

The following description of plagiarism was approved by the faculty of St. Olaf College in May, 2009.

Plagiarism, or the act of plagiarizing, occurs whenever a person, orally or in writing, attempts to pass off as his/her own the words and ideas of others. Since plagiarism is more readily discovered and proven when the appropriated ideas have been previously written down, the offense of plagiarism most frequently pertains to the wrongful use of another person's writings.

In college, plagiarism most often occurs in student projects (written or oral) that require independent work. Though plagiarism could also occur in an essay examination, it is usually not thought of in this context. The pressure of time during an in-class examination makes adequate acknowledgment of sources difficult; moreover, frequently the purpose of the examination is to check on what a student has absorbed of lectures and readings rather than to provide an opportunity for the student to argue a personally endorsed thesis.

The real problem of plagiarism centers on those projects prepared by a student outside the classroom and meant to be presented as representative of the student's own thinking.

Unless there is some indication to the contrary, the reader assumes that a written work (or an oral presentation) bearing a person's name as author represents that person's own words and ideas, hence, there is a tacit warranty that the ideas and phraseology in student papers are his/her own, except insofar as he/she acknowledges them to be the work of another. Moreover, in the world outside the classroom there is a recognition that words and ideas formally recorded are the property of their author and that they cannot be appropriated without acknowledgment. But even apart from the necessity to protect property rights, writers have an intellectual responsibility not to mislead readers by presenting as their own the words and ideas of others.

Plagiarism is repugnant to the academic environment for two reasons: First, it is a practice fundamentally in opposition to the process of educating one's mind by personal exploration of material and by the effort necessary to shape that material to one's own ends; second, it is immoral behavior in that it deceives or misleads the hearer or reader in regard to the true authorship. The plagiarism that occurs in student work may be described as willful (a conscious intent to fool or cheat the reader) or inadvertent (a failure to understand the responsibility for acknowledgment or the means by which acknowledgment should be made).

Three categories of borrowed words and ideas need to be acknowledged:

- (i) Direct quotation from the work of others
- (ii) Paraphrase of the work of others
- (iii) Certain other uses of information which are neither quoted nor paraphrased.

The third category clearly presents more difficulties than the first two because it requires discretionary choice. How much of an idea must be borrowed before acknowledgment is due? Though the decision is not always easy, neither is it beyond the average intellectual and moral capacity. If there are no specific sources that can be recalled, and if the information is generally known, then it may be used without acknowledgment. If the writer is aware of the source, then, depending on the use he/she makes of this material and whether it is in fact particular to its source and not generally known

information, he/she may be obliged to provide acknowledgment. He/she should ask him/herself in full honesty the following question: How much do I really owe the other writer? Finally, the submitting of the same paper for credit in more than one class can relate to the question of “original work” and academic ethics. Unless there is full knowledge and approval of the instructors of both courses, such a practice is considered unethical and will be treated in the same manner as plagiarism.