**Avoiding Plagiarism**

**Introduction**

It is very important to use plenty of sources in your science writing to show how much you know about a topic, and to allow your own research to link in with current thinking in that discipline. However, if you fail to credit sources properly, or if you copy the work of your peers, you will be committing plagiarism. This is a serious crime in the eyes of an institution and/or the research community.

There are a number of misconceptions relating to plagiarism; sometimes students commit plagiarism unknowingly, and other times they worry unnecessarily. In this guide, we provide a few clarifications on what does and does not count as ‘plagiarism’, and also give a few tips you can follow to make sure you avoid any potential problems.

**What is Plagiarism?**

Put simply, using others’ ideas or words, or using their specific findings (such as results from experiments, or images/photos, or even diagrams/figures) without giving them credit in the form of a citation is plagiarism.

However, many students do not realize that they are also committing plagiarism if they copy any of these things from previous assignments (even if they are from their own previous assignments).

Additionally, you are also committing plagiarism if you copy paraphrased material from other sources (even if these are properly cited in their original format).

**An Example:** If you are reading a journal article written by Deane and Reilly, and in that article these authors paraphrase material from another author like this: “Nolan and O’Sullivan (2003) argued that white mice were more likely to be caught by predators than brown mice,” you must rephrase the paraphrased material from Nolan and O’Sullivan to avoid plagiarising Deane and Reilly (because it was their interpretation that Nolan and O’Sullivan had argued this point).

Finally, it is also possible to commit plagiarism by badly misinterpreting/misquoting someone when providing a citation (even if this is not purposeful). As a result, it is very important that you pay special attention to the work of others when citing it in your own work; it is very important that your paraphrased piece of writing does justice to the original material.

**An Example:** In this guide, we wrote that sometimes students commit plagiarism unknowingly. If someone was to credit this guide with a proper citation but paraphrased our words inaccurately, they would be plagiarising the material (e.g. *“More often than not, students commit plagiarism unknowingly (UBC Science Writing, 2014)”* is plagiarism, because this misrepresents what the guide says, and propagates inaccurate information among whomever reads the article).

**What is Not Plagiarism?**

The most common misconception relating to plagiarism is that you must cite every piece of information in your work, when in fact you only need to cite some of it (the specific, individual thoughts of others). Another common misconception is that you must write every sentence differently to how other people have done so.

The key realization that you must make – particularly with regard to the second misconception – is that you only need to rephrase original ideas or arguments, or published material cited by other people.

**An Example:** You need to rephrase Deane and Reilly’s paraphrased sentence referring to the work of Nolan and O’Sullivan (2003) because that was original, published material. However, if Deane and Reilly opened their article by saying that: “mice are small mammals,” you do not need to worry about writing something different to get the same point across, because this is a universally acknowledged fact (it is not an original idea of Deane and Reilly’s that you must credit them for).

This links in to the next point: You do not need to cite material that is factual (and well known), or which can be filed in the category of ‘general knowledge.’

What does and does not fall under ‘general knowledge’ can be hard to know, especially when you are starting out as a science writer, but the two key things to keep in mind are **1**) the audience you are targeting, and **2**) how specific your information is.

**1: Your Audience:** You should cite material that is unlikely to be familiar to your audience, to make sure that you do not pass off the ideas of others as your own. However, a public talk, or a journalistic article, or a presentation to high-school students will involve audiences with very different background knowledge about your subject than a presentation to specialist researchers working in the same discipline as you.

**An Example:** You would not need to cite Charles Darwin’s most famous work when talking to a group of evolutionary biologists about evolution (as long as you are not referring to something very specific that Darwin did or said), but if you were presenting work to those high-school students, you probably would (because they might very well not have read *Origin of Species* and might not realize you were talking about Darwin’s ideas if you didn’t).

**2: How Specific is your Information?** Even if you are talking to specialists in your field, they might not have all read the latest (or even the more obscure) published material. As such, you should cite anything that you think is very specific, because it is unlikely that it would be generally known.

**An Example:** You would need to cite Darwin’s most famous work if you mentioned the specific sizes of the finches’ bills in the different populations found on different islands of the Galapagos, as this is very specific information (*note: Darwin proposed that birds on different islands had evolved different beak sizes, within a few mm of each other, as they became adapted to the unique food resources on each island*). You would need to cite this whether you were talking to evolutionary biologists or to the high-school students because of its highly specific content.

**Tips for Avoiding Plagiarism**

1. If in doubt, cite the material (you won’t be penalized for over-citing material)
2. When deciding whether information is very specific, or whether your audience would consider it general knowledge, ask some friends with a variety of backgrounds and see if they already knew about the information; if they hadn’t, you should cite it
3. **i**) Summarize material when you first read it and paraphrase it yourself to avoid copying what others have written (cover up the original work before writing your own paraphrased summary)

**ii**) Re-read the original material and then read your paraphrased version to make sure your version is an accurate assessment of the original thought/idea

1. Credit any source for images and/or figures as well as ideas (think about media and how you always see images credited)
2. Do not copy your own work from previous semesters or classes!

**Video Resource**

For a recap and for some extra information about avoiding plagiarism, please watch Grammar Squirrel’s [video](http://youtu.be/Z6ba9FVFAXg) about identifying and integrating sources into your writing on the UBC Science Writing [YouTube channel.](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvynvmsn_NTlS9lc8cH-OFw)