

Departmental Guidelines on Plagiarism

What is meant by plagiarism?

Plagiarism is basically the attempt to pass off someone else's work as your own. The University guidelines define as plagiarised work which

- has been written or dictated wholly or partly by another person;
- has been wholly or partly copied from the work of another person (with or without that person's knowledge or consent);
- contains quotations from the work of others which are not acknowledged; or
- consists wholly or largely of the work of others even if the sources are acknowledged.

Plagiarism in scientific writing

Much of the writing you are asked to do in this department involves reporting the results of a literature search, or writing up an experiment testing theoretical predictions which are the work of others. In these cases it is entirely right and proper that all or part of your report consists of an account of the work and findings of other people and is based upon their publications in the scientific literature. This is not plagiarism *provided* that the original authors are properly acknowledged and that the level of dependence on another's work is not excessive.

Proper acknowledgement means:

- *Direct quotations* should be identified as such by using quotation marks or by setting off the text in some way (indentation, different type size, different font). The source must be explicitly cited (it is not enough just to include it in a general bibliography). An example of a direct quotation would be:

According to Fabian[1], "there is strong evidence that powerful radio-loud objects are surrounded by dense, cooling, intracluster (or intragroup) gas".

The reference [1] would then provide the source (in this case, A.C. Fabian, *Annual Review of Astronomy and Astrophysics* **32** (1994) 277–318).

- *Material which follows the source closely but is not a direct quote* (for example, a theoretical derivation in a lab report which is based on a textbook or theory paper) should be acknowledged as such by appropriate wording (e.g. "Following the argument of Beale and Jackson (*Neural Computing*, Adam Hilger, 1990), we can derive the new learning rule by...") and the source should be cited as a reference.
- *Pictures copied from a published source* (this includes both photocopies and versions which have been redrawn) should have their sources specified in the picture caption (e.g. "From Fabian[1]" or "Redrawn from Beale and Jackson[2]"). In a formally published article you would be expected to seek the permission of the original copyright holder (the author or the publisher) before making use of such material, but for an undergraduate exercise it is enough just to acknowledge the source.

Avoiding excessive dependence on another's work means:

- If you are not acknowledging a direct quote, try to avoid paraphrases which are so close they look like a deliberate attempt to use the original words without having to say so!

The *occasional* sentence like this is hard to avoid: sometimes there is simply no other way to phrase the information. But if entire paragraphs are this close to the original, and you have not acknowledged the fact, then you are plagiarising.

- If you are reporting a literature search, directed reading, or design study, you should not be basing your essay on a single source. One of the objectives of such exercises is that you should read *widely* in the relevant literature: you cannot demonstrate that you have done this by summarising a single article! If you find that you cannot avoid relying heavily on one source, you must (1) state that you are doing so and (2) justify this.

Note that there are cases where relying on a single source is the correct thing to do: for example, if you are asked to write a piece in the style of a *Nature* ‘News and Views’ article (the whole idea of these articles is to take a recent technical paper, usually one appearing in the current issue of the journal, and explain its findings and their significance to a wider non-specialist audience). Theoretical derivations in lab or project reports might also reasonably follow a single textbook or theory paper. In these cases there is no need to apologise!

What are the consequences of plagiarism?

The penalties for detected plagiarism depend very much on the seriousness of the case. At one extreme, minor failures of acknowledgement where there is clearly no intent to deceive (for example, using a photocopied diagram from a published article without citing the source) will simply result in your being awarded a lower mark—by a few percent, or perhaps one grade—than you might otherwise have earned. The marker’s feedback form will point this out, probably under the heading “Presentation” or “Style”. On the other hand, wholesale unacknowledged copying of published material or material written by another student will certainly earn you a zero grade, and you may also be reported to a university disciplinary committee.

In cases where the marker and the Year Tutor feel that there is evidence of plagiarism sufficiently serious to warrant the award of a failing grade, you will be contacted by the Head of Department or the Year Tutor and asked to explain what has happened. You may deny the accusation altogether, in which case the matter will be referred to the appropriate committee for adjudication; dispute its seriousness, claiming for example that your wording is not as close to the original as the marker says it is, in which case an independent person such as the External Examiner may be asked to mediate; or offer mitigating circumstances such as illness or personal problems, which, if properly documented, will be considered by the appropriate examining board. You will never be awarded a failing grade for apparent plagiarism without being given the chance to defend yourself.

You should recognise that the issue of plagiarism is not just bureaucratic hair-splitting: claiming credit for another’s work is as serious as any other form of theft. The free dissemination and publication of scientific results is vital to the progress of science, and it should not be hampered by fears that the results of one’s hard work will be appropriated by another.