

Frequently Asked Questions About Plagiarism

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Abstract

Plagiarism is the theft of others' words, ideas, or information, and it is considered a severe violation of integrity by every college and university, by all peer-reviewed academic journals, and by virtually every book and magazine publisher in the world. It is a serious enough violation that at Parker University, as at most universities, it is grounds for getting a zero on any assignment on which you have plagiarized and, depending on the seriousness of the specific offense, it can grounds for further disciplinary action, which may include failing the course or being expelled from the university.

The topic of plagiarism is covered in detail in the course ENGL 1301 – Composition 1; it is explained in the APA Style guide¹ used in many of the Parker University courses; it is covered in the Parker University catalog; and it is covered in the regularly-held APA seminars conducted by the General Education department. This FAQ document breaks down the question of plagiarism even further, to help make sure there is no room for misunderstanding. **Note that it is each student's personal responsibility to be clear about what constitutes plagiarism.** Not fully understanding the rules or even committing “accidental plagiarism” is not considered a valid excuse at Parker University or at any other university.

Keywords: plagiarism, citation, reference, attribution, quotation, summary, paraphrase

¹ The official title of the APA Style guide is *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

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What Do I Need to Understand About Plagiarism?

The overwhelming majority of students at Parker University have demonstrated exemplary integrity, honesty, and hard work in how they have approached their studies over the years. In rare cases, however, some students have run afoul of the rules by committing plagiarism, a serious violation of academic integrity.

Plagiarism is one of the Academic Dishonesty offenses listed in the *Parker University Catalog* for which a student can be disciplined—including, when the offense is serious enough, being dismissed from the university. Yet many students don't fully understand what plagiarism is. This document will attempt to clarify the issues involved and help students avoid falling into accidental plagiarism.

The *Parker University Catalog* defines plagiarism as follows:

Plagiarism—an attempt to represent someone else's words or ideas (whether published or unpublished) as one's own. Examples of such activities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a. Using the words of a published source in a written exercise without appropriate documentation.
- b. Presenting as one's own original concepts, ideas, and/or arguments of another source.
- c. Presenting as one's own another's scientific research, case studies, etc., without properly acknowledging the source of the material (Parker University, 2016).

Most students who commit plagiarism don't do so deliberately; often, the issue is that the student doesn't understand the rules for how to use words, ideas, or information taken from another source. In the prerequisite course, ENGL-1301 – Composition I, you learn the basics of how to apply these rules. They are covered in Chapter 14, Section 4 of *Write Now*, the main

textbook for that course. They are also covered in much more exhaustive detail in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (commonly referred to as the “APA Style guide”).

Here’s a summary of all the rules in a nutshell: *every time you make use of someone else’s words, ideas, and/or information, you must provide BOTH an in-text citation in the body of your essay, as well as a full citation on a References list that starts as a new page after the end of your essay. Furthermore, when you use words taken directly from your source, you MUST put them in quotation marks, even if your intention is to paraphrase or summarize the original material.*

An **in-text citation** is a short citation that appears within your paper next to where you have utilized words or ideas from your source. Here’s a typical example:

The first novel of *The Dark Tower* series, *The Gunslinger*, begins with this famous opening: “The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed” (King, 2003).²

The author of the novel is Stephen King, and it was published in 2003, so the in-text citation is simply, “(King, 2003).”

Because the opening sentence of the novel is quoted *verbatim* (i.e., word-for-word), quotation marks are put around the sentence. This lets your reader know that you are not paraphrasing King but faithfully reproducing his exact words.

² Notice that the period does not go after “followed.” When an in-text citation is being used, punctuation such as a comma, a semicolon, or a period goes after the closing parenthesis of the citation. (However, if the original expression being quoted had a question mark or an exclamation point at the end of it, that punctuation would go inside the quotation marks before the citation parentheses.)

On the **References page**, a full citation for the book would appear as follows:

King, S. (2017). *The gunslinger*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, an imprint of
Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Here's the important takeaway: **you need both the in-text citation AND the References page citation**. Having one without the other is not enough and leaving out either one is considered plagiarism. Here's why: let's say you list a book that you've used on your References page, but you don't provide any in-text citations for it. If you do this, your reader has no way of knowing which words or ideas are yours, and which you've taken from your source.

You should also note that **leaving out quotation marks when you are using words from your source is also considered plagiarism, even if you have both an in-text citation and a References page entry**. The reason here is the same: without the quotation marks, the reader is left to assume that the words used are a paraphrase or summary that *you* came up with. You do not get to take credit for words that someone else wrote!

Here are some key things to keep in mind about plagiarism:

1. If you make a minor mistake on the APA formatting, that is perfectly understandable and it is not, in most courses, a significant issue. While you are expected to learn how to format citations correctly, it's expected that you will make mistakes as you learn how to do this. In any case, such mistakes do NOT represent a violation of academic honesty. (Note that these mistakes would keep an academic journal from accepting your essay for publication, however.)
2. If you copy information off a website and paste it into your essay, you must still provide both in-text and References page citations. Do *not* copy substantial amounts of text from a website or elsewhere. Direct quotations should be used sparingly. *We're*

interested in your ability to write and to reason through ideas and arguments, not in your ability to copy and paste!

3. If you use a paper you find on the web or elsewhere, such as from a friend, classmate, or paper writing service, **this will constitute an extremely serious case of plagiarism**. Not only will you automatically get a zero for the assignment, but also you could be expelled. You should know that this kind of cheating is extremely easy to catch. Furthermore, since this is such a serious violation, it will be reported to your program director and will be on your permanent academic record, even if you transfer to another university.
4. If you copy and paste select sentences from multiple sources and use them without quotation marks, in-text citations, and References page entries, this will also constitute a serious case of plagiarism.
5. If you provide a References page citation but no in-text citation, this will also constitute a serious case of plagiarism. If you do this, there is no way to tell which parts of your essay are your own thoughts, original ideas, and original words, and which ideas were taken from one your sources. Thus, you would have defeated the whole purpose of academic attribution.

When in doubt, ask. And remember: it's much better to make minor errors on formatting mechanics than it is to leave out in-text citations and References page citations altogether.

Can You Give Examples of What Plagiarism Is, or What it Looks Like?

When you use words, ideas, or information from someone else or from *any* source that you have found (an article, book, blog post, essay, interview, etc.), you are required to document the original source in **three** ways:

1. With Quotation Marks.

When you use someone else's words, you must put quotation marks around them to indicate that the words originated elsewhere. This is true whether you are fully quoting someone or just quoting a part of what the person said or wrote. *Even if you are trying to paraphrase or summarize someone else's words but end up using some of them in your paraphrase or summary, then you must still put those words in quotation marks.* Otherwise, you are submitting your paraphrase or summary as having been entirely written by yourself. But since that is not true, then you would be guilty of plagiarism, because you would be taking credit (whether you intended to do so or not does not matter) for someone else's work.

2. With an In-Text Citation.

Each time you use words, ideas, or information that did not originate with you—unless it is information that is common knowledge, such as the number of days in a week or the fact that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth—then you must provide an in-text citation that indicates the source where you obtained those words, ideas, or pieces of information. If you use multiple bits of information in the same paragraph from the same source, then you can put one in-text citation at the end of the paragraph, unless there needs to be one or more in-text citations for other sources elsewhere in the paragraph. In that case, put in-text citations near each use from a source. Note that at Parker University, we use APA Style for how in-text citations and References page citations are formatted. There are several other style guides, so make sure to use correct APA formatting.

3. With a Full Citation on the References Page.

Each source you use for your work must be acknowledged with a full citation on the References page. While in-text citations are often quite short, the References page citations are often quite long. A novel correctly cited in-text as (Poe, 1838) has a references page citation as follows:

Poe, E. A. (1838). *The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket. Comprising the details of a mutiny and atrocious butchery on board the American brig Grampus, on her way to the South seas ... With an account of the recapture of the vessel by the survivors; their shipwreck and subsequent horrible sufferings from famine.* New-York: Harper & Bros.

To properly credit your sources and to avoid committing plagiarism, then, you need to have all three of these: quotation marks around any words used from your source; in-text citations in every place where you are using work, ideas, or information from your source; and a full References page citation entry. **If you are missing any one of these items, then you have committed plagiarism.** Students sometimes turn in papers that have References page citations but no in-text citations, and then they are surprised when they are told they have plagiarized. The problem is that, without being able to see in-text citations in the correct place, a reader of your essay has no way of telling how much of the essay is your work, and how much comes from sources. Nor can the reader tell which words are your paraphrases or summaries, and which words represent your original thought and creativity. In short, leaving out in-text citations obfuscates how much work you personally have done on an essay. Do not let careless or lazy citation habits make you guilty of plagiarism.

Similarly, having an in-text citation in place but not acknowledging with quotation marks the words you have taken from a source is, at best, carelessness and, at worse, a willful attempt to pass off as your own paraphrase something that borrows heavily from the original author.

Here is an example of how a student might properly quote some text from an academic review article by the anthropologist Barbara J. King:

In her review of *The Origins of Language* by Michael C. Corballis, anthropologist Barbara J. King remarks, “Language is thought to be uniquely human, whether by those who are indifferent to questions of language evolution or by those who see modern speech as resulting from late or abrupt changes associated only with *Homo sapiens*” (King, 2003).

Here is an example of how a student might incorrectly paraphrase what King says, committing plagiarism by using too much of the source language, which I have highlighted:

In her review of *The Origins of Language* by Michael C. Corballis, the noted anthropologist Barbara J. King reminds us that many people mistakenly see language as **uniquely human**—sometimes because they ignore **questions of language evolution**, and sometimes because they see **modern speech resulting from late or abrupt changes** that are **associated only with *Homo sapiens*** (King, 2003).

Note that this incorrect paraphrase is not a full quotation of the source. Some words have been added, some deleted. However, by not putting quotation marks around the several words and phrases taken directly from King’s review, the student here has plagiarized. The student is making themselves look like a much better writer than they otherwise would. The easy fix here is either to rewrite the paraphrase, or simply to put the quotation marks where they belong.

Here is an example of how a student might correctly paraphrase King without committing plagiarism:

In her review of *The Origins of Language* by Michael C. Corballis, the noted anthropologist Barbara J. King reminds us that many people mistakenly see language as exclusively belonging to the human domain. This error comes alternatively from people's disinterest in the way language evolves, or from their mistaken belief that the way we speak today is a result of late or sudden evolutionary developments that only affected *Homo sapiens* (King, 2003).

While this example conveys the same idea that King expresses in her review, it does not use her verbal formulations, other than the appropriate use of the term *Homo sapiens*, which is needed for clarity.

Here is an example of how a student might summarize King without plagiarizing:

In her review of *The Origins of Language* by Michael C. Corballis, the noted anthropologist Barbara J. King explains why people mistakenly believe language to be an exclusively human attribute (King, 2003).

Here the student has appropriately identified the general meaning of King's comments in the review, without relying on the words with which King expressed herself. And as one would expect from a summary, the student here uses fewer words than King's original passage.

What Happens If I Get Caught Plagiarizing?

Depending on the nature of the offense, the consequences can be quite serious.

- If you make a simple APA formatting error but have clearly acted with an intent to document your sources appropriately, that won't be considered plagiarism and,

depending on the course and the assignment, you might only lose a few points off your score, if any.

- If you commit plagiarism through callousness or negligence because you took no care about the proper attribution of sources you used, that is treated as a serious issue and you may well fail the assignment, at the discretion of your instructor.
- If you commit plagiarism out of a deliberate attempt to present words, ideas, and/or information resulting from the work of others as if it they were your own work, then that is an extremely serious offense. At a minimum, you will receive a zero on your assignment. Your department dean will generally be informed.

Depending on the extent and severity of the issue, you may be given a grade of “F” for the course, and you may even be expelled from the university.

How Easy Is It to Plagiarize? How Easy Is It to Get Caught?

Thanks to the Internet, it is easier than ever to cheat. And thanks to the Internet, it is even easier than that to get caught.

Plagiarism has been an issue for as long as there have been students, but the advent of the Internet has made sharing content of all kinds easier. Students who have grown up during an age in which it is commonplace for people to illegally share music, movies, and other entertainment online³ can just as easily find ways to copy and share academic work. Students sometimes copy work from other students; sometimes they copy it from one or more online sources they find

³ To be clear, though this behavior is widespread, it is indeed illegal. It is every bit as much an act of theft as it would be to walk into a Walmart and shoplift a CD, DVD, or book. Using modern technology to commit a theft does not make it any less a theft.

(books, articles, blog posts, etc.); and sometimes they purchase papers from online services that offer to sell students papers “tailored” to the assignments they have.

What students who cheat don’t realize is that, to the extent the Internet has made plagiarism much easier to commit, it has also made it many times easier to catch. There are many reasons for this; here are a few:

- Several online tools are available to instructors to help them catch plagiarism. These tools have been designed specifically to help universities cut down on the practice, and in many cases these tools have been designed in collaboration with leading universities in the country. Tools such as Turnitin, SafeAssign, Grammarly, and others tap into databases of millions of student essays as well as millions of books, articles, websites, and other sources. They compare student submissions against these databases to find work that has been used in other essays as well as source work that has not been properly cited. Turnitin, for example, receives about 200,000 new essays a day (Turnitin, 2013). Essays you submit at Parker University are automatically compared against one or more of these plagiarism checkers.
- Google indexes virtually every site on the web, and it is constantly being updated. If an essay in your submission looks like it might be plagiarized, it takes *fewer than 10 seconds* to copy it into a Google search, search the entire web, and see what results turn up.
- Your instructors have graduate training and, in most cases, many years of experience as professional writers. They can spot the difference between student writing and professional writing; even an “A” student writes at nowhere near the

same level as a professional writer or scholar. Thus, finding sentences or passages that need to be tested for possible plagiarism is quite easy.

- Selling papers to students online is unethical and, in many countries, even illegal. In the United States, there is no federal law against the practice, though it is illegal in several states, including Texas,⁴ where Parker University operates. Thus, the people who do this are criminals, and it is extremely foolish to trust them. Students who buy papers online in the belief that those papers have been produced uniquely for them are often surprised to discover that the same paper has been sold to dozens, sometimes hundreds, of other students. This duplicity guarantees that papers like this usually turn up in Google search results and/or the results from a plagiarism checker such as Turnitin. You are usually *more likely to get caught* if you use one of these services, and you will be out however much the illegal service charged you.⁵

What Should I Do if I Don't Have Time to Write My Essay?

Students have difficult demands on their time, and it is understandably human to find yourself in a situation in which you do not have sufficient time to complete an assignment. With the pace of four-week classes at Parker University, inexperienced students who do not plan their time carefully can fall into this situation.

The most important thing to do if this happens to you is to be honest with your instructor. Whether or not your instructor gives you more time is at their discretion, but even if they don't,

⁴ See Texas Penal Code - PENAL § 32.50. Deceptive Preparation and Marketing of Academic Product.

⁵ You should know, too, that using a credit card with such a service is an extremely dangerous thing to do. Remember, these services have the same ethics as criminals. Many have been known to utilize customers' credit card numbers for identity theft or other forms of fraud.

you are better off being straight with them. If possible, turn in some portion of the work, even if it is not finished. Turning in half a draft of an essay will get you partial credit that may allow you to still pull out a good score on your final grade. This is better than turning in nothing—and certainly much better than trying to get away with cheating.

If you find yourself in this situation, especially if it happens more than once, have a candid talk with your instructor and/or academic advisor at Parker University. They may be able to help you brainstorm how to improve your study habits or point you towards tutoring services than can help you learn to complete assignments faster.

Can I Really Plagiarize Myself?

Yes, in multiple ways:

- You cannot reuse work that you did for a previous class. This policy is consistent at most universities around the world. The reason for it is simple: learning isn't just about memorizing; it is *experiential*, especially when it comes to deep cognitive work like writing. This means that the learning you get from writing a paper doesn't just consist of whatever facts you learn during the process; what's important is the process itself, the mental exercise of the research planning, reading, analysis, critical thinking, and writing. If you turn in work that you completed for a previous class, then you rob yourself of the portion of experiential learning you were expected to gain from your current class. Not only would this rob yourself of the important learning experience, but it would also create a fraudulent representation of the amount of work that you have actually done, if you were to get credit more than once for the same project.

- If you are the original discoverer of some insight or information and you have published a paper about it before, then you must cite your previous publication whenever you reference that insight. This kind of thing won't be an issue for most students, but it comes up all the time in academia. Thus you may come across sentences like the following, in which the author references themselves: "As I demonstrated in a previous study (2009), we have yet to achieve a fully satisfactory and consistent understanding of black hole entropy."⁶ This is an important rule, as it helps keep straight when an idea or bit of information was first discovered, and it makes it possible to track revisions to ideas over time.
- The requirement to cite your own work still applies to unpublished work, such as an unpublished manuscript, private letters or email correspondence, remarks from a conversation, etc. See the APA Style guide for details.

I Cited All the Sources in My Essay but Still Was Told I Plagiarized...Why?

There could be several reasons:

- If you used any of the exact words from your source but didn't put them in quotation marks, that's plagiarism. That's true even if you have in-text citations and Reference page entries for all your sources.
- If you didn't cite sources frequently enough to account for how much you used them, that's plagiarism. Say you paraphrase and summarize a source throughout your essay, but only have one or two in-text citations for it. That would create the impression that all the places where you haven't cited the source represent your

⁶ Since this is a just sentence that I wrote to demonstrate a point, there is no citation on the References page for this imaginary reference.

own thinking. You need to make sure that it's clear to the reader which words and ideas came from you, and which didn't.

- If you have Reference page entries for all your sources, but no in-text citations, that's plagiarism. There's no way for the reader to tell what's yours and what not.
- If a very high percentage of your paper is material from your sources, even if you have properly used quotation marks, in-text citations, and the References page citations, you could still get called out for not having done any original work.

This depends on the assignment instructions, but here's a general guideline:

unless you are specifically tasked with writing a summary of the research on a topic (and not being asked to contribute your own ideas), then a paper in which

you primarily quote, paraphrase, or summarize other sources is not acceptable

work. You must contribute your own analysis and original thoughts as well. You

need to discuss the meaning and significance of the material you bring in from

other sources, and you must add to the discussion with your own insights and

interpretations. None of your college courses will merely be an exercise in how

well you can copy, paste, paraphrase, summarize, and cite. We want to see how

well *you* can think critically and wrestle with the material. Such deep engagement

is where the real learning comes from.

How Should I Make Clear What Comes From Me vs. What Comes From My Sources?

Be direct and explicit about this. Use signal phrases, not just citations, to make this clear.

This include attribution phrases like, "According to X . . ." or "As noted in X . . ." (Rosenwasser and Stephen, 2003, p. 177).

What Do I Do About Material From the Class Discussions and/or the Textbook?

Whatever the source, if the words and/or ideas aren't common knowledge and they're not from you, then you must cite them. If a source includes conversations or communications that are not in any published format, see the APA Style guide for instructions how to cite personal communication, which is cited only in-text, and not on the References page.

If, however, you are citing a discussion post from Blackboard, you can use the following format:

In text citation: (Doe, 2018)

Reference page: Doe, J. (2017, November 16). Re: Rip Van Winkle [Online discussion group]. Retrieved from

https://parker.blackboard.com/webapps/discussionboard/do/message?action=list_messages&course_id=37750_1&nav=discussion_board_entry&conf_id=41026_1&forum_id=25076_1&message_id=160987_1

If you are citing a class PowerPoint lecture or online notes in some other file format, use this format for your citation:

Author, A. (Publication Year). Name or title of lecture [file format]. Retrieved from URL

For example:

McGuirk, K. (2017). Washington vs. DuBois: the civil rights movement rising from the ashes of Reconstruction [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from

<http://mcguirkclass.downloadlink.url/goes/here/washington-dubois.pptx>

If Plagiarism Is Such a Big Deal, Should I Just Skip Using Sources Altogether?

For some assignments, it is preferable to avoid using any outside sources. In particular, if you are assigned an essay about your own experience or your personal reaction to a work of art, music, film, or literature, there should not be any need to use outside sources (except, of course, to refer to whatever work you are responding to).

That being said, college students need to learn how to conduct research, and thus they must learn how to use sources accurately and ethically. We can't keep adding to the human body of knowledge unless we are aware of what others have already discovered. Isaac Newton famously said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" (Newton, 1675). What he meant was that we can only add to our wisdom and understanding by having learned and appreciated the knowledge and discoveries those who have come before us—and Newton shows his reverence for previous leading scientists and philosophers by calling them "giants." For you, as a college student, to be able to master the information needed for your education and gain technical currency in your chosen field, you must learn how to conduct research.

If I Accidentally Write Something That Someone Else Already Wrote That I Didn't Know About, Is That Still Plagiarism?

The odds of you writing the exact words someone else wrote, in the same order, diminish exponentially with each letter of each word that you write, and once you get beyond a few words, they are so astronomical as to make it virtually impossible for you to do so. You are more

likely to win the Powerball lottery a few times in a row.⁷ This is one of the reasons plagiarism is so easy to catch.

It is possible and even likely, however, that you might unknowingly hit on general ideas that others have come upon before. The more general the idea, the higher the odds of this happening. This possibility is another key reason we require research: without researching what has already been published in a field, it is impossible to know whether your idea is original or not.

If you have a working interpretation of a poem, for example, and you come across an article in which the author makes the same points you planned on making, do not panic. Instead, you should see this as important validation that you are thinking intelligently about your subject. Your task now is to take what the previous critic has written, as well as other interpretations you come across, and do more thinking to see whether those other ideas have allowed you to dig deeper into even further insights. This is what it looks like when research is working the way it is meant to: you synthesize what you have learned from others and integrate it with new observations of your own, giving credit in all the appropriate places.

I Read Several Sources That I Ended up Not Using for My Paper. Should I Include These on the References Page?

No. It is understandable that students want to let their instructors know just how much research they have done for an assignment, and it is often the case that one reads several articles for each one that ultimately proves useful. Indeed, as you narrow your focus on your research

⁷ To give you an idea, the odds of you writing the same arbitrary 20 letters in a row that someone else has written are $1/26^{20}$, or 1 in 19,928,148,895,209,400,000,000,000,000. In comparison, the odds of winning the Powerball top prize are 1 in 292,201,338 (Multi-State Lottery Association, n.d.).

question over the course of your project, you often find that only part of what you have read proves germane to the final draft of your essay. The rules of APA Style are clear: “a *reference list* cites works that specifically support a particular article” (American Psychological Association, p. 180n1).

However, there are perfectly acceptable ways of letting your instructor know what additional works you read for your project. The simplest is to email your instructor a short note identifying all the works you read. Alternatively, the APA Style guide provides for adding a bibliography to your work: “a *bibliography* cites works for background or for further reading and may include descriptive notes” (APA, p. 180n1). Make your bibliography starting on a fresh page after the References page. Title the page “Bibliography” (or “Annotated Bibliography” if you annotate the references with short descriptions after each), and otherwise format it exactly as you would the References page.

What Are Some Helpful Sources for Learning APA Style That Include Examples?

Here are a few useful online sources:

Purdue Online Writing Lab: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/10/>

APA Style Blog: <http://blog.apastyle.org/>

APA Style: <http://www.apastyle.org/>

Baker College APA Help: <http://guides.baker.edu/apahelp>

UMUC Library: http://sites.umuc.edu/library/libhow/apa_examples.cfm

Walden U: <http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/apa/references/examples>

Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/apa.html>

Citation Machine: <http://www.citationmachine.net/apa/cite-a-website>

BibMe: <http://www.bibme.org/citation-guide/apa/website/>

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