

Plagiarism and How To Avoid It

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1 Introduction

What is Plagiarism?

First, let's define plagiarism. The Oxford English Dictionary says it means '...to take and use as one's own the thoughts, writings, or inventions of another.' Universities often define plagiarism in their regulations to prevent any misunderstanding among staff and students. Here is how it is defined by The University of Hong Kong:

Plagiarism is defined as the unacknowledged use, as one's own, of work of another person, whether or not such work has been published.

Regulations Governing Conduct at Examinations,
The University of Hong Kong Calendar 1998-99.

In other words, we are talking about copying. It is clear that it doesn't matter whether the work which is copied has already been published or not. The significant points are that it was copied from someone else and that no acknowledgement has been made.

Why Avoid Plagiarism?

Universities do not allow plagiarism. So if you do it you are risking the successful completion of your studies. Here is the ruling from the same regulation quoted above:

A candidate shall not engage in plagiarism nor employ nor seek to employ any other unfair means at an examination or in any other form of work submitted for assessment as part of a University examination.

Regulations Governing Conduct at Examinations,
The University of Hong Kong Calendar 1998-99

You may think at first glance this is only relevant when taking an exam. But you would be wrong for two reasons. Firstly, if you copy another person's work without acknowledgement you are committing plagiarism regardless of whether it is for an examination or not. Secondly, look again at the part which says in any other work submitted for assessment. That means any piece of work you do which counts towards your course assessment. In most cases this means any assignments you complete, any thesis or dissertation and anything you write in exams.

What This Booklet is About

Have I got your attention? I hope so because now I want to admit I am not only going to talk about plagiarism. The way to avoid plagiarism is to be a better academic writer. Therefore, as well as discussing plagiarism I will also give you some information and examples of what good academic writing is like. In other words, as well as telling you what not to do I will also tell you what you should do.

Having said that, it is important to make clear that this is not a complete course on academic writing. It couldn't possibly be that in such a short space. The intention is to get you started in thinking about and practising better ways of writing. Different writers will need different additional support.

I hope it has already become clear that you have to treat the issue of plagiarism seriously and avoid it. However, you should also know that you are not alone in this endeavour. Contrary to what you may feel sometimes, your teachers want you to

succeed. So if you are ever in doubt about your writing always ask them. You will never lose marks for asking a teacher questions, in fact you might do well by making your teachers aware that plagiarism is a topic you treat seriously.

We will break the topic into 4 sections. First we will look at techniques for avoiding plagiarism while quoting other writers. Then we will look at ways of expressing opinions about the quoted writing. Thirdly, we will look at supplying references for the quoted material. Finally, there is a self-test to help you identify plagiarism and to avoid it. You can do this on your own or you might choose to work through it with a partner or a small group.

Whichever kind of (plagiarism-free) writing you are currently involved in, good luck!

David Gardner