

ACCIDENTAL PLAGIARISM: IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU

Accidental plagiarism is still plagiarism, and it can still result in a failed assignment, a failed class, or expulsion from a college. Even honest sorts can fall into the foul clutches of plagiarism! What are the most common types of accidental plagiarism?

(1) Failure to distinguish carefully between outside sources and your own thoughts when taking initial notes for research projects.

To prevent this confusion, color-coding is salvation. If you create the bulk of your draft on hardcopy paper, use three different colored pens. Perhaps a red pen indicates the material you are writing comes word-for-word from an outside source, and a blue pen indicates the material is paraphrased or the facts found in an outside source, and a green pen indicates the idea or phrase is completely original.

If you do the bulk of your drafting on a computer with Microsoft Word, you can also color-code by selecting "font" from the menu and then choosing a font color. Don't convert the font color to black on your final copy until after you have double-checked, quotation-by-quotation, that the red text has appropriate quotation marks or block format along with a citation, and that the blue material has citations but no quotation marks, and that the green material really is your own.

(2) Failure to "frame" paraphrased material.

Readers must be able to see clearly where ideas from a source begin in your paper and where they end. A common error is using several paraphrased sentences in a row with only one citation. If you paraphrased these words from a single page found in one original source, you might mistakenly think that one citation at the end of the final sentence is sufficient for all the material. (I often see such faulty citations appearing at the end of a long paragraph.) Actually, such a citation only indicates that the last sentence comes from the source, and thus falsely implies that all the previous sentences were your own original thoughts. The appropriate documentation would either be (a) to cite each sentence separately with its own parenthetical documentation, or (b) to "frame" the material by verbally indicating at the start of the paraphrased section that all the subsequent points come from the same source. For instance, you might write, "Smith makes several comments pertinent to this question. First, he points out . . ." Finally, when you get to the last point by Smith, you can then use the final parenthetical citation, showing that all the previous points came from this source, thus framing the beginning and ending of the paraphrased section. It's far safer, however, to cite each sentence of the paraphrase separately.

(3) Laziness About Appropriate Adaptation

When quoting from original texts, it is permissible to make minor changes as long as those minor changes are properly indicated and the changes do not alter the meaning of the original. If you need to add a word for grammatical sense or context, insert that additional word in square brackets [like this]. If you need to chop material out of the quotation to shorten it, indicate it with ellipses like . . . this, or if your original source also uses ellipses in the sentence like [. . .] this. These markers also help remind you that you are quoting material from a source and that this phrasing was not yours originally. Another problem appears in quotations that spill over from the bottom of one page and continue on the top of another--say the bottom of 42 and the top of 43. You might later change your mind after returning the library book or article, and want only to use the first part of a quotation. Where was the page break that separates 42 from 43? To indicate this, you might informally leave a mark in your notes--say a triple slash like this /// to remind you of the page break. Otherwise, you might be tempted to "fudge" the correct page number without re-checking the source.

(4) Cutting and Pasting

Cutting and pasting from webpages is so easy and so fast, you may be inserting material into your paper faster than you can accurately document it. Don't cut and paste from web resources!