

Plagiarism

Written for the MA program
“Sociology – European Societies”
at Freie Universität Berlin

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Plagiarism is a wide-spread phenomenon in universities world-wide. This paper aims at preventing students of the masters program "Sociology – European Societies" at Freie Universität Berlin from intentional and accidental plagiarism.

During their studies in the masters program "Sociology – European Societies" students are required to write several papers between 3,000 words and 80 pages length. While writing these papers, they are expected to stick to general scientific standards. One requirement is that scientific work has to be original in the sense that it does not plagiarize. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, plagiarism means "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own" (Merriam-Webster 2010; cf. Akademischer Senat 2002). Basically, this is all the information needed: In the papers that students hand in, they are not allowed to present ideas or words as their own that were written by somebody else. For example, even when copying only a string of a few words, this short phrase has to be set in quotes and the source must be cited. The same applies to 'self-plagiarism' which means that a student hands in a text as a term paper, research report or master's thesis which includes parts of another text he or she has handed in elsewhere without pointing this out. Please read the rest of this document to find out why plagiarism is strictly forbidden, which consequences it will have and how charges of plagiarism can easily be avoided.

(Why) is plagiarism such a big deal?

Some readers might ask: What is actually the problem with taking "just a little" from another source. There are so many sources freely available online, and using just a wee bit for a seminar paper cannot be a problem, right? It is not at all that easy. For a number of reasons, plagiarism is a serious offence:

1. Plagiarism is a violation of property rights. Plagiarists present words and thoughts as their own which have actually been created by somebody else. These words and thoughts are their original author's property and using them for one's own purpose without acknowledging the source is theft!
2. Plagiarism is bad scientific practice. Scientific research, and seminar papers and master's thesis are part of this genre, aims at the development of knowledge – not copying and pasting. Plagiarism does not contribute to the advancement of knowledge, but means stealing from colleagues.
3. At the completion of the program students will be conferred the title "Master of Arts in Sociology – European Societies". This title means that they have learned the sociological contents and the scientific skills taught in this program. Plagiarizing to gain this title is a case of fraud.

Consequences

At Freie Universität Berlin, plagiarism is not treated as a trivial offence. If discovered, it will have serious consequences for the offender's studies. Basically, two different measures can be taken:

1. In every case, offenders will fail the particular course assignment and they cannot repeat the assignment. Thus they will have to take another seminar in the respective module a year later.
2. In case of serious or repeated plagiarism, the module will be failed permanently. Since every module has to be passed for a completion of the program, offenders will not be able to graduate from the program and will not receive the title "Master of Arts".

The lecturers of "Sociology – European Societies" check every seminar paper and master's thesis for originality, using their knowledge of their field of research and additional anti-plagiarism software. Unfortunately, they discover one or more non-ambiguous cases of plagiarism each semester and the above mentioned measures have to be applied.

How to avoid plagiarism

We can distinguish between different types of plagiarism. The following list addresses the three most common types of plagiarism, but makes no claim to be complete.

Phrases

In some text, every thought might be well expressed, every word elegantly placed, each sentence smoothly constructed. It then might seem appealing to adopt the original author's words for a paper. This can be done, but only under one condition: *Direct quotes always have to be set in quotation marks and the source has to be clearly indicated.* This applies to sentences as well as phrases (strings of words).¹ Before or after the quote a specific citation including page numbers has to be provided. But please bear in mind that excessive quoting is considered as bad style. Quotes should be kept to a minimum and longer passages should be paraphrased instead.

Paraphrasing is a crucial skill for good scientific writing and a good way of avoiding long quotes. It is not sufficient to only shuffle the original author's words, since this

¹ Diagrams and graphs do not have to be set in quotation marks, but of course the source has to be indicated.

will result in reusing original phrases. To paraphrase correctly, authors have to express the original message in their own words. Of course, the source still has to be cited. A short and very useful explanation on correct paraphrasing can be found at http://www.plagiarism.org/plag_article_how_to_paraphrase_properly.html.

Structures

Originality in research also applies to structures. Every seminar paper, journal article, chapter or book is structured in a characteristic way. Almost every scientific contribution begins with some sort of introduction and ends with a conclusion, but in between there is huge leeway for composition. In combination with the content, the particular structure makes a paper unique and distinguishable from others. This also holds true for smaller units, like paragraphs. Regarding structures, it is certainly not necessary to reinvent the wheel when writing a paper. There are a limited number of possible structures and some scholarly traditions even teach certain structures as particularly valuable. However, students are not allowed to adopt an existing paper or paragraph, leave the structure and just change the words. This would be seen as plagiarism. Every source used has to be *paraphrased properly*. This also applies to the structure.

Ideas and arguments

In the course of a semester, students will read various books and articles on the class's subject. When you write a seminar paper, you will continue to search for specialized literature on your paper topic. Of course you can and should integrate interesting ideas and arguments which you have read in a text into your own paper's argument. However, when drawing upon others' thoughts, the source has to be cited explicitly. This holds for very well known concepts as well as less known ideas. A student in physics who describes the theory of relativity cannot claim that he invented it. The intellectual property of this idea belongs to Einstein (1920). Likewise, the idea that increasing prosperity leads to value change on a macro level can hardly be described without mentioning Inglehart (1977). Whereas one could argue that these theories are so widely known that they are common sense, these sources should be cited nevertheless in order to avoid a charge of plagiarism. This is even more important when referring to less well-known ideas that borrowed from someone else. *Whenever it is not your original idea, cite the source.*

It may seem now that it is impossible to write a paper without plagiarizing accidentally. Any neologisms and phrases created by a student might already exist, without

the student knowing. Also, other students' papers or journal articles might have used the same structure independently, of course. Rest assured that supervisors in this masters program will judge cautiously before rejecting a paper on account of plagiarism. Stealing from another author does not "simply happen", it is an intentional act. In nearly all cases, the difference between original work and plagiarism is very obvious. Experience has shown that students, who focus on writing original papers, will not risk being accused of plagiarism.

Please read www.plagiarism.org

This paper gives a wide, but not a complete overview of all types of plagiarism. It is strongly recommended that you also read the information given on www.plagiarism.org for a more concise illustration of the issue. Examples of plagiarism can be found on <http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/08/plagiarism/>.

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