

# PLAGIARISM: WHAT IS IT?



College of the  
Siskiyous  
WRITING LAB

**INTRODUCTION:** In college, you continually encounter other people's ideas: you read them in texts, hear them in lecture, discuss them in class, and then incorporate them into your writing. Thus, it is essential to give credit where it is due. Plagiarism is using others' ideas and words without clearly acknowledging the source of that information.

## According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, to "Plagiarize" Means:

- To steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own
- To use (another's production) without crediting the source
- To commit literary theft
- To present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward. But can words and ideas really be stolen?

According to U.S. law, the answer is yes. The expression of original ideas is considered intellectual property, and is protected by copyright laws, just like original inventions. Almost all forms of expression fall under copyright protection as long as they are recorded in some way (such as a book or a computer file).

## All of the Following Are Considered Plagiarism:

- Turning in someone else's work as your own
- Copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- Failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- Giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
- Changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- Copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not (see our section on "fair use" rules)

Most cases of plagiarism can be avoided, however, by citing sources. Simply acknowledging that certain material has been borrowed and providing your audience with the information necessary to find that source, is usually enough to prevent plagiarism.

## Deciding if Something is Common Knowledge:

Generally speaking, something is regarded as common knowledge if the same information is found undocumented in at least five credible sources. Additionally, it might be common knowledge if the information presented is something readers will already know or something that a person could easily find in general reference sources. But when in doubt, cite.