

Avoiding Plagiarism: A Guide for Graduate Students at Virginia Tech

Each year, the Graduate Honor System deals with several cases of plagiarism, many of which involve students who did not realize that they were in violation of the Graduate Honor Code. We realize that some students may not be aware of the technical writing standards at Virginia Tech, but it is each student's personal responsibility to learn what is expected in his or her academic work. In an effort to increase awareness of what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, the GHS has developed the following guide. This guide is intended to provide insight into avoiding plagiarism in your academic work, but it is by no means an exhaustive document. Please read over this information and consult your advisor or instructor about how to incorporate appropriate standards in your personal writing.

Plagiarism is a specific form of cheating, which the GHS Constitution defines as "copying of the language, structure, idea, and/or thoughts of another and claiming or attempting to imply that it is one's own original work." Some of the cases we receive include sentences, paragraphs, or entire sections that are copied nearly verbatim from another source. With thousands of sources available electronically, it has become increasingly easy for students to paste portions of source material directly into their own papers. For clarity, we note that the same standards apply to all source documents, whether they are published in paper, distributed electronically, or obtained in any other way. Additionally, [Appendix IIIA](#) of the GHS Constitution clarifies that the rules regarding plagiarism also apply to "drawings, laboratory reports, or computer programs of another or parts or passages thereof."

In the past, students found guilty of plagiarism have explained that they could not find a better way to express the ideas than the words chosen by the original author; therefore, they thought it appropriate to copy or only slightly modify the words used in the original source. This often happens when the students involved do not have good English skills and/or when the topic is quite technical in nature. Please note that most graduate students do not have the language capability to write as well as published authors, and professors do not expect perfect writing from students. Term papers and literature reviews are intended to display your understanding of the source material, and using the author's words gives the false impression that you have a thorough understanding of the material. If there is a particular section of the source that you wish to quote directly, then you should place it in quotation marks and reference its source. The only time that it is permissible to copy directly from another source is when the material is indicated as a direct quotation. Student papers should use few of these direct quotations, and the majority of the paper should be written entirely by the student. When writing a literature review or a summary of other materials, you should read the material, summarize it in your own words, and properly reference the works discussed. The same standard applies for all papers, whether they are written for a class report or for a paper that is published.

The first step in avoiding plagiarism is to avoid directly copying any phrases, sentences, or other portions from source materials. However, even papers that avoid such direct copying may still contain examples of plagiarism. In certain cultures, one may include material from another work

source, perhaps changing very little of the original quote, as long as he/she documents the source. This is not the standard at Virginia Tech and throughout the United States. A common form of plagiarism is a paraphrase attempt that changes only some of the words of the original, but not the sentence structure. Consider the following source material.

"People sometimes regard the written word with special reverence, even going so far as to believe that something must be true if it occurs in print. Since most people do not write books or articles that get printed, there is perhaps a natural tendency to regard printed words with wonder or admiration and to forget that they carry no guarantee of truth or quality. False or stupid things can be printed as easily as anything else, and often are." (Ronald Langacker, *Language and Its Structure*, 2nd ed., NY: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1973, p. 60)

The following is an example of plagiarism, even though the student attempted to paraphrase.

Ronald Langacker pointed out (1973:60) that people sometimes have faith in the written word; for this reason, they go so far as to believe that if something occurs in print, it must be true and they regard it with admiration. Since there are a few people who write books and articles that get printed, most people have a tendency to regard printed words with reverence and believe that they carry no guarantee of truth or quality. In fact, false or stupid things can be printed as easily as anything else, but people do not realize that.

While the student attempted to re-word the source material, the result is still plagiarism. ***It is important to note that this example would still be plagiarism even if the section were immediately followed by a citation.*** In order to avoid plagiarism, both the wording and sentence structure must be changed, so that the paraphrase does not sound like the original material. Therefore, although the ideas come from someone else (thus requiring documentation of the source), the paraphrase should be your own work. You can avoid a sentence-by-sentence paraphrase by being selective about what to include and by rearranging the order of the ideas. Finally, use care to distinguish your own ideas from the paraphrase itself, so that the reader can tell where the paraphrase ends and where your own textual material resumes. The following is an example of an acceptable paraphrase.

According to Langacker (1973:60), owing to a lack of experience in publishing, many people have such high regard for printed material that they automatically believe what they read. However, the form in which an idea is presented, whether in print or not, does not determine its validity. Langacker's remarks serve as a caution to readers who...

Paraphrasing indicates mature writing, as you demonstrate that you can integrate your understanding of the original ideas with an ability to express them in different grammatical constructions. It takes time and effort to thoroughly understand source material, especially if the material is technical. If your attempt at paraphrase involves just changing a few words here and there, you should instead quote the author's work directly and cite it accordingly. If a summary of the work is required, try setting the source aside and summarizing it from memory. It might take more effort to obtain such a thorough understanding of the source material, but it will be worth it to avoid committing plagiarism, which is a serious offense in the academic community.

Additionally, if the source is important enough to be included in a literature review, a full comprehension of the material should be attempted in any case, not just to avoid plagiarism.

In summary, you can use the following guidelines for quotations and paraphrases.

For Direct Quotations:

1. Enclose all copied material in quotation marks and indicate its source.
2. Use direct quotations sparingly. The vast majority of the paper should be original work.

For Paraphrases:

1. Change the form of the original, including sentence structure and vocabulary (if possible).
2. Reference the original source material.
3. Avoid paraphrasing sentence by sentence. Combine the ideas in an original way. A good practice is to write the paraphrase without looking at the source.
4. Be selective in what you decide to paraphrase. Be as concise as you can.
5. Remember that although the ideas come from someone else, thus requiring your documentation of the source, the paraphrase is your own work.

After writing a rough draft, be sure that:

1. Direct quotations are indicated as such.
2. Paraphrases meet the following criteria:
 - a. Accurately represent the original meaning and emphasis.
 - b. Sound different from the original source material.
 - c. Integrate with, but are distinguished from, your own discussion in the text.
 - d. Properly documented (i.e. the source of the material is referenced).

To learn more about ethical writing practices, read [*Avoiding plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other questionable writing practices: A guide to ethical writing.*](#)

For questions about plagiarism, contact the Graduate Honor System at 540/231-4558 or ghs@vt.edu. For general writing questions, see the [Virginia Tech Writing Center](#).

Consult your advisor or instructor with regard to which citation method you use. For more information on two popular citation conventions, see: [Modern Language Association \(MLA\)](#) [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#).

This document was prepared by Dr. Donald McKeon and the GHS leadership team, July, 2000.