

Avoiding Plagiarism in Essays, Reports and Dissertations

Students will sometimes be asked to write a report, essay or dissertation as part of their assessed work. In order to do this, they will need to consult information from various sources, such as books, journals, magazines, and websites. Great care needs to be taken when using this information, so as to avoid being penalized for plagiarism. Plagiarism is a very serious offence, which may result in severe penalties, including compulsory withdrawal from the course of study. This document gives guidance on how to use material from other sources while avoiding plagiarism.

What is plagiarism?

According to one online dictionary [1], plagiarism is:

a piece of writing that has been copied from someone else and is presented as being your own work.

Simply put, plagiarism means presenting someone else's work as if it were your own. Plagiarism is seen as a form of cheating by copying. It is plagiarism if a student uses material that is taken from another writer, without clearly and explicitly giving credit to that writer at the location in the essay where the material is used. This material might consist of text, pictures, graphs, statistics, diagrams, photographs, or even facts that are not common knowledge. If the material is taken from some other source, that source **must** be cited at the point where it is used.

What are the penalties for plagiarism?

The University has a formal policy on plagiarism [2] which all academic departments are required to enforce. The penalties can be severe. For undergraduate students, the penalties range from having the assessed work downgraded by a number of grade points (for a minor first offence) to compulsory withdrawal from the degree program (for repeated serious offences). For postgraduate students, the penalties are similar but even stricter.

Note that the policy does not consider whether or not the student *intended* to commit plagiarism. The same penalties apply, even if the student committed plagiarism through ignorance or incompetence, rather than by intent.

How can students avoid plagiarism?

The University policy on plagiarism [2] states that students must give "due acknowledgement" whenever they use material that is taken from another source. The following extracts from this policy give guidelines that apply to essays, reports and dissertations. Students are advised to read these carefully.

6.10.2.1 It is not sufficient merely to list a source in an appended bibliography, or in the body of an assignment to express a general indebtedness. To avoid a charge of plagiarism, all debts must be specifically, precisely and accurately referenced in accordance with good academic practice.

6.10.2.2 When a source is directly quoted word-for-word, the passage quoted should be placed within quotation marks or indented and the source accurately referenced, in parenthesis, in a footnote, or in an endnote, according to a recognised system. There must be no ambiguity about where the quotation ends or begins.

6.10.2.3 The source of any data cited (e.g. figures, tables, charts) should be made explicit.

6.10.2.4 When ideas, or an argument, are reproduced from a source in a general or paraphrased way, the source must be acknowledged.

6.10.2.5 When submitted work is dependent upon a lecture or group discussion for its argument, this fact must be acknowledged.

The Department makes use of plagiarism-detection tools such as TurnitinUK [3] for some assignments. These tools also help to educate students to avoid plagiarism, and will be used increasingly in the future.

How to use online sources safely

The internet is a convenient and abundant source of information and students are encouraged to make use of it when carrying out research for assignments. Unfortunately, the ability to copy-and-paste from internet sources makes it all too easy for these sources to be abused. Occasionally students attempt to create an essay by patching together a selection of extracts taken word-for-word from sources found on the internet. These students are then surprised when they receive a poor grade, or even a charge of plagiarism. To avoid this, here are some guidelines to follow:

Cite all sources of quoted material, including internet sources. This document contains some examples showing how to cite a website. The citation should contain a brief description of the website, the date on which the website was accessed, and the website URL. Be as specific as possible. Many online sources of information give guidance as to how they should be cited, for example, Wikipedia articles have a “Cite this page” link which generates an appropriate citation.

Do not overuse quoted material. Essays, reports and dissertations must consist largely of material that is **in the student’s own words**. If an essay contains too much material that is quoted from other sources it will not receive a pass grade, even if the sources are cited. (If the sources are cited, this will not be viewed as plagiarism, but it will still be seen as a poor essay.) Individual lecturers will be able to give guidance about how much quoted material is acceptable.

Make your own contribution. Students should not just quote other sources or rewrite material from other sources in their own words. An essay should also demonstrate the student’s own critical insight into and evaluation of the material they are referring to. If an essay gives the impression that the student has simply quoted words from elsewhere without trying to understand them and evaluate their significance, it will receive a poor grade.

Plagiarism in other kinds of assessed work

This note is specifically about plagiarism in written assignments such as essays and dissertations. There is also other advice available [4, 5, 6] concerning plagiarism in other kinds of assessed work such as programming assignments and group projects.

References:

[1] "plagiarism." *WordNet® 3.0*. Princeton University. Accessed on 15 Jan. 2008. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/plagiarism>>.

[2] Academic Policy on Assessment, University of Stirling, Accessed on 15 Jan. 2008, <<http://www.quality.stir.ac.uk/ac-policy/assessment.php>>

[3] TurnitinUK, 15 Jan. 2008, <<http://www.submit.ac.uk>>

[4] A Note on Independent Work, Simon Jones, University of Stirling. Accessed on 27 Feb 2008, <<http://www.cs.stir.ac.uk/guides/cheat/cheat.html>>

[5] The Computing Science Undergraduate Handbook, University of Stirling, Accessed on 27 Feb 2008, <<http://www.cs.stir.ac.uk/courses/ug-handbook.pdf>>

[6] The Computing Science Taught Postgraduate Handbook, University of Stirling, Accessed on 27 Feb 2008, <<http://www.cs.stir.ac.uk/courses/msc/handbooks/handbook-2007.pdf>>