  - brackets [ ] to add
  - or an ellipsis (three spaced dots: . . .) to omit.
- As many as three significant words (nouns, adjectives, adverbs) used in order must be
  - within quotation marks
  - given a citation.
- Even an author's syntax (order of words and phrases) must be changed *unless the passage is placed in quotation marks*.

Most professional writers, of course, borrow ideas and quotations from others; such is desirable and expected. The problem occurs when writers try to pass such work off as their own. However, some writers who know they must give credit don't realize exactly when and how to do that. Look closely at the following three versions:

**Original:** “Students who eschew dishonesty, regardless of the inducement, will glean the approbation of the deity and will institute a lifestyle commensurate with Christian ethics.” This was written by Gerald Smith.

**Plagiarized version:** People who avoid cheating, in spite of rewards through grades, will both gain God's approval and instill in themselves a style of living that meshes with Christian righteousness (Smith 23).

**Acceptable version:** Even though cheating may bring good grades, students who avoid dishonesty will please God as well as establish Christian behavior as a pattern for life (Smith 23).

The student author of the plagiarized version did a good job of changing the overblown diction of the original and gave credit to the author. Even so, this is plagiarized *because the student kept the original sentence structure* (subject, dependent clause, prepositional phrase, verb phrases that contain objects, ending with a prepositional phrase.) The original author worked to write a

rhetorically pleasing sentence, *and the student stole his pattern, his writing style*. It is not enough just to substitute “common” words for “learned” ones even if the writer gives a citation. The paraphrase must be in the student’s own sentence style as it is in the acceptable version.

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## Will I be accused of blatant plagiarism if I make a real effort to change the syntax but fall short in some spots?

The answer is “NO.” Though you may lose some points on the paper, your teachers will be able to see that you made the effort.

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## Am I allowed to get any help on my papers?

Yes. Getting *help of the right kind* is considered a learning experience. For instance, tutors in the Write Place will suggest words or phrasing, help you with correct grammar and punctuation, and even suggest good ideas you might use. Getting help in the writing lab is *not considered plagiarism* because it is part of the learning experience. Also, nothing is wrong about brainstorming with a friend for ideas, asking someone to read your paper and comment, or getting help with punctuation rules.

**However**, handing your paper to someone—a typist, for instance—who rewrites passages, proofs, edits, and/or rephrases is *dishonest in the academic setting*. That person becomes the “author” of portions of your paper. Your professors expect that the papers you hand them are your own projects, except for “lessons” you may have received during the writing process. Any help you get on a paper must be a *learning experience*, not just a “proofreading” favor of a friend, parent, or spouse who never explains WHY the portions need to be changed.

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## Do I need to worry that I’ll accidentally write something too close to an Internet piece or someone else’s already-submitted paper?

No. If by chance you write in an essay a short identical phrase or two quite similar to someone’s writing, you will not be accused of plagiarism. Also, though you may be guilty of **technical plagiarism** as you are learning the process, you will not be accused of deceit.