

***The Student's Guide to Avoiding Plagiarism***  
**Department of Sociology**  
**Western Washington University**

The faculty of this department has compiled the following information to help you become more aware of the nature and repercussions of plagiarism. We recognize that gray areas on the topic do exist and we have developed these guidelines to assist you in developing the skills and habits critical for professional competence.

**What is plagiarism?**

**Plagiarism is the practice, whether intentional or not, of using someone else's words or ideas and presenting them as your own.**

Plagiarism is stealing. By definition, when you plagiarize, you steal someone else's work. Plagiarism is also lying. By passing someone else's work off as your own you are lying to your instructor and your classmates. Plagiarism is equivalent to copying from someone else's paper during an exam and then pretending the work is your own.

Using ideas and information from outside sources in your writing is essential. After all, the best social science writing demonstrates an appreciation of the knowledge compiled by other researchers before. There is nothing wrong with the act of presenting an idea from an outside source; but presenting that work as your own, either explicitly or implicitly, is wrong. Thus, it is important that you properly identify and give appropriate credit to these outside sources through the proper use of quotation marks, internal citations, and references.

Plagiarism is a dangerous crime because is very easy to commit unintentionally. The risk is greatest when the writer is simply unaware of the proper method of paraphrasing and citing other people's work. Plagiarism, like speeding, is defined by the act -- not the intention. Writers, like drivers, are expected to be aware of what they are doing. Whether deliberate or intentional, the repercussions of plagiarism are the same, and they are harsh.

**What constitutes plagiarism?**

Plagiarism takes many forms, ranging from the most egregious and easily detectable instances of copying someone else's words to the failure to attribute paraphrased thoughts to the original thinker.

The most blatant form of plagiarism occurs when a student submits a paper written in whole or in part by someone else. These include:

- Papers purchased from a term-paper house or written by your mom, roommate, live-in bicycle repairperson, or anyone else other than yourself.
- Papers copied word-for-word or with only minor changes from the Internet, a book, or any other source.

- Papers worked on in conjunction with other people, either in this class or in another class, is also plagiarism since you are presenting other people's ideas and words as your own.
- Papers submitted for another course, recycled without further development.

These acts of plagiarism are very clear-cut and usually quite easy for instructors to detect.

Somewhat less blatant (but no less serious) are instances of plagiarism that involve the failure to follow the rules of fair use of published work. For this reason, it is important that we look at some specific examples of unfair use and contrast them to examples of fair use.

***The main point to keep in mind: If you want to incorporate another person's ideas in your own writing you must either put the idea in your own words or use direct quotes. And, no matter whether you use quotes or paraphrasing, you must acknowledge the original source by properly citing the original author.***

Below is a passage from a recent book by Harvard sociologist, William Julius Wilson. Below the passage are examples of some of the most common types of plagiarism and some tips on how to avoid them:

Original passage:

*Despite the overwhelming poverty, black residents in inner-city neighborhoods verbally reinforce, rather than undermine, the basic American values pertaining to individual initiative. For example, the large survey of the UPFLS found that nearly all the black respondents felt that plain hard work is either very important or somewhat important for getting ahead...Nonetheless, given constraints and limited opportunities facing people in inner-city neighborhoods, it is altogether reasonable to assume that many of those who subscribe to these values will, in the final analysis, find it difficult to live up to them.*

(W.J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 1996, p. 67)

Now let's suppose that you want to incorporate Wilson's influential ideas into your own writing. The following are some plagiarism pitfalls that you will need to avoid in doing so.

### **1. Word-for-word copying:**

As you likely know already, it is *not* acceptable to simply lift other people's words and present them as your own. This is another sledgehammer approach to plagiarism – not very subtle!

#### **PLAGIARISM:**

***Black residents in inner-city neighborhoods verbally reinforce, rather than undermine, the basic American values pertaining to individual initiative.***

In this example I have implied that these are my own words and ideas by failing to clearly indicate otherwise. It is perfectly acceptable to use an author's words in your own writings, but you must properly cite the author and provide a reference to the original work. *Citing the original source is crucial whether you draw material from a book, an article, a lecture, an Internet site, or any other outside source.*

For example, the following is a perfectly acceptable use of Wilson's statement:

OK:

Wilson (1996: 67) argues that "[b]lack residents in inner-city neighborhoods verbally reinforce, rather than undermine, the basic American values pertaining to individual initiative."

Notice that, following the guidelines of the American Sociological Association, the citation of a quote includes the year of the publication (1996) and the page number on which the quote can be found (67). This example would then be accompanied by a full bibliographic reference to Wilson's book at the end of the paper:

Wilson, William J. 1996. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

This bibliographic reference shows that I have done my research and allows the reader to study the topic more if they are interested.

Also notice the brackets around the letter "b" in the quoted phrase. This indicates that I've slightly altered Wilson's text by making the "b" lower case. This kind of bracketing is appropriate any time the writer makes a minor change to the original text used in a quotation. For example, bracketing is required when you add words to a quote, change some words within the quote (to be consistent with other text in your paper, for example), substitute a formal name for a pronoun, or change capitalization.

You should not be afraid to include quotes from other people's work in your writing. While you should avoid writing a paper that just strings together one quote after another without any original thought or interpretation of your own, there are some instances in which the original author's words are particularly eloquent or make the point better than you can. It is much better to admit this fact (you are, after all, not a paid professional -- at least not yet), include the direct quote, and move on than to "adopt" these words and pass them off as your own.

## 2. Improperly paraphrasing

Rather than quoting someone directly, it is often the case that you will summarize and reword, or paraphrase, an idea or a passage. *Proper paraphrasing requires you to put the idea in your own words -- you cannot use exact sentences or phrases from the original source.* By definition, paraphrasing requires that you restate the idea in *other* words. Changing a few words, omitting or adding words, or altering the order of words or phrases is not enough. For example,

**PLAGIARISM:**

African Americans living in the central city verbally reinforce, rather than reject, the basic American ideals pertaining to individual initiative.

In this example I've really just substituted a few synonyms for some of Wilson's words and retained the same sentence structure and most of the original verbiage. This is still blatant

plagiarism. Similarly, even if I attribute the idea to Wilson, I will still be committing plagiarism if I use his words.

#### PLAGIARISM:

African Americans living in the central city verbally reinforce, rather than reject, the basic American ideals pertaining to individual initiative (Wilson, 1996: 67).

In this example, Wilson's *idea* is properly attributed him, but his *words* are still being stolen. The phrases "verbally reinforce" and "pertaining to individual initiative" are lifted directly from Wilson's work, *but no quotation marks are used*, and the remainder of the sentence is just a simple modification of Wilson's. Try one of these instead:

#### OK:

According to Wilson (1996) the ideals and values regarding self-reliance and hard work held by black inner-city residents are similar to those held by other Americans.

or

According to Wilson (1996: 67) the ideals and values held by black inner-city residents, including the "values pertaining to individual initiative," are similar to those held by other Americans.

In the first example, I have put Wilson's ideas in my own words, but still properly attribute the idea to Wilson. I do the same in the second example, but also include a direct quote, with quotation marks and a reference to the page on which the quoted phrase can be found.

Paraphrasing well without stealing from the original author is difficult. *Again, it is not sufficient to just change a few words from the original text.* Effective paraphrasing requires the use of a number of techniques including changing the structure of the sentence; reducing whole clauses to simpler phrases; changing the active voice to the passive voice (or the other way around); and, of course, using appropriate synonyms for all words that are not generic. The university writing center can provide excellent assistance in developing all of these strategies. *Remember that any one of these strategies alone is insufficient to avoid plagiarism. Good paraphrasing requires a combination of these strategies.*

### 3. Failing to cite the original source

In general, it is better to put other people's ideas into your own words. However, doing so does not absolve you from the responsibility of attributing the thought to the original author. Even if I paraphrase an idea appropriately, I must still acknowledge the person from whom I borrowed the idea. Remember that the definition of plagiarism is the use of someone else's words *or ideas* without attributing them to that person. For example:

#### PLAGIARISM

The lack of opportunities to be found in the inner city often prevents residents of these areas from demonstrating their values of hard work.

Since my name is not William Julius Wilson and I have not independently arrived at this conclusion, this is an example of plagiarism. I have taken someone else's idea and passed it off as my own, implicitly, by failing to cite the originator.

OK

The lack of opportunities to be found in the inner city often prevents residents of these areas from demonstrating their values of hard work (Wilson, 1996).

### **What needs to be cited?**

As a rule, you need to provide a citation for any fact, figure, or idea that you present that cannot reasonably be assumed to be common knowledge. For example,

BAD:

A majority of black residents of inner-city neighborhoods believe that working hard is a very important determinant of success.

or

Sixty-six percent of black residents of inner-city neighborhoods believe that working hard is a very important determinant of success.

This fact is not something that most people simply know. Thus, you need a citation.

OK:

Sixty-six percent of black residents of inner-city neighborhoods believe that working hard is a very important determinant of success (Wilson, 1996: 67).

It is *not* necessary to provide a citation for something that can reasonably be assumed to be general knowledge. For example:

OK:

President Clinton was first elected in 1992.

Federal provisions to reform welfare were passed into law in the mid-1990s.

Bellingham is north of Seattle.

### **What are the repercussions of committing plagiarism?**

The most important repercussion of plagiarism is that you are yourself robbed of the opportunity to learn something. First, properly incorporating the ideas of others requires that you develop a fuller understanding of those ideas. You can only paraphrase effectively if you have a firm grasp of what the original author was trying to say. In addition, working to avoid plagiarism will undoubtedly improve your writing in general. Sociologists often don't write so good. Students can often improve original texts with minimal effort. Your writing improves by actively addressing the imperfections in the writing of others.

Beyond the injustice you do to yourself and the learning process, there are also more formal sanctions for those guilty of plagiarism. *These sanctions range from a zero grade on the*

*assigned work to expulsion from the university.* Because it is impossible to determine absolutely one way or the other, all instances of plagiarism will be treated as if they were intentional and dealt with severely. You should look at Appendix C in the Western Washington University Bulletin for more information on the repercussions of academic dishonesty.

**A final note:**

In general, you should not be afraid to use the thoughts of others to illustrate, punctuate, or contrast your own arguments. In fact, the use of these outside sources demonstrates your willingness to study and carefully consider outside opinions. That's essential to good professional work! But, you must be aware of the rules of the game. Learning to properly paraphrase and cite other authors is an important, but tricky part of the writing process that will require diligence and practice.

**A final-final note:**

Don't be afraid to call on a professional for help. Your instructor is always willing to assist you with your writing. In addition, the people at the university's writing center stand ready to assist you and are the ultimate source for advice on paraphrasing, citing, and effective writing in general. Visit their web page at <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~writepro>.