

## **ABOUT PLAGIARISM – AND WHY COPY-PASTING IS NO LAUGHING MATTER IN ACADEMIA**

*Dr. Christian Baden | The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

That plagiarism constitutes an academic violation is by now widely acknowledged. However, there are several important misunderstandings in the debate: While it is easy enough to understand how copy-pasting others' words and ideas into a student assignment might constitute fraud, it is less evident why plagiarism is often said to touch upon the core of scientific work – and hence, what justifies its heavy stigmatization and often draconic punishment. In the following I will try to explain what is really at stake in the debate about plagiarism.

### **► What is plagiarism?**

In science, plagiarism is a kind of work that uses the intellectual property of others without revealing the source. For a work to constitute plagiarism, it is not critical whether others' ideas are copy-pasted verbatim or whether they are imported as paraphrases; nor is it important whether entire pieces of work are taken over or only parts thereof. Rather, the decisive transgression consists in the act of presenting the thoughts of others as if they were one's own.

### **► Why is plagiarism such a big problem in academia?**

Plagiarism undermines two existential preconditions of scientific work.

The first reason why plagiarism is a grave sin in academia has to do with the way in which scientific knowledge is built. The key mechanism for the development of knowledge rests on the systematic appraisal of findings and conclusions that other researchers have drawn from other contexts and studies. In order for scientists to further develop scientific knowledge, it is necessary that it is always possible to retrace how the present knowledge has come to be: what theoretical ideas and arguments it rested on, and what kinds of investigations have contributed the available evidence. Only the traceability of this genesis of ideas guarantees that the validity and applicability of scientific knowledge can be properly evaluated. This **traceability** is undermined by plagiarism: By cloaking where present arguments build upon existing knowledge, plagiarism disables a systematic evaluation of the quality of presented ideas. Where scientists present existing ideas as if they were their own original contributions, hence, their ideas appear as new and still unvalidated, requiring others to start again the tiresome process of validation and contextualization: If the chain of the provenance of ideas is broken, it requires science to effectively re-invent the wheel.

The second reason why plagiarism is a grave sin in academia has to do with the fact that, during their progressing specialization, scientists inevitably become experts to an extent that only few others are able to fully appraise and evaluate the quality of their work. Also practically, it is impossible for other researchers to doublecheck every source, piece of evidence or data point cited as warrant in a scientific study – regardless of whether this is a class or seminar paper, scientific article or monography. For science to function, it is necessary that readers of scientific work can reasonably assume that all sources are appropriately represented and credited, and not distorted, ripped out of context or entirely made up. This is even more dramatic in empirical research, where it is almost impossible to verify that a scientist has indeed observed or measured what is claimed in a study. Without **trust** in the accuracy and diligence of scientific work, the only way to ascertain the validity of conclusions would be to retrace and replicate all those steps that led to a specific finding or idea. Occasionally, this actually happens: Experiments are being replicated, interviews are cross-checked, cited references are verified.

If such checks reveal discrepancies, this not only damages the researcher whose honesty is then in question, but also all the work that built upon those studies now found to be non-dependable. Any violation in the process of documenting scientific work necessitates a far-reaching re-appraisal of all related work, including the need to replicate key findings and reexamine their theoretical foundations. Accordingly, plagiarism constitutes a breach of trust that prevents other researchers from relying on the work presented by a specific author: If we cannot trust a researcher to report his or her work accurately and honestly, it effectively invalidates that author's entire work for use in scientific knowledge production.

Trust in the accuracy of work presented by other researcher, as well as the transparency of the origin of relevant ideas are thus essential prerequisites for the functioning of scientific knowledge production. **Anyone who breaches that trust or cloaks the origin of ideas thereby reveals her or his unsuitability for being a part of the academic community.** In the context of the academic education afforded by a BA or MA program, therefore, a student that commits plagiarism thereby documents that she or he is unworthy of an academic degree: You are evidently unable to contribute to the scientific development of knowledge.

In addition to these primary reasons, there are two more aspects to plagiarism that are primarily of disciplinary and legal concern. First, plagiarism violates **intellectual property rights**: Plagiarism is idea theft. While this is less critical from a scientific point of view – the hurt vanity of true authors is not the reason why plagiarism is prosecuted – this may sometimes have painful legal consequences.

Second, plagiarism in the context of an examination – and also a class or seminar paper is an examination – constitutes **fraud**, which is a disciplinary violation, under certain conditions also a legal one. From the point of view of students, this is one important reason why plagiarism in all probability means that the offender will fail the respective examination and class, and in some cases the entire study program: After all, it is unacceptable to obtain credit or even a degree by means of fraud. If plagiarism were tolerated, the bestowment of academic honors upon cheaters and freeloaders would devalue those credits and degrees obtained by most students through their hard and honest work.

### ► How do you avoid plagiarism?

Avoiding plagiarism is simple and fundamental in all scientific work:

- Mark all passages that you take over **verbatim** from anywhere as **quotations**, and provide the source reference and page number. Quotations are normally specific sentences or clauses, and in exceptional cases expand to multiple sentences; where you take over technical terms or concepts from others' works, it may sometimes be appropriate to also treat single words or expressions as quotations – however, that applies only if an author proposes specific new terminology. *Note*: If text is taken over verbatim, it still constitutes plagiarism if the source is mentioned but the quote is not marked as literal takeover.
- Mark all passages wherein you **refer to, paraphrase or summarize** ideas taken from elsewhere as **citations** by presenting the source at the end of the relevant passages. If multiple successive paragraphs are primarily based on one source, the source needs to be credited at the end of each paragraph; however it is rarely sufficient to base lengthy passages on only one source, so ideally, this problem does not arise as you bring in additional sources within the discussion of others' ideas. *Note*: Citations are needed for ideas or factual claims that derive their credibility from other work, but not for claims that are obviously true or ideas that are widely in circulation.

There are a few general hints that may be useful.

- Always make sure that you **include references when you are taking notes**, so you know where you got something from.
- **Never ever copy passages from anywhere into your work** that you do not wish to use as verbatim quotes and mark immediately as such.
- Whenever you base an entire paragraph primarily on one source, (1) credit the source of course, but also be sure to (2) use your own words, (3) connect the referenced ideas to the arguments made in your paper and (4) consider putting it into relation with other related work (including required citations).

Generally, **avoiding plagiarism requires no additional effort as long as you work carefully and keep track of your sources**: If you take over content verbatim or by means of paraphrase or summary, make sure to mark it appropriately, include the reference, and you should be safe.

What may be helpful, however, is a change of perspective. Contrary to popular perceptions, scientific progress does not derive from the inspired epiphanies of rare geniuses, but from the incremental, transparent, systematic and explicit appraisal and critique of insights contributed by other scientists at earlier times, in different locations and situations. It is thus not the task of scientists to have ingenious ideas – in fact, science deeply distrusts inspiration, as creative original ideas provide no means for evaluating their validity, applicability and relevance. Rather, scientific ideas gain power through their careful and explicit foundation in what others have known, found and argued. Every citation that supports a claim or argument strengthens it. In this sense, if you present an argument or idea as your own, you mostly create a situation wherein scientists need to wonder how valid and good your idea is; by contrast, crediting ideas and sources shows that your work is firmly based in what we know and can trust, and that your conclusions deserve credence. **References do not diminish your originality, on the contrary, they endow your arguments with relevance and force.**

#### ► **What happens if someone commits plagiarism?**

First of all, it is **very likely for plagiarism to be detected**. That is chiefly for three reasons. First, instructors tend to be deeply familiar with the relevant literature and can easily recognize relevant formulations and important ideas. Where familiar expressions and ideas are not marked as quotations or citations, the search for plagiarism commences. Second, instructors are familiar with the same search strategies that are available to students – if anything, they know them probably better, as the search for academic sources and literature is a key part of their daily work; they also know some additional data bases that are not accessible to students. Even contents taken over from books, unpublished reports and others' class and seminar papers are thereby easily found. Third, the faculty possesses specialized software that can automatically identify plagiarism. This software supports the search for plagiarism once there is reason to suspect a transgression, and can find also paraphrases and fragmentary plagiarism, where not entire passages but only bits and pieces are copied into a paper.

Once a case of plagiarism is identified, the only remaining question is whether the copied passages can be explained as accidental oversight: After all, everyone makes mistakes, and nobody fails a class just because she or he forgot two quotation marks. However, if there are too many “accidents” or the extent or pattern of plagiarized contents cast doubt on that explanation, the case is classified as plagiarism. For this, it is unimportant whether someone just worked in a sloppy manner and thus “forgot” multiple marks and references, or whether someone attempted deliberate fraud – in retrospect, it is often impossible to distinguish one from the other, anyway. Likewise, it is irrelevant whether the plagiarism concerns one paragraph, a few scattered ideas, or the entire document; whether it concerns unmarked verbatim takeovers, uncredited arguments or otherwise paraphrases others'

publications: **Once a transgression cannot be confidently excused as accidental oversight, the entire paper counts as plagiarism.**

From the moment that a case of plagiarism is detected, its further processing is no longer in the hands of the individual instructor. At the Hebrew University, cases of plagiarism are referred to a **disciplinary committee** – at the faculty level for normal transgressions, and before the academic secretary for particularly severe or repeated transgressions. The author of the plagiarized work then has the opportunity to explain her- or himself, before the committee determines the severity of the transgression and imposes appropriate sanctions. If the committee judges the case to be not explicable as accidental oversight, at the very least, **the paper and the class that it was written for are voided, normally failed.** Depending on the severity of the case, however, plagiarism can also lead to the student failing the entire study program, and in extreme cases, being expelled from the Hebrew University. Given the severe consequences of plagiarism, and also given how easy it is to avoid, **please save yourself and us the trouble: Work carefully, credit citations and quotations, and build your own, strong arguments upon the shoulders of the giant that is scientific knowledge.**