

# Plagiarism—What is it and how do I avoid it?

The Oxford American dictionary defines plagiarism as “(the use of) another person’s ideas or writings or inventions as one’s own.” The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary adds the following entries for plagiarism:

- A) to use without crediting the source
- B) to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.
- C) to commit literary theft.

United States copyright laws protect intellectual property rights. A basic overview of these protections can be found on the web address given below.

<http://www.copyright-laws.com/pgs/copyright-basics.html>

- ❑ Generally if a fact is well known (common knowledge) it does not need a citation.
- ❑ Information extracted from an encyclopedia, such as a date, usually does not need to be cited.
- ❑ Additionally, depending on the scholar’s audience, information paraphrased from some class notes are “fair game” and can be included in text without citation. To elaborate on this point, consider the example of a senior history major compiling research on the impact of so called third world countries upon diplomacy between the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Great Britain during the Cold War. Our example scholar would not be writing for a general audience, but rather a specific audience within the field of Cold War history and international relations. (This, of course, does not suggest that the author would not consider making his or her paper “readable” for those outside the field). If the author of such a paper wanted to use class notes from a course titled 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Diplomatic History for background information, he or she may *carefully* do so without offering citation.
- ❑ If in doubt, offer a citation for your source, and as always, it is best to check with your instructor about the specific guidelines required for formatting the citations in your research paper.

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