

Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the act of presenting someone else's writings – in part or in its entirety -- as your own original work. Unfortunately, the introduction of the Internet has made it easier for people to steal others' work. Plagiarism is an act of theft, and an act of dishonesty and lying.

In law dictionaries, such as Black's Law Dictionary, plagiarism is defined as the act of appropriating the literary composition of another, or parts of passages of writings, or the ideas or language of the same, and passing them off as the product of one's own mind. To be liable for plagiarism, it is not necessary to exactly duplicate another's literary work. Lifting substantial portions of someone else's work is also considered plagiarism.

Recently, a New York Times reporter was fired and an editor who resigned in disgrace because of plagiarized information in news accounts. Author Alex Hailey was ordered by a judge to pay \$600,000 for material he plagiarized for "Roots." Singer/songwriter Garth Brooks just settled with another songwriter for an undisclosed amount over allegedly plagiarizing words in "Standing Outside the Fire."

The legalities of plagiarism are significant. However, the ethical questions are just as important, particularly when the ethics of people representing an academic institution could be called into question. Journalists are ethically bound to tell the truth, and, in addition, since they make their living by writing original works, they are, ethically, fiercely opposed to plagiarism. It threatens their livelihood, but also their profitability, credibility and their amendment rights. Most journalists don't forgive plagiarism, and the reputation of individuals and organizations caught plagiarizing will forever be tarnished.

Guidelines for attributing:

For the author's protection and credibility, information should be attributed to a source during the following circumstances and for the following reasons (Columbia University Professor Melvin Mencher, 1984):

- Attributing information gives strength and credibility to any material.
- When opinions are offered, or controversial statements are made in a writing, but are not being made by the author.
- When an author is unsure of the accuracy of the information.
- When inferences, conclusions or generalizations are made.
- When any information derived from another individual or organization is used.

Reporting for the Print Media, a journalism textbook, outlines the following standards for attribution:

- Statements of undisputed facts do not need to be attributed.
Example: Colorado State University is part of the land-grant university system.

- Writers must attribute information given to them by other people, as well as statements about controversial issues, statements of opinion and all direct and indirect quotations.
Examples: Cloning is unethical (opinion or controversial issues).
A recent study shows that apples are healthy. (indirect quotes)
- Attribute information as soon as conveniently possible – after the first meaningful clause, for example. It is best if attribution is not delayed until the end of the second or third sentence.
Example: But dieting is not as simple as jumping on the current fad-diet bandwagon, according to Pat Kendall, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension nutritionist. Although some fad diets may work for a while, it’s often difficult to keep weight off. And, some fad diets are the opposite of healthy; they promote unbalanced nutrition or “magic cures” that can cause health complications.
- A direct quotation (using quote marks) should be attributed once, regardless of the number of sentences in the quote.
Example: “This innovative method provides a purified, cost-effective extract which can be produced in the United States. The extract produced under these conditions should decrease or eliminate the adverse drug interactions that Saint-John’s-wort may currently cause,” said Jorge Vivanco, lead researcher on the team and Colorado State University assistant professor in the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture. “Hypericin can now be produced in large, isolated quantities in a process that is similar to how antibiotics are produced today.”
- Provide a transition between statements made by different people.
Example:
Colorado State University is a leader in academic research in the area of veterinary medicine, said the dean of the college.
Top level administrators at the university agree. “Colorado State University is world-renown for it’s veterinary medicine programs,” said Tony Frank, vice president for research and technology.
- In a press release or column, avoid using APA style – or academic style – to attribute information. Instead, attribute the information within the text of the story, preferably NOT within parenthesis. Columns, as with news releases, should follow AP style. AP stands for the Associated Press, the gold standard of writing style and guidelines in journalism. Associated Press manuals can be purchased through book stores.

Sources don’t need to be attributed when:

- You are providing general information that is common knowledge, such as children are not as strong as adults, the Civil War was fought in the 1860s, Cooperative Extension is part of the land-grant university system, etc.

- The ideas and information are your own – you are writing about your own conclusions and opinions. However, if someone else’s information is used to support those thoughts or is referenced, that information should be properly and thoroughly attributed.

Here are some stats from a research article written by Marie Dunne White. The article, called *Plagiarism and the News Media*, helps define how editors and reporters feel about plagiarism, and where the lines are drawn in news rooms. This is also food for thought as to how plagiarism can negatively impact an organization’s reputation among the media, which carries forward into news stories:

- 64 percent of editors of larger newspapers feel that reprinting a press release without attribution is plagiarism.
- 94 percent of editors of larger newspapers said reprinting a press release as part of a signed column is plagiarism.
- 86 percent of the larger newspaper editors said similar descriptive phrases are plagiarism when not attributed.
- 64 percent of small paper editors said that writing a story based only on the facts gleaned from another’s article is plagiarism

Some resources about plagiarism include:

- Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law (published annually)
- <http://www.plagiarism.org/>
- <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html>
- <http://hnn.us/articles/514.html>
- <http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html>

Sources about copyright and copyright law:

- <http://www.templetons.com/brad/copymyths.html>
- <http://fairuse.stanford.edu/>
- <http://www.ipwatchdog.com/copyright.html>