Plagiarizing By Accident: Don't Let It Happen to You!

- Committing plagiarism—either by accident or by choice—is a serious form of academic dishonesty. It carries severe penalties for students, including expulsion, an "F" for the course, or a permanent mark of "academic dishonesty" on one's transcript; less-serious cases are given academic probation.
- Many students who face discipline for plagiarism claim they did not know that their research methods constituted plagiarism.
- Ignorance is not a valid excuse; all students must learn proper techniques for conducting research, incorporating it into their writing, and quoting, citing, and documenting properly.

Categories & Definitions:

1—fraud: Turning in someone else's writing as your own; inventing statistics or sources that do not exist; falsifying evidence.

2—plagiarism: Intentionally or unintentionally using someone else's ideas or writing in part or whole in your own paper without proper attribution.

3—"accidental" plagiarism: When a writer attempts or intends to write in his/her own words but—out of ignorance, sloppiness, or carelessness—fails to distinguish quote from paraphrase or fails to cite and document properly. Legally, there is no distinction between intentional and unintentional plagiarism; both carry legal or financial penalties and can ruin a writer's reputation.

4—sloppy citation and poor integration of sources: This is not plagiarism (and usually entails no punishment other than a poor grade), but it demonstrates ignorance of the rules of citation, and such ignorance can lead to "accidental" plagiarism later.
Top 3 most common causes of plagiarism:

1—Poor time management: most students who deliberately plagiarize do so because they panic at the last minute before the paper is due.

2—Ignorance of the difference between quoting directly and paraphrasing.

3—Sloppy note-taking during the research process: it is very easy to mistake hand-written or copied-and-pasted segments of someone else's writing as your own.

Most common plagiarism problems, mistakes, and misconceptions:

1—"I didn't know I had to cite that, too!" Some students think that only direct quotes and statistics from other sources need to be cited; this is wrong. Original ideas, unique phrasing, and summaries of books and articles also need to be fully cited.

2—"But I included a bibliography . . ."—a bibliography is not enough! The most important part of documenting your sources is at the level of the sentence—this is where you distinguish your ideas and words from someone else's.

3—Copy-cat paraphrasing: This is when a student attempts to summarize or paraphrase an idea or some research made by someone else, but adheres too closely to the other writer's phrasing and sentence structure. Even if there is a footnote or citation attached to the copy-cat sentence, it is still plagiarism if another writer's words are not enclosed in quotation marks.

4—"I copied and pasted from all these different websites, and after I wrote the paper I forgot which parts were mine and which parts were from other people"; "I was just surfing the web and writing down notes, but I forgot to write down the URLs and I couldn't find any of the websites again": both of these situations demonstrate sloppy research and note-taking methods with serious consequences.
Steps to avoid accidental plagiarism:

1) **Improve your research methods:**
   A—keep a working bibliography of all sources you consult
   B—print out any web-pages and write the necessary bibliographic information on the hard-copy.
   C—make photocopies of any reference books, periodicals, or other non-circulating sources from the library; write the bibliographic information on the photocopy.

2) **Be careful to distinguish your words from someone else's**
   A—Use citations as you write: include footnotes, page numbers and quotation marks in your earliest draft!
   B—As you take notes from other texts, be careful to identify any quotes, phrases, or ideas that come from those sources, and distinguish them from your own ideas and word-choice.
   C—When you summarize or paraphrase another writer, do not look at their writing while you do so. Afterward, go back through your summary or paraphrase closely to make sure that your sentence structure and phrasing does not follow the source too closely.

3) **Double-check your citations and documentation**
   A—"Works Cited" refers to every source in your paper that provided:
      i—a quote or unique phrase
      ii—a statistic or fact
      iii—a unique idea
      iv—general background that you paraphrased or summarized
      v—if you mention or discuss a source in general, it should also be listed as a Work Cited in your bibliography.
   B—"Works Consulted" includes every book, article, website, or any other media or inter-personal source that formed your research; not all works consulted will actually be used in your paper or listed in Works Cited. You do not need to include a Works Consulted Bibliography, but if you do—to impress your professor—attach it after your Works Cited page.
   C—A "bibliography" is just a list of books, usually meaning Works Cited.
   D—After you have written your paper and before you hand it in, make sure that your paper actually matches your Works Cited list. Be sure not to leave any sources off the list, and also make sure that you have not listed any sources that you decided not to use.
   E—Make sure your page numbers and dates of publication are accurate. Professors check these carefully to look for signs of plagiarism, and you should too!

4) **Consult a writing handbook for updated citation protocol for the documentation style you are using.**
Protect Yourself from Accusations of Plagiarism:
The advice below is part of a careful research process and does not suggest any sort of dishonesty. Good research leaves a clear "paper trail" that plagiarism usually lacks.

--**Keep all drafts** of every paper you write, including outlines and hand-written notes and diagrams; these can prove the amount of work you put into creating and drafting the paper.
--**Make photocopies** of all sources that come from library periodicals and reference books; these can prove that you used a variety of sources to write the paper and can be used to distinguish your writing from someone else's.
--**Print out Web-pages** that you consult; these can prove that you researched a variety of websites.
--**Keep hand-written research notes** and any note-cards. These can demonstrate your research methods.
--**Keep all of the above materials until you receive a grade for the course.** Do NOT throw them out at the end of the semester! Plagiarism investigations occur during the following semester, so hold onto your evidence until then.

**Common Research Paper Mistakes** that do NOT constitute plagiarism but will guarantee a poor grade:

--Relying too much on outside sources to provide the ideas and structure for your paper.

--Using too many long quotes.

--Dropping a quote into your paper without connecting it to a sentence of your own.

--Failing to explain how a quote fits into your own point or why you are quoting.

--Failing to evaluate sources for accuracy, reliability, reputation, and datedness and relying on information that is inaccurate, untrue, out of date, or put forward by groups or organizations that you do not want to be associated with because they implicitly or explicitly oppose the points your are advancing in your paper.

--Taking quotes out of context to force them to fit into your perspective.

--Relying primarily on one outside source for an assignment that called for many sources.
The following material comes from
Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference, 4th ed.*
(Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999)