Defining Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the use of someone else’s words or ideas without citing, or giving credit, to the original author. It is a form of intellectual theft.

Clear-Cut Instances of Plagiarism:

- Buying or copying a paper from the Internet
- Paying someone else to write your paper
- Copying large chunks of text into your own paper

Other Instances of Plagiarism:

- Using a paper you have written for another course
- Copying a chunk of text, changing a few words, and keeping the sentence structure
- Citing a source incorrectly
- Failing to use quotation marks around a direct quote
- Using another person’s ideas as the basis for your own idea without giving credit to the original source

When to Cite

You must cite when:

- Using a direct quote from a work or interview.
- Paraphrasing someone else’s ideas.
  - Paraphrasing is when you summarize or restate ideas without the use of direct quotes.
- Using the original idea of another person.
- Incorporating information or facts that are not common knowledge (statistics, graphs, research results, etc.).
- Using unique expressions.
  - In *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Friedman describes the “flatteners” that have contributed to equalizing global competitors.

You do not have to cite when:

- Using information that is common knowledge.
  - “Common knowledge” includes generally accepted facts and other information that is likely to be known already by your target audience. As a general rule of thumb, if a source can be found in five or more easily accessible sources, it can be considered common knowledge.
    - Ex. Plants need water and sunlight to thrive.
    - Ex. Barack Obama is the 44th President of the United States.
- Writing about your own experiences.

To illustrate plagiarism in different degrees, we have reproduced a passage from a book, followed by three student samples, two of which are plagiarism.
Original passage
Alexander III died on 20 October, 1894, and was succeeded by his son Nicholas. The new emperor was more intelligent and more sensitive than his father. Both those who know him well, and those who had brief and superficial contact with him, testify to his exceptional personal charm. The charm was, however, apparently associated with weakness and irresolution. Nicholas appeared to agree with the last person he had talked to, and no one could tell what he would do next.

Student Version A (plagiarized)
When Alexander III died on October 20, 1894, he was followed by his son Nicholas, who was more intelligent and more sensitive than his father. People who knew him well and also some who knew him only superficially testify that he was exceptionally charming as a person. This charm, however, was associated with weakness and an inability to make decisions. Nicholas always seemed to agree with the last person he had talked to, and no one could predict what he would do next.

This is an example of outright plagiarism. No documentation of any sort is given. The student simply repeats the passage almost verbatim, as though he or she had written it.

Student Version B (plagiarized)
When Alexander III died on October 20, 1894, he was followed by his son Nicholas, who was more intelligent and more sensitive than his father. People who knew him well, and also some who knew him only superficially testify that he was exceptionally charming as a person. This charm, however, was associated with weakness and an inability to make decisions. Nicholas always seemed to agree with the last person he had talked to, and no one could predict what he would do next.3


Though documented with footnote, the passage is still a case of plagiarism because the student has merely changed a word or two of the original, without doing a proper paraphrase.

Student Version C
Emperor Nicholas II, who came to the throne of Russia following the death of his father, Alexander III, was apparently a man of exceptional personal charm and (acceptable) deep sensitivity. Ample testimony has come to us from both intimate as well as casual acquaintances, indicating that indeed he possessed a magnetic personality. However, the general consensus is also that he was a man who lacked the ability to make hard decisions, preferring to agree with the last person he had seen, and thus making it impossible to predict what he would do next.3


This is an acceptable use of the material. The original is properly paraphrased and its source documented with a footnote.