Plagiarism[1]

The following text is reproduced, with permission, from Appendix II of the Constitution of the Virginia Tech (Undergraduate) Honor System. Any notes appearing in brackets, [ ], have been added for completeness by the Graduate Honor System. (The Constitution of the Virginia Tech (Undergraduate) Honor System may be obtained from the Provost's Office.)

Definition

The Virginia Tech honor system constitution states that "plagiarism includes the copying of the language, structure, ideas, and/or thoughts of another and passing off same as one's own, original work." The violation, then, consists of both copying and misrepresenting the material in question.

Since the matter of misrepresentation is easier to define and understand, let us consider it first. Generally, when a student places his or name in any kind of work, whether it is specifically pledged or not, he or she claims responsibility for the originality of the contents except for those parts that are specifically attributed to another or that are considered common knowledge. (The concept of common knowledge posts a problem of definition, and the student should consult the section of this handbook that addresses that area.) Thus, if a student has consulted any outside source, whether published or not, and has incorporated any of its "language, structure, ideas, and/or thoughts" into his or her work without acknowledging that source, he or she may be guilty of misrepresenting the work's originality. [Furthermore, in citing a reference, the student must change both the sentence structure and the vocabulary (where possible) in expressing the original material in his or her own words.]

On the other hand, copying includes a whole range of offenses. Everyone is undoubtedly familiar with stories involving students who have "borrowed" or bought a term paper or laboratory report from a so-called research service, a fraternity or sorority file, a fellow student, or another similar source. Such wholesome copying is akin to the lifting of an assignment in its entirety from a book or journal article. In either case, the student in question submits work that is literally copied and transferred from one piece of paper to another; by claiming this work as his or her own, the student is clearly guilty of the most flagrant kind of plagiarism.

Another type of copying that is not as obvious, though equally serious, involves the transmission of the part of a book, article, or other source into different words-paraphrasing. Although the language is not the same because the exact words of the source have been changed, the structure, ideas, and thoughts of the original author have been copied. Thus, the student who submits an assignment that simply paraphrases a source without identifying it may also be guilty of plagiarism.

Similarly, any combination of simple copying and paraphrasing, whether from one source or from many, is also a type of plagiarism, and the offender may be equally guilty as those students described above. Because a person's ideas can be conveyed in many ways besides the written word, students should be aware that the copying of drawings, designs and photographs, maps, graphs, illustrations, tables, primary data, derived equations, computer programs, verbal communications of information and ideas, and other sources may also constitute plagiarism, unless the source is acknowledged and properly documented.
For the purposes of the Virginia Tech Honor System, plagiarism can be broadly defined as appropriating the literary composition, language, structure, ideas, and/or thoughts, drawings, laboratory reports or computer programs or another or parts or passages thereof, and of passing them off as the original product of one's own mind. To be liable for plagiarism under the university's honor system, it is not necessary to duplicate another's literary work exactly; it being sufficient if unfair use of such work is made by lifting of substantial portions of it. Plagiarism is not confined to literal copying, but also includes many of the evasive variations and colorable alterations by which the plagiarist may disguise the source from which the material was copied. On the other hand, even an exact counterpart of another's work does not constitute plagiarism if such counterpart was arrived at independently.

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1 Appendix A from the VSU Graduate School's <u>Thesis & Dissertation Guide</u>. Used by permission.

The next several pages of this handbook will illustrate the major types of plagiarism, and will also indicate how these offenses can be avoided through proper documentation of sources.

Examples of Correct and Incorrect Uses of Sources

The following four examples provide illustrations of three kinds of plagiarism, as well as the proper use and acknowledgement of sources. The excerpt from Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* is quoted from W.K. Marriott's translation (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1908), p.37. The excerpts from student papers have been written by the committee for the purposes of this handbook.

Flagrant Plagiarism

Excerpt from *The Prince*
Whenever those states which have been acquired as stated have been accustomed to live under their own laws and in freedom, there are three courses for those who wish to hold them: the first is to ruin them, the next is to reside there in person, the third is to permit them to live under their own laws, drawing a tribute, and establishing within it an oligarchy which will keep it friendly to you. Because such a government, being created by the prince, knows that it cannot stand without his friendship and interest, and does its utmost to support him, and therefore he who would keep a city accustomed to freedom will hold it more easily by the means of its own citizens than in any other way.

Excerpt from a student paper
Whenever those *nations* which have been acquired have been accustomed to *living* under their own laws and in freedom, then there are three *options* for those who wish to *keep* them; the first is to ruin them, *second* is to reside there in person, and the *last* is to permit them to live under their own government, drawing a tribute, and establishing within it an oligarchy which will keep it friendly to you. Because such a government, being created by the *ruler*, knows that it cannot stand without his friendship and interest, and does its utmost to gain his support, and therefore, he who would keep a city accustomed to freedom will hold it more easily by the means of its own citizens than in any other way.

Comments
This student paper is an example of the most obvious form of plagiarism. The writer has copied Machiavelli almost verbatim without any acknowledgement. There have been some minor changes. For example, the italicized words have been changed. "States" becomes "nations", "courses" becomes "options", etc.

Excerpt from *The Prince*
Whenever those states which have been acquired as stated have been accustomed to live under their own laws and in freedom, there are three courses for those who wish to hold them: the first is to ruin them, the next is to reside there in person, the third is to permit them to live under their own laws, drawing a tribute, and establishing within it an oligarchy which will keep it friendly to you. Because such a government, being created by the prince, knows that it cannot stand without his friendship and interest, and does its utmost to support him, and therefore he who would keep a city accustomed to freedom will hold it more easily by the means of its own citizens than in any other way.

Excerpt from a student paper
There are basically three methods to maintain control over nations which formerly enjoyed their independence. First, the nation can be completely destroyed. Second, the king can personally reside in the conquered territory. Finally, the king can permit them to live under their own rules; he would then levy a tax and establish a ruling clique which would be loyal to him. Since this government is created and maintained by the conquering power, the puppet government will do its utmost to support him in order to keep his friendship. In addition, by establishing a puppet government in such a manner, he will gain the allegiance of its citizens.

Comments

By paraphrasing the paragraph taken from Machiavelli, the student attempted to disguise the source of material. Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that the sentences of this writer parallel those of the Machiavelli text and are identical in meaning.

Plagiarism of an Idea

Excerpt from *The Prince*

Whenever those states which have been acquired as stated have been accustomed to live under their own laws and in freedom, there are three courses for those who wish to hold them: the first is to ruin them, the next is to reside there in person, the third is to permit them to live under their own laws, drawing a tribute, and establishing within it an oligarchy which will keep it friendly to you. Because such a government, being created by the prince, knows that it cannot stand without his friendship and interest, and does its utmost to support him, and therefore he who would keep a city accustomed to freedom will hold it more easily by the means of its own citizens than in any other way.

Excerpt from a student paper

When the British established their empire in Asia and Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were faced with the problem of how to govern and control effectively these areas which had formerly lived under their own government. There were essentially three methods of achieving this end: destroying the country; establishing direct rule through governors appointed by the king; and maintaining indirect control through the already established governing structure. The British chose indirect rule. Through indirect rule, the former officials realized that their position was now dependent upon the British. Consequently, their allegiance was assured, and through them the British obtained substantial economic benefits. In addition, the people, seeing their leaders still in power, obediently supported the indirect rule of the British.

Comments

The student has used the ideas of Machiavelli in describing a historical event. Machiavelli lists three methods of governing and controlling a state that had formerly been independent, and then shows the relative advantage of pursuing the last method. The student does not acknowledge the use of the description of the three methods of control nor the advantages of the last method when applying Machiavelli's idea to a specific example.

Correct Use of Paraphrasing and Direct Quotations

Excerpt from The *Prince*

Whenever those states which have been acquired as stated have been accustomed to live under their own laws and in freedom, there are three courses for those who wish to hold them: the first is to ruin them, the next is to reside there in person, the third is to permit them to live under their own laws, drawing a tribute, and establishing within it an oligarchy which will keep it friendly to you. Because such a government, being created by the prince, knows that it cannot stand without his friendship and interest, and does its utmost to support him, and therefore he who would keep a city accustomed to freedom will hold it more easily by the means of its own citizens than in any other way.

Excerpt from a student paper

When the British established their empire in Asia and Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were faced with the problem of how to govern these formerly independent areas effectively. According to Niccolo Machiavelli in *The Prince*, a ruler had three options. He could destroy them, "reside there in person", or "permit them to live under their own laws, drawing a tribute and establishing within it an oligarchy which will keep it friendly to you."[2] Machiavelli felt that through this third method the conqueror gained the support of the former leaders and their subjects.[3]

The British seemed to apply this third method through their indirect rule concept. In other words, the British maintained control using the former leaders as figureheads. The former leaders realized that their position was now dependent upon the British. Consequently their allegiance was assured and through them substantial economic benefits were obtained. In addition, the people, seeing their leaders still in power, obediently supported the indirect rule of the British.

Comments
In this instance, the student has correctly footnoted the ideas of Machiavelli, which he has paraphrased and quoted. The writer has then applied Machiavelli's ideas to a more recent historical event.

The Problem of Common Knowledge

The concept of common knowledge is one of the more difficult points to explain in any consideration of plagiarism. How can a student, often a novice in the subject, determine whether an idea or fact included in a paper is so widely known that it is considered common knowledge and requires no documentation? A few general guidelines for solving this dilemma can be suggested, but none is inviolate. Given the seriousness of plagiarism, the prudent writer cites a reference whenever he or she is uncertain.

1. Concepts and facts widely known outside of the specific area of study are generally considered common knowledge. These include undisputed dates (e.g. the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776), scientific principles (e.g. Newton's Laws of Motion), and commonly accepted ideas (e.g. Hamlet's role as a tragic hero). Such data require no specific reference. Students should be aware, however, that the addition of minor informational embellishments might require documentation (e.g. that the Declaration of Independence was unanimously adopted by the American colonies on July 4, 1776, despite the abstention of New York).

2. The fact that material appears in a dictionary, encyclopedia, handbook, or other reference work does not guarantee that it is common knowledge. Such books are written by experts, and most of the information they contain is not widely known.

3. There is no simple test to determine whether information is common knowledge. In case of doubt, the student should consult his or her instructor.

Documentation

To avoid plagiarism in writing, the student must be familiar with the concept of documentation. Terminology and methodology concerning proper ways to acknowledge sources are probably more confusing to students than any other aspect of research reporting. The purpose of documenting a source is first to give proper credit to others for their original words, thoughts, and ideas, and second to enable the interested reader to locate the original source in order to read or study further. Keeping the latter purpose in mind, one finds that the rules regarding documentation make more sense. Therefore students should familiarize themselves with the proper methods of providing citations and bibliographies both to document their sources and to provide the reader with the necessary data to locate further information on the subject.

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[2]Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and intro. W.K. Marriott (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1908) p.37.

[3]Machiavelli, p. 37.

Indicating Quotations

Whenever the exact wording of a source appears in a student paper, that fact must be made apparent to the reader. This goal can be accomplished in two ways. Brief quotations should be enclosed in quotation marks, whether complete sentences, phrases or single significant words which have been incorporated into the student's own sentence or into a paraphrase or a longer excerpt of the source. The student should be careful to denote precisely where the source's exact wording begins and ends by the appropriate placing of opening and closing quotation marks.

Longer quotations (of more than three lines) should be indented ten spaces from the left-hand margin. Again, the beginning and ending of quoted material should be clearly indicated. All direct quotations must be signified in one of these ways.

Citations

Immediately following every piece of quoted paraphrased material, some type of reference is required. The method used varies according to the field of study for which the paper is written; thus, students should ask instructors which style manual to use in preparing papers for their courses.