

Plagiarism

What it is and how to avoid it

1. Background¹

1. This guide is intended to provide students at Heriot-Watt University with a clear definition of plagiarism and examples of how to avoid it.
2. The guide may also be of use to members of staff who seek to advise students on the various issues outlined below.

2. Definition

Plagiarism involves the act of taking the ideas, writings or inventions of another person and using these as if they were one's own, whether intentionally or not. Plagiarism occurs where there is no acknowledgement that the writings or ideas belong to or have come from another source.

Most academic writing involves building on the work of others and this is acceptable as long as their contribution is identified and fully acknowledged. It is not wrong in itself to use the ideas, writings or inventions of others, provided that whoever does so is honest about acknowledging the source of that information. Many aspects of plagiarism can be simply avoided through proper referencing. However, plagiarism extends beyond minor errors in referencing the work of others and also includes the reproduction of an entire paper or passage of work or of the ideas and views contained in such pieces of work.

3. Good practice

1. Academic work is almost always drawn from other published information supplemented by the writer's own ideas, results or findings. Thus drawing from other work is entirely acceptable, but it is unacceptable not to acknowledge such work. Conventions or methods for making acknowledgements can vary slightly from subject to subject, and students should seek the advice of staff in their own School/Institute about ways of doing this. Generally, referencing systems fall into the Harvard (where the text citation is by author and date) and numeric (where the text citation is by using a number). Both systems refer readers to a list at the end of the piece of work where sufficient information is provided to enable the reader to locate the source for themselves.
2. When a student undertakes a piece of work that involves drawing on the writings or ideas of others, they must ensure that they acknowledge each contribution in the following manner:
 - **Citations:** when a direct quotation, a figure, a general idea or other piece of information is taken from another source, the work and its source must be acknowledged and identified where it occurs in the text;
 - **Quotations:** inverted commas must always be used to identify direct quotations, and the source of the quotation must be cited;
 - **References:** the full details of all references and other sources must be listed in a section at the end of any piece of work, such as an essay, together with the full publication details. This is normally referred to as a "List of References" and it must include details of any and all sources of information that the student has referred to in producing their work. (This is slightly different to a Bibliography, which may also contain references and sources which, although not directly referred to in your work, you consulted in producing your work).

¹ 1. This copy is a version of the official Heriot Watt Student Guide to Plagiarism. The material is based on "Plagiarism – A Good Practice Guide", Carroll, J and Appleton, J (2001) and various extracts from Student/Course Handbooks 2004/2005, Schools and Institutes at Heriot-Watt University.

3. Students may wish to refer to the following examples which illustrate the basic principles of plagiarism and how students might avoid it in their work by using some very simple techniques:

Example 1: A Clear Case of Plagiarism

Examine the following example in which a student has simply inserted a passage of text (*in italics*) into their work directly from a book they have read:

University and college managers should consider implementing strategic frameworks if they wish to embrace good management standards. *One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action.* Managers are employed to resolve these issues effectively.

This is an example of bad practice as the student makes no attempt to distinguish the passage they have inserted from their own work. Thus, this constitutes a clear case of plagiarism. Simply changing a few key words in such a passage of text (e.g. replace 'problems' with 'difficulties') does not make it the student's work and it is still considered to be an act of plagiarism.

3.1 Citations and Quotations

What follows are examples of the measures that students should employ in order to correctly cite the words, thought or ideas of others that have influenced their work:

Example 2: Quoting the work of others

If a student wishes to cite a passage of text in order to support their own work, the correct way of doing so is to use quotation marks (e.g. " ") to show that the passage is someone else's work, as follows:

"One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action".

3.2 Referencing

Example 3: Referencing the work of others

In addition to using quotation marks as above, students must also use a text citation. If the work being cited is a book, page numbers would also normally be required. Thus, using the Harvard system for a book:

"One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action" (Jones, 2001, p121).

The same reference could also be made to a book using the numeric system:

"One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action" (Ref.1, p121).

More often, a piece of work will have multiple references and this serves to show an examiner that the student is drawing from a number of sources. For example, articles by [2] Brown and by [3] Smith may be cited as follows in the Harvard system

“It has been asserted that Higher Education in the United Kingdom continued to be poorly funded during the 1980’s [Brown, 1991], whereas more modern writers [Smith, 2002] argue that the HE sector actually received, in real terms, more funding during this period than the thirty year period immediately preceding it”.

or as follows using the numeric system:

“It has been asserted that Higher Education in the United Kingdom continued to be poorly funded during the 1980’s [Ref 2, whereas more modern writers [Ref 3] argue that the HE sector actually received, in real terms, more funding during this period than the thirty year period immediately preceding it”.

Example 4: Referencing the source of your words based on the work of others

IF you use other work in your own argument without actually copying their words, it is also necessary to their work explicitly. Since the words are not copied, quotation marks are not appropriate in this case, but students must also use a text citation. If the work being cited is a book, page numbers would also normally be required. Thus, using the Harvard system for a book:

Since a strategic framework for a university generally results in both positive and negative constraints on their operation (Jones, 2001, p121), it is essential to carry out a comprehensive analysis of all potential constraints before implementing a new strategy.

The same reference could also be made to a book using the numeric system:

Since a strategic framework for a university generally results in both positive and negative constraints on their operation (Ref. 1, p121), it is essential to carry out a comprehensive analysis of all potential constraints before implementing a new strategy.

More often, a piece of work will have multiple references and this serves to show an examiner that the student is drawing from a number of sources. For example, articles by [2] Brown and by [3] Smith may be cited as follows in the Harvard system

Irrespective of a prior debate as to whether the funding situation of Higher Education system in the United Kingdom during the 1980's was deteriorating [Brown, 1991] or improving [Smith, 2002], the current situation shows that the profession of the university lecturer is now classed as a high-risk employment by insurances due to the high stress levels caused by the increasing demands on the job.

or as follows using the numeric system (note the shorter version, just using the number, [2] instead of [Ref 2]):

Irrespective of a prior debate as to whether the funding situation of Higher Education system in the United Kingdom during the 1980's was deteriorating [2] or improving [3], the current situation shows that the profession of the university lecturer is now classed as a high-risk employment by insurances due to the high stress levels caused by the increasing demands on the job.

3.3 The bibliography or reference list

Whichever system is used, a list must be included at the end, which allows the reader to locate the works cited for themselves. The Internet is also an increasingly popular source of information for students and details must again be provided. You should adhere to the following guidelines in all cases where you reference the work of others:

If the source is a book, the required information is as follows:

- Author's name(s)
- Year of Publication
- Title of Book
- Place of Publication
- Publishers Name
- All Page Numbers cited
- Edition (if more than one, e.g. 3rd edition, 2001)

Example:

[1] J. Jones (2001). *Strategic frameworks for Higher Education*. Random House Publishings, London, pp. 121 ff.

If the source is an article in a journal or periodical, the required information is as follows:

- Author's name(s)
- Year of Publication
- Title of Journal
- Volume and part number
- Page numbers for the article

Example:

[2] P. Brown (1991). A survey of UK Higher Education funding in the Thatcher years. *Journal of Educational Policy* **23**, 131 – 142.

If the source is from the Internet, the required information is as follows:

- Author's or Institution's name ("Anon", if not known)
- Title of Document
- Date last accessed by student
- Full URL (e.g. <http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/plagiarism/>)
- Affiliation of author, if given (e.g. University of Tennessee)

Example

[3] S.J. Smith (2001). Exposing the myth of the alleged destruction of the education sector by M. Thatcher. (accessed 21 August 2007), <http://www.tories.org.uk/reports/2001/smith.pdf>

The way in which the information is organised can vary, and there are some types of work (for example edited volumes and conference proceedings) where the required information is slightly different. Essentially, though, it is your responsibility to make it clear where you are citing references within your work and what the source is within your reference list.

Failure to do so is an act of plagiarism.

Students are encouraged to use a style of acknowledgement that is appropriate to their own academic discipline and should seek advice from their mentor, course leader or other appropriate member of academic staff. There are also many reference sources available in the University Library which will provide useful guidance on referencing styles.

4. Common mistakes

Students may find the following examples² of common plagiarism mistakes made by other students useful when reflecting on their own work:

- “I thought it would be okay as long as I included the source in my bibliography” [without indicating a quotation had been used in the text]
- “I made lots of notes for my essay and couldn't remember where I found the information”
- “I thought it would be okay to use material that I had purchased online”
- “I thought it would be okay to copy the text if I changed some of the words into my own”
- “I thought that plagiarism only applied to essays, I didn't know that it also applies to oral presentations/group projects etc”
- “I thought it would be okay just to use my tutor's notes”
- “I didn't think that you needed to reference material found on the web”
- “I left it too late and just didn't have time to reference my sources”

None of the above are acceptable reasons for failing to acknowledge the use of others' work and thereby constitute plagiarism.

5. Managing Plagiarism

Students, supervisors and institutions have a joint role in ensuring that plagiarism is avoided in all areas of academic activity. Each role is outlined below as follows:

How you can ensure that you avoid plagiarism in your work:

- Take responsibility for applying the above principles of best practice and integrity within all of your work
- Be aware that your written work will be checked for plagiarism and that all incidents of plagiarism, if found, are likely to result in severe disciplinary action by the University. The standard penalty is to annul all assessments taken in the same diet of examinations (refer to [University Ordinance 9: Student Discipline](#), Section 6 and to <http://www.hw.ac.uk/registry/resources/GuidelinesStudentDiscipline.pdf> for further details).

How your School/Institute will help you to avoid plagiarism:

- Highlight written guidance on how you can avoid plagiarism and provide you with supplementary, verbal guidance wherever appropriate
- Regularly check student work to ensure that plagiarism has not taken place (this may involve both manual and electronic methods of checking, an example of the latter being use of the Joint Information Standards Committee (JISC) “Turnitin” plagiarism detection software).
- Alert you to the procedures that will apply should you be found to have committed or be suspected of having committed an act of plagiarism and explain how further action will be taken in accordance with University policy and procedures.

How the University will endeavour to reduce student plagiarism:

- Provide clear written guidance on what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it directly to your School/Institute and to you
- Alert you and staff in your School/Institute to the penalties employed when dealing with plagiarism cases
- Take steps to ensure that a consistent approach is applied when dealing with cases of suspected plagiarism across the institution
- Take the issue of academic dishonesty very seriously and routinely investigate cases where students have plagiarised and apply appropriate penalties in all proven cases.

² Extract from ‘Plagiarism at the University of Essex’ advice copyrighted and published by the Learning, Teaching and Quality Unit at the University of Essex (http://www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism/common_excuses.htm), reproduced with kind permission.

6. Using TurnitinUK

1. Connect to the JISC PDS system from the link in the Vision/Blackboard module
2. In the list of assignments, click the “**submit**” icon next to the assignment you want to submit. This takes you to the upload page.
3. You should submit your paper by “**file upload**”. Submit your essay as a ‘**word**’, **Postscript, Rich Text, or pdf** document.
4. In the “submission title” box, **enter the title of your dissertation**.
5. Click on the **Browse** button and navigate to your document. Highlight it and click on “**Open**”.
6. The next page displays the document and asks you to confirm that it is the one you want to submit. If it is, click “**yes, submit**”.
7. The essay is now submitted. You should see a “**digital receipt**” page with a paper ID, and a receipt is also automatically emailed to you.
8. Click on “**class portfolio**” to see your list of documents. You should see the document you just submitted in the portfolio list. Within a few minutes (or during busy times up to an hour!), the little square between the “submitted” and “contents” columns will be a bright colour. This is the “**Originality Report**” for your essay. The colour is coded to the percentage of the essay found in other, pre-existing sources. This percentage is called the “similarity index”.
9. To view the “**Originality Report**”, click on it. The default view is a printer-friendly version. Click on “**side-by-side version**” at the top of the screen to see your text and the sources, if any, that were identified.

6.1 How you and your tutor will use the Originality Reports

1. For most people, most of the time, the “similarity index” in the Originality Report will be a very low number, ideally less than 10% but certainly less than 20%.
2. If the similarity index is high (greater than 25%), ask yourself if this indicates the presence of a genuine problem. For example, if you use a direct quote from some author, enclose it in “ ”, and provide a full citation, the Originality Report will pick this up – but you do not need to do anything about it, because you have cited the source correctly.
3. If the similarity index is high and you believe that the JISC PDS has uncovered a genuine problem, then redraft your dissertation so that the problem is removed. When you have done this, resubmit your final dissertation as a “**Revision assignment**”.
4. You are allowed up to 2 submissions of your dissertation: the original submission and one resubmissions. You may resubmit without penalty, and the last version submitted before the deadline is the one that will be used.
5. A low value for the similarity index does not guarantee that your dissertation uses good citation practice! Make sure that you follow the basic rules of good citation: if you use the work of others, cite it and its source; put quotations in “ ” and cite the source in the text; and include a references section.
6. Your tutor will monitor the Originality Reports for your dissertation. Minor problems that remain in your dissertation that are detected by the JISC PDS software will be reflected in the mark awarded to the dissertation. Major problems may result in the rejection of your dissertation, and you may be referred to the University Disciplinary Committee for plagiarism detected by the software.