PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

You may have heard or read about cases in which a politician, a journalist, or another public figure was accused of plagiarism. No doubt you have also had classroom conversations about plagiarism and academic dishonesty. Your school may have an honor code that addresses academic dishonesty; it almost certainly has disciplinary procedures meant to address cases of plagiarism. But you may nonetheless find yourself with questions: What is plagiarism? What makes it a serious offense? What does it look like? And how can scrupulous research and documentation practices help you avoid it? What Is Plagiarism? Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines plagiarizing as committing “literary theft.” Plagiarism is presenting another person’s ideas, information, expressions, or entire work as one’s own. It is thus a kind of fraud: deceiving others to gain something of value. While plagiarism only sometimes has legal repercussions (e.g., when it involves copyright infringement— violating an author’s exclusive legal right to publication), it is always a serious moral and ethical offense. What Makes Plagiarism a Serious Offense? Plagiarists are seen not only as dishonest but also as incompetent, incapable of doing research and expressing original thoughts. When professional writers are exposed as plagiarists, they are likely to lose their jobs and are certain to suffer public embarrassment, diminished prestige, and loss of future credibility. The same is true owho write in connection with their jobs, even when they are not writing for publication. The charge of plagiarism is serious because it calls into question everything about the writer’s work: if this piece of writing is misrepresented as being original, how can a reader trust any work by the writer? One instance of plagiarism can cast a shadow across an entire career. Schools consider plagiarism a gravematter for the same reason. If a studentBfails to give credit for the worinto detectives instead of mentors,fostering suspicion instead of trust, and making it difficult for learning to takeplace. Students who plagiarize deprivethemselves of the knowledge they would have gained if they had done their own writing. Plagiarism also can undermine public trust in educational institutions, if students are routinely allowed to pass courses and receive diplomas without doing the required work. What Does Plagiarism Look Like? Plagiarism can take a number of forms, including buying papers from a service on the Internet, reusing work done byarismroject, how can a teacher trustany of the student’s work? Plagiarism undermines the relationship between teachers and students, turning teachers into detectives instead of mentors, fostering suspicion instead of trust, and making it difficult for learning to take place. Students who plagiarize deprive themselves of the knowledge they would have gained if they had done their own writing. Plagiarism also can underminepublic trust in educational institutions, ifstudents are routinely allowed to pass courses and receive diplomas without doing the required work. What Does Plagiarism Look Like? Plagiarism can take a number of forms, including buying papers from a service on the Internet, reusing work done by another student, and copying text from published sources without giving credit to those who produced the sources. All forms of plagiarism have in common the misrepresentation of work not done by the writer as the writer’s own. (And, yes, that includes work you pay for: while celebrities may put their names on work by ghostwriters, students may not.) Even borrowing just a few words from an author without clearly indicating that you did so constitutes plagiarism. Moreover, you can plagiarize unintentionally; in hastily taken notes, it is easy to mistake a phrase copied from a source as your original thought and then to use it without crediting the source. (Is it possible to plagiarize yourself? Yes, it is. If you reuse ideas or phrases that you used in prior work and do not cite the prior work, you have plagiarized. Manyacademic honesty policies prohibit the reuse of one’s prior work, even with a citation. If you want to reuse your work, consult with your instructor.) Imagine, for example, that you read the following passage in the course of your research (from Michael Agar’s book Language Shock):Everyone uses the word language and everybody these days talks about culture. . . . “Languaculture” is a reminder, I hope, of the necessary connection between its two parts. . . . If you wrote the following sentence, it would constitute plagiarism: At the intersection of language and culture lies a concept that we might call “languaculture.” This sentence borrows a word from Agar’s work without giving credit for it. Placing the term in quotation marks is insufficient. If you use the term, you must give crediAt the intersection of language and culture lies a concept that Michael Agar has called “languaculture” (60). In this version, a reference to the original author and a parenthetical citation indicate the source of the term; a corresponding entry in your list of works cited will give your reader full information about the source. It’s important to note that you need not copy an author’s words to be guilty of plagiarism; if you paraphrase someone’s ideas or arguments without giving credit for their origin, you have committed plagiarism. Imagine that you read the following passage (from Waltere A. McDougall’s Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776): American Exceptionalism as our founders conceived it was defined by what America was, at home. Foreign policy existed to defend, not define, what America was. If you write the following sentence, you have plagiarized, even though you changed some of the wording: For the founding fathers America’s exceptionalism was based on the country’s domestic identity, which foreign policy did not shape but merelyIn this sentence, you have borrowed an author’s ideas without acknowledgment. You may use the ideas, however, if you properly give credit to your source: As Walter A. McDougall argues, for the founding fathers America’s exceptionalism was based on the country’s domestic identity, which foreign policy did not shape but merely guarded (37). In this revised sentence, which includes an in-text citation and clearly gives credit to McDougall as the source of the idea, there is no plagiarism. How Can You Avoid Plagiarism?Avoiding plagiarism begins with being scrupulous in your research and notetaking. Keep a complete and thorough list of all the sources that you discover during your research and wish to use, linking each source to the information you glean from it, so that you can double-check that your work acknowledges it. Take care in your notesto distinguish between what is not yoursand what is yours, identifying ideas andphrases copied from sources you consult, summaries of your sources, and your own original ideas. As you write,carefully identify all borrowed material, including quoted words and phrases, pararguments, and facts and other information. Most important is that you check with your instructor if you are unsure about the way that you are using a particular source.Does Absence of Documentation Indicate Plagiarism? Documentation is not required for every type of borrowed material. Information and ideas that are common knowledge among your readers need not be documented. Common knowledge includes information widely available in reference works, such as basicly biographical facts about prominent persons and the dates and circumstances of major historical events. When the facts are in dispute, however, or when your readers may want more information about your topic, it is good practice to document the material you borrow. The rest of this section will guide you through the steps involved in giving credit for others’ work. Documentation begins well before you put together your list of works cited. Sound academic use of sources starts with evaluating them and selecting the appropriate information from the topic .