

Plagiarism: What it is. How to avoid it.

Plagiarism (from Latin *plagium*, kidnapping) is the unattributed use of the words, work, or ideas of another and constitutes a serious form of academic misconduct. Plagiarism is a matter of fact, not intention. It is a failure to properly reference the source of a citation, an author's thought, or a creator's work, in whatever medium—for example, words, data, computer code—anything that has been plundered without clear reference to its source. While plagiarism shows a lack of respect for the talent and effort of the original author and may also be a violation of copyright law, there are two much more salient reasons why it is anathema to scholarship: First, because free and open scholarly inquiry is only possible when sources can be honestly and critically evaluated. Second, because students' educational achievement can only be advanced through the exercise of their own efforts.

Students frequently become overwhelmed with the details of scholarly reference styles, particularly as these vary among disciplines. Though they should take the time to become familiar with these conventions, they should keep in mind that the simple purpose they all share is to guide the reader to the original sources. Any reference style that accomplishes that goal will be sufficient.

Examples of good and bad use of sources follow below. The text is Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1782–88], and is in the public domain.

The primitive government of Rome was composed, with some political skill, of an elective king, a council of nobles, and a general assembly of the people. War and religion were administered by the supreme magistrate; and he alone proposed the laws, which were debated in the senate, and finally ratified or rejected by a majority of votes in the thirty curiae or parishes of the city. Romulus, Numa, and Servius Tullius, are celebrated as the most ancient legislators; and each of them claims his peculiar part in the threefold division of jurisprudence. The laws of marriage, the education of children, and the authority of parents, which may seem to draw their origin from nature itself, are ascribed to the untutored wisdom of Romulus. The law of nations and of religious worship, which Numa introduced, was derived from his nocturnal converse with the nymph Egeria. The civil law is attributed to the experience of Servius: he balanced the rights and fortunes of the seven classes of citizens; and guarded, by fifty new regulations, the observance of contracts and the punishment of crimes. The state, which he had inclined towards a democracy, was changed by the last Tarquin into a lawless despotism; and when the kingly office was abolished, the patricians engrossed the benefits of freedom. The royal laws became odious or obsolete; the mysterious deposit was silently preserved by the priests and nobles; and at the end of sixty years, the citizens of Rome still complained that they were ruled by the arbitrary sentence of the magistrates.

Good Use of Source

In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon argues that while Rome's earliest governmental systems showed "political skill" in their design and even an inclination toward democracy, they nevertheless had declined by the time of Tarquinius Superbus to "lawless despotism." [chapter XLIV]

[Here the student has properly credited the source and its author. Words cited verbatim are set off in quotation marks; and the careful summary and paraphrase demonstrate that the student has well

understood the source. The student also shows an independent knowledge of Roman history, substituting the name of the last king for Gibbon's oblique reference.]

Poor Use of Source

The earliest government of Rome had an elected king, a council of nobles, and a general assembly. The laws on marriage were ascribed to Romulus, religious law to Numa, and civil law to Servius. Though skillful in its design, ultimately the government declined to a kind of despotism and arbitrary rule.

[This student has committed plagiarism, having stolen both actual words and the structure of the ideas presented. The student fails to acknowledge Gibbon as the source of these words and ideas and also fails to comprehend the difference between historical facts and Gibbon's interpretive argument based on those facts.]

As these examples show, avoiding plagiarism is not simply a question of attribution. In order to use sources well, students must also be able to read them critically and must have sufficient general knowledge of their subject to be able to distinguish commonplace facts from interpretive claims. In brief, the "shortcut" students take when they engage in plagiarism is not so much the lack of proper attribution of sources; rather, it is a failure to grapple with the material and to do the intellectual work of comprehending its value and importance. Handbooks can teach reference styles; but nothing substitutes for students' diligent attention to their course work and the need to seek additional help when they are struggling to make sense of it.

A number of resources are available to students.

- Faculty and Recitation or Laboratory Instructors for the course
- Peer Tutoring at the Academic Resource Center
- Writing Consultations at the University Writing Center
- On-Line Resources of the NYU Libraries, <http://nyu.libguides.com/citations>

The following handbook is recommended by the Expository Writing Program and contains detailed discussion on working with sources and the variety of reference formatting styles.

Aaron, Jane E. *The Little, Brown Essential Handbook*. [Custom edition for New York University.] New York: Pearson, 2011.

For a very complete guide to writing research papers, see—

Turabian, Kate L, et al. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. [8th edition.] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.