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The other day in the cafeteria - rumours about plagiarism

Date: 2018-06-21

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citation:

[author] Project *Refairence*

[title] The other day in the cafeteria - rumours about plagiarism

[date] 2018-06-21

[source] <http://www.academicintegrity.eu/wp/all-materials>

[access date]

The other day in the cafeteria - rumours about plagiarism

In order to inform and educate students (and staff), we have collected these common rumours, myths/questions and drafted possible answers. We react to them in a FAQ-like scheme.

I've heard...

...that tutors go easy on students, because they know you're not a professional yet. So it's no big deal if you use parts of other texts or some chart/figure in your paper without citing the sources.

Failure to cite your sources will be considered a case of academic misconduct, whether you're a pro, or still a bit green.

It's true that requirements change in the course of your studies. Tutors will hardly expect a paper worthy of Stephen Hawking in your first term. But frankly, how green are you, if you rely on your tutors' clemency?!

Of course, studying for a degree means constantly improving your skills and knowledge. This may lead you to think that because you're a beginner, it's OK not to follow the rules to a T. However, that doesn't keep your tutors from expecting just that. In addition to extending your knowledge on your subject area of study, you are also expected to gradually master the rules of academic writing. Eventually, you will have to prove that you have - when it comes to writing your final thesis at the latest. So why not familiarize yourself with these rules straight away?

... that tutors don't read coursework very carefully, anyway. So it's quite unlikely that plagiarism will be detected.

It's no secret that tutors, especially those teaching large classes of students, have a lot of term papers to grade and no superpowers to make the job easier. But that doesn't mean they haven't come up with useful strategies to help them fulfil their task. Tutors are very experienced readers, and experts in their field. That makes it relatively easy for them to spot mistakes of form or content.

Sometimes they get colleagues or assistants to help them. So there's no knowing who (else) will be reading your paper, or even study it carefully. Maybe because your topic is fascinating and original, or just out of personal interest.

Nowadays, there is also technology for aiding the detection of plagiarism, which may be used by universities and tutors.

...that copying more than three words from another text can be an act of plagiarism. So it's OK to copy up to three words from a text without citing the source.

It's not about the number of words you're copying, but about the content and the kinds of words (and their usage) of the passage in question.

If the words you wish to copy convey the original ideas of another author, you are required to cite the source. Citation is required, firstly, when you are using terms coined by the author, secondly, when you are referring to specific contents such as arguments, hypotheses, interpretations, data or images, and thirdly, when you are copying especially apt and succinct ways of describing something or new terms. In all these cases, the number of words copied is irrelevant. If, for example, you are using a term coined by a specific author, you have to provide a citation even for that one word.

On the other hand, you do not need to provide a citation for transitional phrases which do not convey any specific ideas but are merely used to structure your text. This includes phrases like "in this context," "with regard to this hypothesis," "as has been shown in the previous chapter" or standing expressions like "students and staff"

Moreover, there is some subject specific terminology that does not require citation. This includes examples like "the variable has a significant influence on..." or "involuntary manslaughter". The use of this kind of terminology is a common feature of academic texts, and is expected in students' written assignments as it shows that you are adhering to the linguistic conventions of your subject.

...that I don't have to provide a citation for material from freely accessible sources such as wikipedia or other free online resources.

The fact that some information is accessible to anybody does not mean that it can be used without citing the source it came from. No matter if you are using an online blog, a podcast, an e-journal or your classic printed book, in academic writing, you always have to cite all your sources.

Moreover, spreading information also means taking responsibility for this information. Good ideas as well as mistakes are attributed to the writer of the text in question. If you do not indicate material taken from other sources, you can be held accountable for any mistakes to be found in this material, as readers must assume that these are your own ideas.

If you are uncertain which contents require citation and which are common knowledge, you should ask your supervisors or tutors.

Also you need to think about the reliability of the so called „freely accessible sources“. For example Wikipedia can be edited by anyone online and therefore you need to check whether the information you gather is reliable.

...that I don't have to provide a citation for things that are common knowledge.

Common knowledge describes the kind of information that can be expected to be known to all readers, and therefore does not need to be supported through citation. In the field of European history, for instance, the fact that the Maastricht Treaty was signed on 7 February 1992 does not require citation, nor does the fact that hydrogen is abbreviated as H in equations in the field of chemistry.

In some cases, however, it is hard to decide what constitutes common knowledge, and the decision often depends on the subject and the readers in question. Within an academic discipline, members of the community share a common store of basic knowledge whose authors or origins can often no longer be remembered, traced or are so well known (are basic and commonly agreed knowledge) they do no longer require citation. One example is Pythagoras' theorem, whose original source is now unknown. For this reason, you should always consider whether the readers of your text can be expected to know what you know, and whether that knowledge is common knowledge.

If you are uncertain which contents require citation and which are common knowledge, you should ask your tutors. When in doubt: it never hurts to cite a source - better safe than sorry!

...that it is OK to copy the table of contents or passages from the works of fellow students, if they have given their permission.

Of course it is OK to ask your fellow students for advice and feedback (also to go to tutors, the experts at the writing centre or library). And of course it is no crime to ask someone else to check your text for grammar or spelling mistakes. It is also OK to have a look at other texts, to get a sense of what would like to do in your own work. Moreover, some subjects have a standard table of contents to be used in all students' assignments of a certain type.

The trouble begins once you start copying original passages or ideas from somebody else's work without citing the source, but passing them off as your own. It is irrelevant whether or not the author gave you permission to do so. The aim of written assignments is to help you improve your skills: They allow you to acquire, practice and prove your proficiency in writing, reflecting on problems, interpreting texts and data and discussing results presented in other works. Your work thus shows what you have learned, and therefore documents your progress. So what would there be for you to learn and document if you were simply to copy other people's work?

...that I don't have to provide a citation if I'm paraphrasing a text, using only its contents but not quoting verbatim.

It's not just about the words you copy, but also about the ideas these words convey! The need to cite your sources does not just apply to verbatim quotes. It is also necessary to cite your sources when you are presenting their contents in your own, carefully chosen words - a process called paraphrasing.

Paraphrasing is a common technique in academic practice. Let's say you have found a publication that deals with the topic of your assignment; but you do not want to quote from it verbatim, maybe because the author uses a very complicated style of writing, or because the text is older and the language sounds old-fashioned, or because direct quotes are rarely used in your discipline. Although you are paraphrasing the author's ideas, you are still merely using them, not developing them yourself. That means that you have to provide a citation.

...that it is possible to engage in plagiarism unintentionally.

Yes, that can happen.

But even accidentally plagiarism will be sanctioned according to the university regulations, regardless of whether the act of plagiarism or the intertextual mistake occurred on purpose, out of negligence, or involuntarily. A useful tip: Make sure you save earlier versions of your assignment so you can document your working process if problems arise.

It is easy to get confused when you are dealing with a large number of sources and a complex topic. As a result, arguments and ideas you have been using often become difficult or impossible to trace back to their original sources. To avoid this kind of confusion, it might be helpful to review your working habits. You could start using reference management software or practice other techniques for storing contents and material in a way that allows you to find them again and reconstruct the sources they came from.

Students often express the concern that as a result of focusing intensely on a topic over a long period of time, certain formulations they have encountered in literature will become so familiar they mistake them for their own. But in this case, too, careful documentation of the sources and good working habits can limit the likelihood of this happening and help avoid involuntary plagiarism.

One little mistake will not be used against you. It would be suspicious, however, if these 'little' mistakes occurred again and again, over several pages...

...that if I'm proved guilty of plagiarism, I may be expelled from university.

Yes, that can ultimately be one of the consequences of plagiarism. Plagiarism is a gross violation of the standards of good academic practice and of the examination regulations. The termination of enrolment is only one of many possible consequences.

What consequences will be taken in a specific case depends on the university regulations, higher education legislation, the assessment of the examiners, the university's plagiarism policy and the gravity of the offence in question. Since there are a variety of possible mistakes in students' texts, there are also a variety of possible sanctions.

Most universities handle cases of plagiarism in a similar way as an attempt at cheating in a (written) exam. Your work will be marked as 'failed' at least. A note documenting your attempt at cheating may be added to your student file. Especially grave or repeated acts of plagiarism may incur penalties like expulsion from the university.

...that I have to support almost every statement in my work with a reference, because as a student I'm not doing original research but only reproducing other researchers' results.

It is certainly true that most written work you produce in the course of your studies is not aimed at exploring or discovering completely unknown fields. Rather, written assignments present the results and insights of others, document experiments, summarize the state of research in a particular field or contrast conflicting positions in a scholarly debate. They allow you to weigh different theories and approaches against one another, discuss their plausibility, and to develop some critical comments and arguments of your own. Depending on your subject of study, your achievement in these assignments lies in structuring your work, summarizing controversies, highlighting the advantages, disadvantages and methodological questions connected to the approach in question. Using quotes and paraphrases to support your argument is a typical feature of these written assignments.

Contributing to research does not only mean producing new results, but also documenting, presenting, interpreting, evaluating, criticizing and discussing existing results.

...that it's OK to copy certain standard expressions, because they are common in my field of study. And some things just can't be expressed differently without losing their scholarly character.

As a general rule, parts of other texts may not be copied without citing the relevant source. In some fields of study, however, using certain standard expressions may be permissible, for example in describing standardized experimental set ups, or research methods/protocols. When in doubt, ask your tutors whether this applies to your field of study.

Apart from these cases, there are usually a variety of possible ways of describing something. The processes and results to be observed in the studies or experiments you document in the course of your studies are not always exactly the same. For this reason, you should make sure that your way of documenting these processes and results is exactly suited to the work you have been doing, and this includes avoiding mindless copying of parts of other works.

...After I graduate, I want to work as a teacher/ a marketing specialist/ a doctor/ an engineer, not as a researcher or scientist. Why should I be bothered about the rules of academic practice?

So you probably do not want to become a professional researcher or scientist. Maybe you 'just' want to pass your exams. Maybe you are not particularly interested in discussing research and its results. There are still a number of reasons why you need to master and apply the rules of academic practice.

In learning the rules of academic practice you will also acquire skills you will need in your future job: You will develop a style of working characterized by integrity, trustworthiness, transparency, personal accountability and respect for the work of others.

There are many reasons why these rules of academic practice matter. Proper referencing makes research articles comprehensible, and allows them to be reconstructed and tested. Maybe your audience are interested in reading for themselves the original version of some clever argument you used in your work. It would only be fair to give them the chance to do so.

Moreover, you will be learning how to fulfil the professional standards of your field. No matter what job you end up in: your employers will expect this from you. As you expect the doctors in a hospital to adhere to the hygiene regulations, so you are expected to master and apply the established rules of academic practice. In fact, academic integrity should apply everywhere, not just in science and research.