

Student Guide Avoiding Plagiarism



Scope

[Academic integrity](#) is at the heart of the University's core values and ethical practice, which promote trust, honesty, and fairness. The University defines academic misconduct as any action or attempted action that may result in a student or group of students obtaining an unfair academic advantage in formal University assessment, or any activity likely to undermine the integral essential to scholarship and research. Academic misconduct includes ethical misconduct and includes any attempt to gain an unfair advantage in an academic assessment (all assessments are included, for example, examinations, class tests, essays, coursework, dissertations, research projects, reports, etc.). All reported allegations of academic misconduct are taken seriously and may lead to disciplinary action. Academic misconduct is regarded as a breach of University Regulations and where proven will result in penalties being imposed (as described below and in more detailed in [Regulation A13](#) and [Student Academic Misconduct Policy](#)).

When someone fails to act with academic integrity they could be described as guilty of academic misconduct. The most common form of academic misconduct is plagiarism which covers a wide range of forms. Plagiarism is intellectual theft and is a major offence which the University takes seriously in all cases. Students must therefore avoid committing acts of plagiarism, which can happen intentionally or unintentionally, by following the guidelines explained in this guide and speaking to academic staff if they are uncertain about what plagiarism means. Those who are found to have plagiarised will be subject to the University's disciplinary policy and procedures, which may result in penalties ranging from the deduction of credits and courses already achieved by students to compulsory termination of studies. The University, however, will do anything it can to ensure all students learn about the required skills to be able to produce ethical assessments and avoid such situations. Plagiarism is a breach of academic integrity.

The best way of avoiding plagiarism, is to learn and employ the principles of good academic practice from the beginning of your university career. Avoiding plagiarism is not simply a matter of making sure your references are all correct, or changing enough words so the examiner will not notice your paraphrase; it is about deploying your academic skills to make your work as good as it can be.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This guide is intended to provide students at Heriot-Watt University with a clear definition of plagiarism and examples of how to avoid it in addition to what is explained in the [Student Academic Misconduct Policy](#).
- 1.2 The guide may also be of use to members of staff who seek to advise students on the various issues outlined below.

2. Definition

2.1 Plagiarism constitutes one form of academic misconduct. Plagiarism is defined as the presentation, by a student, of work for assessment that draws from another source without acknowledgement of that source. This includes:

- use of other people's works,
- texts generated by generative artificial intelligence tools,
- artworks,
- designs, and many more,

without appropriate permission. Please note that generative artificial intelligence can only be used within assessments where specific prior authorisation has been given, or when technology that uses artificial intelligence has been agreed as reasonable adjustment for a student's disability (such as voice recognition software for transcriptions or spelling and grammar checkers). You should check with your course instructor to ensure you are allowed to use such tools.

- 2.2 Plagiarism occurs where there is no acknowledgement that the writings or ideas belong to or have come from another source. There are two common types of plagiarism: (a) improper use of the *words* from another source and (b) improper use of the *ideas* from another source. Both forms of plagiarism involve using someone else's words or ideas **without appropriately acknowledging the author or source**.
- 2.3 *Word* plagiarism occurs when you use another author's exact words or phrases without quotation marks and appropriate citation and referencing; *Idea* plagiarism occurs when you present an idea from another source without citing the author and year.
- 2.4 Plagiarism is the most common form of academic misconduct because it can be an intentional act or happen *accidentally*. It is therefore important to know what it is and how to avoid it.
- 2.5 Not all cases of plagiarism arise from a deliberate intention to cheat. Sometimes students may omit to take down citation details when taking notes, or they may be genuinely ignorant of referencing conventions. However, these excuses offer no sure protection against a charge of plagiarism. *Even in cases where the plagiarism is found to be unintentional, there may still be an academic penalty for poor practice.*
- 2.6 It is your responsibility to find out the prevailing referencing conventions in your discipline, to take adequate notes, and to avoid close paraphrasing or [patchwriting](#). You should attend induction sessions and Skills Hub sessions where they talk about required skills to avoid plagiarism. They together with advice from your course leaders will help you learn how to avoid common errors. If you are undertaking a project or dissertation, you should ensure that you have information on plagiarism and collusion. If ever in doubt about referencing, paraphrasing or plagiarism, you have only to ask your tutor.
- 2.7 Most academic writing involves building on the work of others and this is acceptable if their contribution is identified and fully acknowledged. Therefore, it is not wrong use the ideas, writings, designs, artworks, or inventions of others, provided you are honest about the source of that information. Many aspects of plagiarism can be simply avoided through proper referencing. However, it is not acceptable to reproduce an entire paper belonging to someone else even if the student acknowledges the source. This is wrong practice because students are required to express their own academic judgment and demonstrate their own understand based on appropriate academic reading.
- 2.8 Plagiarism is one of the most serious offences in Higher Education or any environment where people are developing original ideas because plagiarism involves passing off someone else's ideas or words as your own. However, no-one develops ideas in a vacuum, everyone is constantly being influenced by persuasive arguments, or research evidence. In academia, it is therefore important, that you always document how you derive your conclusions. The way you do this is through the proper use of referencing and citations.
- 2.9 [University of Oxford](#) highlights eight common forms of plagiarism:
- **Verbatim (word for word) plagiarism without clear acknowledgement:** Copying someone else's work word for word. Quotations must always be identified as such using either quotation marks or indentation, and with full referencing of the sources cited. It must always be apparent to the reader which parts are your own independent work and where you have drawn on someone else's ideas and language.
 - **Cutting and pasting from web pages or other sources, including generative artificial intelligence tools, without clear acknowledgement:** Pulling information off the internet without referencing it and without including it in the bibliography. Information derived from the Internet must be adequately referenced and included in the bibliography. It is important to evaluate carefully all material found on the Internet, as it is less likely to have been through the same process of scholarly peer review as published sources.
 - **Paraphrasing:** Paraphrasing so closely so that the copy is almost an exact match to the original, also known as patchwriting. Paraphrasing the work of others by altering a few words and changing their order, or by closely following the structure of their argument, is plagiarism if you do not give due acknowledgement to the author whose work you are using.
A passing reference to the original author in your own text may not be enough; you must ensure that you do not create the misleading impression that the paraphrased wording or the sequence of ideas are entirely your own. It is better to write a brief summary of the author's overall argument in your own words,

indicating that you are doing so, than to paraphrase particular sections of his or her writing. This will ensure you have a genuine grasp of the argument and will avoid the difficulty of paraphrasing without plagiarising. You must also properly attribute all material you derive from lectures.

- **Collusion:** In group projects, or projects in which you received help, failing to properly attribute the assistance or failure to follow the project's rules. More guidance on groupwork and collusion is provided [here](#). This can involve unauthorised collaboration between students, failure to attribute assistance received, or failure to precisely follow regulations on group work projects. It is your responsibility to ensure that you are entirely clear about the extent of collaboration permitted, and which parts of the work must be your own.
- **Inaccurate citation:** Failing to cite correctly, according to the conventions of your discipline, either intentional or unintentional there is a risk that still your submission will be subject of disciplinary actions. It is important to cite correctly, according to the conventions of your discipline. As well as listing your sources (i.e., in a bibliography), you must indicate, using a footnote or an in-text reference, where a quoted passage comes from. Additionally, you should not include anything in your references or bibliography that you have not actually consulted. If you cannot gain access to a primary source, you must make it clear in your citation that your knowledge of the work has been derived from a secondary text (for example, Bradshaw, D. Title of Book, discussed in Wilson, E., Title of Book (London, 2004), p. 189).
- **Failure to acknowledge assistance:** Failing to clearly acknowledge all assistance that has contributed to your work (ordinary proofreading and help from a tutor or supervisor is excepted). You must clearly acknowledge all assistance which has contributed to the production of your work, such as advice from fellow students, laboratory technicians, and other external sources. This needs not apply to the assistance provided by your tutor or supervisor, or to ordinary proofreading, but it is necessary to acknowledge other guidance which leads to substantive changes of content or approach.
- **Use of material written by professional agencies or other people:** Using material that was written by a professional agency or another person, even if you have the consent of the person who wrote it. You should neither make use of professional agencies in the production of your work nor submit material which has been written for you even with the consent of the person who has written it. It is vital to your intellectual training and development that you should undertake the research process unaided.
- **Self-plagiarism (also known as Auto-plagiarism):** Reusing work you have previously submitted or published; presenting that information as new when you already have credit for the work. You must not submit work for assessment that you have already submitted (partially or in full) to fulfil the requirements of another degree course or examination unless this is specifically provided for in the special regulations for your course. Where earlier work by you is citable, i.e., it has already been published, you must reference it clearly.

2.10 A detailed guide on "Citing and Referencing" is available on the [Skills Hub SharePoint](#). This guide, however, summarises a few key points to consider. You can also book events [here](#) to learn more from our expert colleagues on Academic Writing, Referencing and many more.

3. Good Practice

3.1 The best way of avoiding plagiarism is to learn and employ the principles of good academic practice from the beginning of your university career. Avoiding plagiarism is not simply a matter of making sure your references are all correct, or changing enough words so the examiner will not notice your paraphrase; it is about deploying your academic skills to make your work as good as it can be ([University of Oxford](#), accessed August 2023).

3.2 Academic work is almost always drawn from other published information supplemented by the writer's own ideas, results, or findings. Thus, drawing from other work is entirely acceptable, but it is unacceptable not to acknowledge such work. Conventions or methods for making acknowledgements can vary slightly from subject to subject, and students should seek the advice of staff in their own School/Institute about ways of doing this. Generally, referencing systems fall into the [Harvard](#) (where the text citation is by author and date) and [numeric](#) (where the text citation is by using a number). Both systems refer readers to a list at the end of the piece of work where sufficient information is provided to enable the reader to locate the source for themselves.

- 3.3 When a student undertakes a piece of work that involves drawing on the writings or ideas of others, they must ensure that they acknowledge each contribution in the following manner:
- **Citations:** when a direct quotation, a figure, a general idea, or other piece of information is taken from a source, the source must be acknowledged using an in-text citation.
 - **Quotations:** inverted commas must always be used to identify direct quotations, and the source of the quotation must be cited.
 - **References:** the full details of all sources cited must be included in a reference list within your work. The citations and the reference list should be formatted following the rules of the appropriate referencing style. (This is slightly different to a Bibliography, which may also contain references and sources which, although not directly referred to in your work, you consulted in producing your work).
- 3.4 Many students cut and paste words from other sources because they are worried about their ability to write in English. Please be reassured that lecturers and professors would much prefer to read something not written very well, but expressing the student's ideas, rather than read a patchwork or conglomeration of ideas cut and pasted from unacknowledged sources. Badly written answers can still potentially convey a student's understanding because they make the learning visible. It is natural to struggle with writing and conveying difficult academic concepts, but this is part of the learning process, helping students develop a deeper understanding. One of the skills the University is trying to nurture is independent thought and learning. Writing in your own words is the best way to demonstrate this independent learning approach, helping you gain higher marks for originality of thought. The following resources on the [Skills Hub](#) will help you become a better academic writer. You also can approach the [Academic Writing Centre](#) and the English Gym who will be able to support and enhance your academic writing skills further.
- [Writing using sources.](#)
 - [Reflective writing.](#)
 - [Set up your own writing retreat.](#)
 - [Essay writing.](#)
 - [Writing reports.](#)
 - [Writing a literature review.](#)
 - [Dissertations and final year projects.](#)
 - [Academic posters.](#)
 - [Critical thinking.](#)
- You can also book various sessions offered by Skills Hub through this [link](#).
- 3.5 Do not think of referencing as merely a way to avoid plagiarism. It also facilitates learning the research language and joining an academic conversation. When you reference someone else's work, in addition to giving rightful acknowledgement, you are also:
- Demonstrating the breadth of your own research knowledge,
 - Putting your own work in a wider relevant context,
 - Allowing others to read further on the same topic,
 - Providing supporting evidence for your own arguments.
- 3.6 When reading a journal article in which the writer has used many references, it gives the impression that they have done their research and has a good understanding of the topic. If a line of reasoning is backed up by evidence, it gives the argument credibility. There is also an implicit generosity embedded in the practice of good referencing because it helps others learn more about a subject by signposting them to further reading. For example, when reading a journal, it is helpful to know more about certain aspects not fully covered in the article, so it is possible to use the reference list to follow up in more depth on related issues covered in the article. This is where this idea of references being part of an academic conversation come from because the writer is telling the reader that there are other people writing about similar issues.
- 3.7 More detailed information on Citing and Referencing can be found on the [Skills Hub](#). The people who mark your work will be looking for evidence that you have consulted the works of those who are considered the experts in your area of study. The process of acknowledging the work of others in your own essays, dissertations, projects, artworks, designs, and other coursework is simply called *citing and referencing*. There are different referencing styles out there. You will see in student handbooks and assignment instructions which referencing style you will need to follow - if in doubt ask your lecturer! At Heriot-Watt University, we use a lot of different referencing styles, including [Harvard](#), [APA](#), [IEEE](#), [SIAM](#) and [others](#).

3.8 Managing your list of references can become a daunting task. There are several Reference Management Software available around the globe. The recommended and supported Reference Management Software provided by the university is EndNote. It is free for all staff and students. There are other software available, such as [Mendeley](#), but they are not supported by the University. You can access Endnote and find more details about this software from the following links:

- [About - EndNote – IS Guides at Heriot-Watt University \(hw.ac.uk\)](#)
- [EndNote - Heriot-Watt University \(hw.ac.uk\)](#)

The ways in which we refer to sources:

3.9 Quotations

It is acceptable to use a few relevant short quotations in an assignment, provided they are referenced properly. They should, however, be used very sparingly, usually never exceeding 5% of your assignment word-count. Similarly, do not use quotes as a substitute for your own words. If, for example, you are asked to provide a definition of a concept, it is better put into your own words because the marker can assess whether you have understood it. Use quotations only when it is not possible to represent someone else's idea accurately, or when you want to capture a particular phrase.

3.10 Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing involves reading and understanding a written passage and then putting it entirely into your own words. This requires more than changing a few words or shifting sentences around.

The best way to paraphrase is to read something, put it aside, and from memory, put the key points down in bullet points. You can always check you have remembered all the important points. These summary points then form the basis from which you express the original idea in your own writing style. The reason this is so important is because you need to demonstrate your understanding, and this can only be done if you express yourself in your own words.

3.11 Summarising

A summary is always shorter than the original text. For example, you might read a whole book and provide a very short summary outlining its main points. There is a great skill to capturing the main points of an argument. You should always try to be fair to the original text and not omit information that intentionally changes its intended meaning.

It takes practice to summarise effectively, but you will learn the basics once you start to read academic sources. It is then a case of practicing writing your own words.

3.12 Students may wish to refer to the following examples which illustrate the basic principles of plagiarism and how students might avoid it in their work by using some very simple techniques:

• Example 1: A Clear Case of Plagiarism

Examine the following example in which a student has simply inserted a passage of text (*in italics*) into their work directly from a book they have read:

University and college managers should consider implementing strategic frameworks if they wish to embrace good management standards. *One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action.* Managers are employed to resolve these issues effectively.

This is an example of bad practice as the student makes no attempt to distinguish the passage they have inserted from their own work. Thus, this constitutes a clear case of plagiarism. Simply changing a few key words in such a passage of text (e.g., replace '*problems*' with '*difficulties*') does not make it the student's work and it is still considered to be an act of plagiarism.

• Common Mistakes

Students may also find the following examples¹ of common plagiarism mistakes made by other students useful when reflecting on their own work:

- "I thought it would be okay as long as I included the source in my bibliography" [without indicating a quotation had been used in the text]

- “I made lots of notes for my essay and couldn't remember where I found the information”.
- “I thought it would be okay to use material that I had purchased online”.
- “I thought it would be okay to copy the text if I changed some of the words into my own”.
- “I thought that plagiarism only applied to essays, I didn't know that it also applies to oral presentations/group projects etc”.
- “I thought it would be okay just to use my tutor's notes”.
- “I didn't think that you needed to reference material found on the web”.
- “I left it too late and just didn't have time to reference my sources”.

None of the above are acceptable reasons for failing to acknowledge the use of others' work and thereby constitute plagiarism.

3.13 What follows are examples of the methods that students should employ to correctly cite the words, thoughts or ideas of others that have influenced their work:

• Example 2: Quoting the work of others

If a student wishes to cite a passage of text in order to support their own work, the correct way of doing so is to use quotation marks (e.g., “ ”) to show that the passage is someone else's work, as follows:

“One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action”.

• Example 3: Referencing the work of others

In addition to using quotation marks as above, students must also use an in-text citation. If the work being cited is a book, page numbers would also normally be required. Thus, using the Harvard Cite Them Right style for a book:

“One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action” (Jones, 2001, p. 121).

The same reference could also be made to a book using a numeric style such as IEEE.

“One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action” [1, p. 121].

More often, a piece of work will have multiple references, which demonstrates to an examiner that the student is drawing from a number of sources. For example, two separate articles may be cited as follows in the Harvard Cite Them Right style:

It has been asserted that Higher Education in the United Kingdom continued to be poorly funded during the 1980's (Brown, 1991), whereas, more recently, Smith (2002) argue that the HE sectors actually received, in real terms, more funding during this period than the thirty-year period immediately preceding it.

or using the IEEE style:

“It has been asserted that Higher Education in the United Kingdom continued to be poorly funded during the 1980's [1], whereas more modern writers [2] argue that the HE sectors actually received, in real terms, more funding during this period than the thirty-year period immediately preceding it”.

• Example 4: Use of reference lists

Whichever citation style is used, a reference list must also be included, which allows the reader to locate the works cited for themselves. In most styles the reference list is placed at the end of your document, but you should check your assignment guidelines and the rules for the style you are using.

Reference lists must follow the rules of the style you are using. You can find the rules for some referencing styles on the [Skills Hub](#) and in [Cite Them Right Online](#). If your assignment tells you to use a different style, ask your lecturer, supervisor, or a librarian for assistance in finding the correct set of rules.

It is your responsibility to make it clear where you are citing references within your work and what the source is within your reference list. **Failure to do so is an act of plagiarism.**

- 3.14 Students are encouraged to use a style of acknowledgement that is appropriate to their own academic discipline and should seek advice from their personal tutor, course leader or other appropriate member of academic staff.
- 3.15 Please visit [Cite Them Right Online](#) or [the Skills Hub](#) for in-depth information about citing and referencing.

4. Tips to Avoid Plagiarism

- 4.1 Whenever possible, paraphrase sources in your own words rather than directly quoting them. Paraphrasing helps you to synthesise ideas and integrate them into the context of your paper.
- 4.2 Use direct quotes only when it is important to reproduce both what was said and how it was said. The most blatant form of word plagiarism occurs when students copy an author's exact words and knowingly do not use quotation marks or include an in-text citation.
- 4.3 A more common type of word plagiarism is when students think they can use an author's exact (or very similar words) and include only an in-text citation. (The citation gives the author credit for the ideas, but the quotation marks give the author credit for the wording of the idea.) If you use an author's exact words, quotation marks and location information must accompany the in-text citation. You should note that it is not a good practice to add many quotation marks to the report either. You need to be able to write a comprehension of what other authors have discussed in your report.
- 4.4 Another common type of word plagiarism occurs when students mistakenly think they have paraphrased an author's words because they added or removed a few words or replaced some of the words with synonyms, i.e., patchwriting. If your wording has a similar sentence structure and uses the same words and phrases of the original author, you are patchwriting. (See the example below)

Example passage from Messabia et al. (2022)ⁱⁱ: Health responses to the spread of COVID-19 had a direct impact on economic policies. Business owners and managers had to adopt new business and organizational strategies to ensure the resilience and survival of their businesses under the new health policies (Cortez & Johnston, 2020).

Plagiarised (*patchwritten*) example: Economic policies were directly impacted by health measures taken in reaction to COVID-19's outbreak. To secure the resilience and survival of their companies under the new health rules, business owners and managers have to implement new organizational and business strategies (Cortez & Johnston, 2020).

In the above example, the student has taken work from Messabia et al. (2022), while Cortez & Johnston 2010 are cited, the student has not read that source, but is presenting Messabia et al. (2022)'s interpretation of that work as their own, but just changing a few words to their synonyms and changing the order of the sentence.

- 4.5 It is important to paraphrase other authors' works in your own words.
- 4.6 When reading a description of an idea or study, it can be hard to represent that idea or finding as clearly and succinctly as the author did without plagiarising. The easiest way to avoid repeating sentence structure or lifting phrases is to **read a section of a work, and then put the work down and write notes in your own words.**
- 4.7 Generally, paraphrase when taking notes on a source. Do not write the author's words verbatim without putting them in quotation marks and including the source location in your notes.
- 4.8 Always attribute every idea, fact, and finding you put in your paper to the source where you got it from.
- 4.9 Any time you write about a concept or idea in a paper without including an in-text citation (or clearly linking it to a previous sentence containing an in-text citation), you are claiming the idea as your own (if it is not, that is plagiarism).
- 4.10 The most blatant form of idea plagiarism occurs when students see a good argument or idea in a paper and then represent that argument or idea as their own.

- 4.11 A more common form of idea plagiarism is when students cite a source incorrectly because they do not follow proper in-text citation guidelines. For example, they may write a whole paragraph about a study and then cite the study's author and year in the last sentence in parentheses, thinking that citation covers the previous sentences. Instead, the in-text citation should appear at the beginning of the paraphrased passage, to establish its origin at the outset.
- 4.12 Another common form of idea plagiarism is when students remember a fact they learned in class and put it in their paper without citing it or when they write about a fact they heard somewhere and mistakenly assume it is common knowledge.
- 4.13 Most important, always search the literature to find a source for any ideas, facts, or findings that you put in your paper.
- 4.14 Do not purchase writing and present it as your own work.
- 4.15 Do not reuse assignments from a previous course without your instructor's permission.
- 4.16 Do not let other students borrow, copy, or reuse your past assignment.
- 4.17 The necessity to acknowledge others' work or ideas applies not only to text, but also to other media, such as computer code, illustrations, graphs etc. It applies equally to published text and data drawn from books and journals, and to unpublished text and data, whether from lectures, theses, or other students' essays. You must also attribute text, data, or other resources downloaded from websites.

5. References

American Psychological Association (2020) Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000165-000/> (Accessed: 15 September 2023).

University of Oxford (2023) Academic good practice – a practical guide. Available at: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism/> (Accessed: 15 September 2023).

ⁱ Extract from 'Plagiarism at the University of Essex' advice copyrighted and published by the Learning, Teaching and Quality Unit at the [University of Essex](https://www.essex.ac.uk), reproduced with permission.

ⁱⁱ Messabia, N., Fomi, P. R., & Kooli, C. (2022). Managing restaurants during the COVID-19 crisis: Innovating to survive and prosper. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 7(4), 100234.