



## Guidance on the Avoidance of Plagiarism for Undergraduate & Taught Postgraduate Students

### Introduction

#### What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the act of including in one's work the work of another person without providing adequate acknowledgement of having done so, either deliberately or unintentionally.

Sometimes students may unintentionally contravene University rules on plagiarism because they have not fully understood what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. Even if it is unintentional, plagiarism can still be a disciplinary matter. It is likely that you will be required to do more at the University in terms of acknowledging your sources and developing your own ideas, than may have been required previously at school or college. This guide is intended to clear up any misunderstandings that you may have about plagiarism and direct you to further sources of support if you are still concerned, or have questions about your courses.

#### Examples of Plagiarism

Academic work is based on a synthesis of sources and ideas. It is perfectly acceptable to make use of another person's ideas or opinions in formulating your own. In fact, building your knowledge and using it to inform and enhance your work is encouraged in all disciplines. As the famous quote from Sir Isaac Newton states, *'if I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants'* (1676)<sup>1</sup>. However, using another person's work without acknowledging it, or under the pretence that it is your own, is plagiarism, and is contrary to the principles of academic study. Plagiarism is a form of cheating.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is taken from a letter from Newton to fellow scientist Robert Hooke on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1676. Although this reference and footnote have been included here, it is arguable that the text is an example of common knowledge because the author and the phrase are so well known.

**The following are examples of plagiarism:**

1. Including in one's own work extracts from another person's work without the use of quotation marks and the acknowledgement of the source (which may be a book, a research paper, a web source, another student's work, a lecturer's comments or class notes, data, lab work or pictures etc.).
2. Summarising another person's work without acknowledgement.
3. Using the ideas or help of another person without acknowledgement of the source (Help can include, for example, the provision of materials or assistance from technicians).
4. Copying the work of another student, with or without their knowledge or agreement.
5. Collaborating with students or others on a piece of assessed work that should be completed and submitted individually<sup>2</sup>.
6. Cutting and pasting from electronic sources without explicit acknowledgement of the URL / author, and without explicitly marking the pasted text in inverted commas, or labelling the source of the diagram or illustration. The inclusion of large amounts of such pasted material, even if acknowledged, always raises doubts about how much of the work presented should be credited to the student. The same applies to over-quotation from a traditional, printed source.

## **Work Submitted**

It is important to note that all work submitted by students is accepted on the understanding that it is the student's own effort. Students are expected to offer their own analysis and presentation of information, gleaned from research, even when group exercises are carried out.

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<sup>2</sup> This type of plagiarism is called collusion. This may be defined as the unauthorised and unattributed collaboration of students or others in a piece of assessed work.

## Student Guidance on the Avoidance of Plagiarism

### General guidance

Students can avoid plagiarism by ensuring that any sources used in submitted work are adequately acknowledged and properly referenced, and that appropriate standards for academic practice in the relevant subject area are always adhered to. This will include:

1. providing full citation of all sources (books, articles, websites, newspapers, images, artefacts, lecture handouts, data sources etc.) used in the preparation of a piece of work.
2. properly referencing the sources of the arguments and ideas used in an assignment, using the recognised reference system for the subject area. Both quotations and paraphrased or summarised versions of arguments or ideas should be referenced in this way.
3. following other guidelines for preparing and presenting coursework as provided by the subject area.

The sites below offer guidance for both students and staff in preventing or avoiding plagiarism. They contain examples of what constitutes plagiarism, and the study skills that can help you avoid it:

<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/pages/plagiarism.html>

<http://www.education.indiana.edu/~frick/plagiarism/>

<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/plagiarism/>

*Please note: the above web addresses link to external sites and are not compiled or controlled by the University. The links are included here for reference, and because they contain examples which may help you to understand different instances of plagiarism. But please note that the University's regulations and procedures take precedence over any other source of information on plagiarism.*

### Subject Area Guidance

Referencing and citation practices will vary from one subject area to another. All students should ensure that they understand what practices relate to their subject area **before** submitting work for assessment. Students undertaking outside courses should therefore take particular care to ensure that they are familiar with the appropriate practices for the subject in question.

Students sometimes ask how they can make a piece of work their own if they are expected to support all of the arguments they make with appropriate references to the academic

literature. What is generally being sought in academic work is a student's own viewpoint on a particular topic, based on a thorough understanding of the underlying literature and argued as much as possible in the manner of an experienced practitioner of the subject area. Learning to work in this way is a skill that will develop gradually during a student's degree programme. Informal feedback during classes and formal feedback on students' work are important for developing these skills and students should pay careful attention to this guidance. Reflecting on the ways in which arguments are developed in lectures or made by the authors of key texts can also be very helpful.

Course Organisers and Programme Directors will be able to provide guidance on this issue. Some examples of subject-specific guidance issued by Schools are below:

- <http://www.englit.ed.ac.uk/studying/undergrd/honours/plagiarism.htm>
- <http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/admin/ITO/DivisionalGuidelinesPlagiarism.html>

## Group Work

Particular difficulties may also be encountered when undertaking assessed group-work, and guidance should be sought from the group-work supervisor on specific questions, such as when group members should stop working as a group and write up individually.

If you copy material from another student, for example, by collaborating on a piece of assessed work that should be completed and submitted individually, then this is collusion and is a form of plagiarism.

You can avoid this by making sure that you understand what you are being asked to do. Some group-work assignments may involve informal discussions in groups, followed by submitting a report individually. Other group-work may be longer term and involve completing a project together. It is perfectly appropriate to discuss ideas in groups if asked to do so by a lecturer or tutor. The point at which you need to be careful is in preparing work for assessment. Make sure that you know when the group work stops, and the individual work begins. Check with your group-work supervisor, Course Organiser or Programme Director if you are uncertain.

## Common Knowledge

There is, in all subject areas, a certain body of long-established information that is described as "common knowledge" and does not need to be referenced. It can be difficult for a student to be sure what is and what is not common knowledge, but that understanding is a part of the essence of the subject area. You should check with your Course Organiser or Programme Director for further guidance on this area and how it applies to your programme of study.

## Other Students

Discussing work and sharing ideas with other students is an important part of the learning experience in higher education. However students need to take care when these discussions relate to assessed work. You should take particular care if you are sharing notes with other students. For example, if the use of another student's notes leads to similarities in your assessed work, this could lead to an accusation of plagiarism.

Copying work from another student is just as much a form of plagiarism as copying from an established author or source. Students assisting someone else in plagiarising (for example, by lending them an essay, lab report or other piece of work submitted for assessment) have also committed a cheating offence.

## Plagiarism Detection Software

In order to assist with the detection of plagiarism, a number of Schools now routinely use Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) plagiarism detection software when marking assessed, student work. The plagiarism detection service is an online service hosted at [www.submit.ac.uk](http://www.submit.ac.uk) that enables institutions and staff to carry out electronic comparison of students' work against electronic sources including other students' work. The service is managed by The University of Northumbria on behalf of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and is available to all UK tertiary education institutions by subscription.

The plagiarism detection service works by executing searches of the world wide web and extensive databases of reference material, as well as content previously submitted by other users. Each new submission is compared with all the existing information. The software makes no decisions as to whether a student has plagiarised, it simply highlights sections of text that are duplicated in other sources. All work will continue to be reviewed by the course tutor. As such, the software is simply used as a tool to highlight any instance where there is a possibly case of plagiarism. Passages copied directly or very closely from existing sources will be identified by the software, and both the original and the potential copy will be displayed for the tutor to view. Where any direct quotations are relevant and appropriately referenced, the course tutor will be able to see this and will continue to consider the next highlighted case.

Once work has been submitted to the system it becomes part of the ever growing database of material against which subsequent submissions are checked. The copyright in each work submitted remains with the original author, but a non-exclusive, non-transferable, licence is granted to permit use of the material for plagiarism detection purposes.

## Procedures

If a marker suspects plagiarism, they will consider the nature and extent of the plagiarism before taking action.

### *Cases that do not need to be formally investigated*

If the marker considers that there is plagiarism in the work for assessment, but it is the result of poor scholarship and can be considered small in terms of its contribution to the overall mark, the work will be marked to reflect its academic quality. The mark for the work is likely to be low, not as a penalty for plagiarism, but to reflect the academic quality of the work including any poor practice in referencing, etc.

*Examples: Marks may be reduced for inadequate citation of material (e.g. material copied from online sources without acknowledgement); marks for an element of submitted work may be shared between students who have clearly submitted joint work without acknowledgement where this is not allowed.*

The marker will provide written feedback to the student and, if necessary, the Course Organiser and/or Director of Studies may arrange to interview the student to back up this feedback with further advice on avoiding plagiarism.

### *Cases that do need to be formally investigated*

College Academic Misconduct Officers are responsible for investigating suspected cases of plagiarism, referring cases to Boards of Examiners or disciplinary hearings, and recommending a penalty for plagiarised pieces of work.

1. The marker informs the relevant Course Organiser (for undergraduate programmes) or Programme Director (for postgraduate programmes), and the Convener of the relevant Board of Examiners. Evidence of the suspected plagiarism will be collected, and the Convener of the Board of Examiners will write a report. The report will be referred to a nominated College Academic Misconduct Officer for further investigation.
2. The College Academic Misconduct Officer will interview the student. The purpose of the interview is to obtain information about the case in order to consider a way forward.
  - i) The student will be invited to the interview, with a reasonable amount of notice, and will be sent a copy of the report prepared by the Convener of the Board of Examiners. The student may also be asked whether they would like to submit a written statement to the College Academic Misconduct Officer, prior to the interview. This might include details of any mitigating or special circumstances that the student would like to have taken into account. Students may also be asked if they wish to submit any evidence, such as their rough workings or contemporaneous notes.
  - ii) The student has the opportunity to be accompanied to the interview by another member of the University community, for example, a Students' Association advisor.
3. After the interview, the College Academic Misconduct Officer will complete a report. The report will include: the evidence of the suspected plagiarism; the report of the

interview with the student; information given to students on the course about the avoidance of plagiarism; and any further information that the student wishes to be taken into account. The student is sent a copy of this report in order to comment on matters of fact in the report. The report will not include the action recommended by the College Academic Misconduct Officer.

4. The College Academic Misconduct Officer will then decide whether the case should be referred back immediately to the Board of Examiners, or should be handled as a disciplinary case. The level and stage of the student's academic career would always be taken into account in making this decision.

#### *Minor cases where the plagiarism is a first offence*

After the interview a written warning is sent to the student and copied to the student's Director of Studies, but not retained in the student's file in the College Office. The mark for the piece of work in question should not be reduced as a penalty for plagiarism, but should reflect the academic quality of the work.

#### *Significant cases, including cases of extensive or concurrent plagiarism*

After the interview a written warning is sent to the student and copied to the student's Director of Studies, and also retained in the student's file in the College Office. A marking penalty is also set by the College Academic Misconduct Officer in a report to the Board of Examiners.

#### *Cases that should be handled through the Code of Student Discipline*

After the interview the College Academic Misconduct Officer makes a report in preparation for a disciplinary hearing, which will be arranged as normal under the Code of Student Discipline.

### **If you are suspected of plagiarism, you should:**

- Co-operate fully with the investigation carried out. It is in your interests to be open and honest.
- Speak to the advisory staff at EUSA for further guidance on how the plagiarism procedures work. Please see the Contacts section below for details of The Advice Place.
- Be patient. The investigation will be carried out as a priority, but the College Academic Misconduct Officer and others involved in the enquiry must have the opportunity to investigate the case thoroughly. The length of the investigation will depend in part on the seriousness of the case, so it is not possible to give exact time-scales. The College Academic Misconduct Officer will advise you of the likely timescales for investigation in your case, and will also advise you if these timings change.

***EUSA: The Advice Place***

Full details of The Advice Place opening hours can be found at:

<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/advice/>

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## Frequently Asked Questions

### *Isn't plagiarism just direct copying?*

No, plagiarism isn't just direct copying. It is about using other people's words or ideas without proper acknowledgement. For example, you can commit plagiarism by summarising someone else's idea or argument, even if you have put it into your own words. This may include summarising the ideas or arguments of another student. Unless you have properly referenced that idea in your work and shown that you are aware that it is not your work, you have plagiarised the material. The Definition section above contains a number of examples of plagiarism. Further examples and guidance on ways to avoid committing plagiarism can be found at the sites listed in the General Guidance section. Your Course Organiser or Programme Director should also be able to give you advice about how to avoid plagiarism in your subject. If you are in any doubt when you are preparing a piece of work for assessment, you should speak to a member of academic staff in your School.

### *I've put all the sources I've used in a bibliography at the end, is this enough?*

It's probably not enough just to use a bibliography at the end of your piece of work. You should be noting and referencing other people's work throughout the document. For example, all quotations should be in quotation marks, all diagrams or illustrations should be carefully labelled, and you should give specific references to the sources of arguments, ideas or findings you have used in your work. This also applies when you have paraphrased someone else's work or summarised the results of lab work, but haven't directly quoted or repeated it. You still need to immediately advise the reader that what they have just read was not your own work or idea. Practices for referencing and quoting academic sources do vary in different disciplines. You should check with your Course Organiser or Programme Director to make sure of the practices on your programme of study

### *I didn't do it deliberately so I won't get a bad mark will I?*

You might. Plagiarism is the act of copying or including in one's own work, without adequate acknowledgement, **intentionally or unintentionally**, the work of another, for one's own benefit. All plagiarism cases, whether intentional or unintentional, will be investigated. Unfortunately, even if you weren't directly aware of committing plagiarism, you might have benefited from it and your mark could be reduced to reflect the quality of the academic work without the plagiarised section in it. Alternatively, you might receive a penalty reduction of marks as a result of the plagiarism. You should try to avoid committing plagiarism in the first place. You need to make sure that the quality and integrity of your work reflects the level at which you are studying. This includes understanding and using the relevant academic practices for referencing work.

### *Will I be accused of plagiarism if I get a proof-reader to check my work?*

Proof-reading is defined as reading to detect errors to be corrected. It is good practice to proof-read your work before submitting it for assessment. This enables you to check for errors and make sure that you are happy with the way that you have presented your findings, arguments or ideas, before the work is marked. You may also choose to ask someone else to read through the work for you and see if they can spot any spelling, grammar or punctuation mistakes, so that you can correct these before submitting the work for assessment. Proof-reading your work in this way is good academic practice and will not lead to accusations of plagiarism.

However, you need to be careful with the type of proof-reading that is provided and make sure that, where necessary, the help of a friend or colleague is acknowledged. If a friend has corrected some spelling mistakes and told you of a couple of sentences which need clarification, then the help they have provided is similar to that available on many computers as a spelling and grammar check, and you do not need to acknowledge their input. But if a friend reads through your work, and suggests an idea for a new section or a better way to present your ideas in a particular paragraph, then you need to acknowledge their help. In order to avoid plagiarism, you need to make sure that you do not present someone else's work as your own and this may include acknowledging the ideas and suggestions of a proof-reader.

[Please note that for the purposes of this FAQ a proof-reader is a 'friend or colleague' who is not connected with the marking of your piece of work. For example, the supervisor of your undergraduate dissertation might discuss ideas with you, review drafts and ask you to look at a different angle on data, statistics, arguments etc. In doing so, they are fulfilling their role as your supervisor or tutor in providing support and teaching to help you produce the best piece of work you can. This is not the same as proof-reading.]

### *We're always being told to analyse and discuss ideas, so what's wrong with working together on an essay?*

It is perfectly appropriate to discuss a topic in groups if asked to do so by a lecturer or tutor. You will probably also want to discuss issues from your classes with other students. The point at which you need to be careful is in preparing work for assessment. This includes preparing notes that may help you to write or carry out an assessment. If a piece of work is to be submitted for assessment as a piece of group work, your tutor or lecturer will explicitly advise you of this. In all other cases, you must ensure that the work you submit for assessment is your own. You should be careful of the following situations:

- Agreeing to share notes with another student, or using someone else's notes to prepare your work. You must make sure that you properly reference other people's work, including another student's work or the assistance of a technician, if you end up including it in your own. If you are using someone

else's notes you should be aware that similarities in the notes can lead to similarities in the work for assessment, which could lead to an accusation of plagiarism.

- Reviewing someone else's essay plan, draft essay or lab report, especially if you are working on the same topic. You should also be careful if someone else asks to see your preparatory work: why do they need to see it at this stage?
- Moving from a piece of group work to a piece of individual work. For example, you have been asked to discuss a topic in a group but then each write a report on the topic individually. Make sure that you know at what point the sharing of ideas stops and the individual study begins. Consult your lecturer or tutor if you have any questions.

### *How can I be sure that I haven't committed a plagiarism offence?*

Make sure that each step in preparing work for assessment is thorough and rigorous in referencing and acknowledging sources. Make sure that you prepare your notes carefully. If you copy down data, a quote or an idea from a source in the library, on the Internet, or even lecture notes, laboratory or tutorial handouts then your notes should reflect where you got the information from, not just the content. When you use the notes in the piece of work for assessment, make sure that you reference it properly. Copying from another student is just as much a form of plagiarism as copying from an established author or source, so be careful about the way in which you work with other students. Practices do vary in different disciplines so it is extremely important that you understand what rules apply to your work. You can contact your Course Organiser or Programme Director for advice or check your course handbook.

### *I have some of my work for assessment on my web site. Is this OK?*

Students setting up a web site for their own reference, which includes some of their work submitted for assessment, are entitled to do so. However, you should be aware that other people might try to use your site to get access to your work and copy it or plagiarise it in some way. It is recommended that you take some reasonable precautions to make sure that you are the only person getting access to your work on the web. It is also suggested that you don't post your current work on the site as this might increase the likelihood that someone else is looking for answers on the same topic and could use your work.

### *Who can give me more advice and information about plagiarism?*

Information specific to your subject and programme should be available in your course handbook. Your Course Organiser or Programme Director will also be happy to help with any specific enquiries. If you have been accused of plagiarism and would like advice and information about the University's plagiarism procedures, you should consult EUSA at The Advice Place.

*What does 'retained in the student's file in the College Office mean'?  
What implications does this have?*

The College Office will keep a record of cases of suspected plagiarism for a number of reasons:

- The University keeps a note of cases of suspected plagiarism in order to monitor the occurrences, and to monitor the consistency of treatment across the University.
- Records are also kept in order to identify repeat offences because this can affect the severity of the penalty, or, for example, help to make a decision about whether a suspected case is serious enough to be referred for discipline.
- In serious cases, a note of plagiarism on a student's file may affect the reference that the College is able to provide to a prospective employer or other academic institution. For example, some reference applications ask if the referee can provide information about the applicant's integrity and honesty. In very significant cases, the College may not be able to provide a reference, based on the evidence of plagiarism available.

The outcome of the investigation will also be noted on the file, so, for example, if a case of suspected plagiarism is dropped because of lack of evidence, and no penalty is applied, then this will also be noted in the student's file. If, at the end of a plagiarism investigation, you are in any doubt about the implications of a note that has been added to your file then you can ask the College Academic Misconduct Officer who has handled your case for further information.

*What happens in the interview? What will they ask me?*

The format of the interview will vary, depending on the College Academic Misconduct Officer involved, and, to some extent, the nature of the incident that is being investigated. The purpose of the interview is to find out more information about what has happened, in order to decide on a way forward. You should therefore be prepared to answer a range of questions about your study skills, how you prepared the work in question and how you account for the evidence of suspected plagiarism. You are entitled to be accompanied to the interview by a member of the University community, such as a EUSA advisor or your Director of Studies. Advisors from EUSA can also give you advice on preparing for your interview and what to expect at different stages of the University's plagiarism procedures.