

Guidelines on Plagiarism and Paraphrasing in Writing Manuals Across Various Disciplines

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Discussions of plagiarism in conventional writing manuals typically focus on acknowledging the source of borrowed ideas and text. Such coverage often includes guidelines for proper attribution and citation practices. A number of manuals also provide specific guidelines for correct paraphrasing. By correct paraphrasing, we mean the extent to which text from an original source should be modified in order for it not to be considered a potential case of plagiarism. Those manuals that cover proper paraphrasing practices (1-3), generally suggest that, in addition to providing a citation, authors should always paraphrase others' work using their own words and expressions and avoid the use of the original author's language. For example, in a widely used guide, the authors state "When you paraphrase or summarize, you should use your own words and sentence structure (4). Imitating syntax, rearranging words and phrases, and borrowing phrases even as brief as two or three words do not change the original sufficiently to avoid plagiarism" (p. 66).

Aside from the above guideline on paraphrasing, we are not aware of any other major writing manual that provides as close an operational definition for correct paraphrasing as the above example illustrates. However, the examples of proper paraphrasing provided by conventional manuals that offer such coverage suggest that a correct paraphrase must represent a very substantial modification of the original text, otherwise the paraphrase may constitute plagiarism. Moreover, some manuals such as the one quoted above, even suggest that, to avoid plagiarism when paraphrasing, not only should the original words be changed, but also the sentence structure of the newly paraphrased text must be different from that of the original (4-7).

As the reader might suspect, the criteria for correct paraphrasing appear to differ from writer to writer, particularly for inexperienced writers. For example, recent studies by one of the present authors have reported wide differences in plagiarism/paraphrasing criteria among college students (8, 9). Furthermore, similar differences also appear to exist among professionals, including physicians, English professors, and journal editors, and between college professors from a variety of disciplines (10-11). Some authors have even begun to express concern about the writing practices of those who engage in 'light' paraphrasing of others' works and terms, such as 'patchwriting' and 'paraphrasiarism', have been offered to describe some of these inappropriate paraphrasing practices (12-14).

Depending on a number of factors, federal agencies, such as the National Science Foundation and the Office of Research Integrity do not classify inappropriate paraphrasing as instances of research

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misconduct (15). However, based on definitions provided by conventional writing manuals and, depending on the context, others may still judge such inappropriate writing practices as potential instances of plagiarism. Thus, the 'light' paraphrasing of others' text, an innocuous writing practice to some, can have serious consequences and possibly result in disciplinary actions by the individual institutions and/or the academic disciplines involved.

A matter that we believe to be of major concern is evidence that suggests that inappropriate paraphrasing practices on the part of academics may be much more common than most people assume. For example, in a recent series of studies (11), one of the present authors found substantial differences in paraphrasing criteria among college professors from a variety of disciplines, including professors in the sciences. In one of the studies, differences in paraphrasing criteria arose even among members of a single academic discipline: Psychology. These findings led the author to review the official guidelines for avoiding plagiarism published by the American Psychological Association (APA), the parent association of psychologists (16, 17). A close examination of these guidelines revealed a certain degree of ambiguity in how correct paraphrasing and plagiarism are defined in that discipline. That particular finding is noteworthy because one of the sources reviewed is not only used by psychologists, but also by members of other disciplines (e.g., sociology and education) (17).

Given the importance of avoiding plagiarism in scholarly and scientific writing, the above findings raise a number of important questions: How do other disciplines in the sciences and the humanities define plagiarism? What are their guidelines regarding correct paraphrasing? How similar are these definitions across disciplines? In an attempt to address these questions, we surveyed the writing manuals of various disciplines within the sciences and humanities for their coverage of plagiarism. We were interested in the extent to which definitions of plagiarism, specifically guidelines for correct paraphrasing, are covered in these manuals and the degree to which such definitions are consistent across disciplines.

Method

We located the latest edition available to us of writing manuals of various disciplines (Appendix

1). First, we proceeded to determine each manual's extent of coverage of plagiarism by reviewing its index and table of contents for entries for 'plagiarism' and for 'paraphrasing'. If no entries were found for those terms we proceeded to examine sections on citation and documentation procedures.

Results

Most of the manuals were found to provide some discussion of citation and quotation procedures. Indeed, these sections are designed primarily for the purpose of identifying the source of ideas and thus, prevent an interpretation of plagiarism. Surprisingly, only 3 of the writing manuals examined (1, 17-18) listed entries for plagiarism in their index. The extent to which plagiarism was covered in these three sources varied somewhat. All three manuals provided some discussion of plagiarism. But, only two, the Modern Language Association (MLA) manual (1) and the American Medical Association (AMA) manual (18) defined this type of transgression and provided specific examples of instances of plagiarism (e.g., word for word lifting of a passage without attribution; presenting others' ideas without attribution).

The two writing guides that included coverage of paraphrasing (17, 18) defined it as restating text in the author's original words, but only the APA manual (17) provided an example of proper paraphrasing. However, as one of the present authors has pointed out, the definition for paraphrasing provided by the APA (i.e., "Summarizing a passage or rearranging the order of a sentence and changing some of the words is paraphrasing.") appears to be somewhat at odds with the actual example offered (11). That example, which shows the original text to have been substantially modified, is consistent with other conventional manuals' examples paraphrasing.

Discussion

Given the importance of avoiding plagiarism, we are somewhat concerned with the fact that the writing manuals of several academic disciplines, particularly many disciplines in the sciences, do not appear to have explicit sections on these matters. We note that other important resources on writing in the humanities and in the biomedical sciences also appear to lack entries on plagiarism (19-21).

It is possible that at least some of these

manuals do provide some coverage of plagiarism. But, in addition to not listing the term 'plagiarism' in the manuals' index or table of contents, any coverage, if it occurs, is probably very minor at best and takes place in sections other than those we reviewed.

If most of these manuals do not provide coverage of plagiarism the reason may be an assumption on the part of authors and editors of these reference materials that contributors to the professional literature are already knowledgeable about such fundamental matters of scholarship. Indeed, some manuals written for students in disciplines, such as biology, psychology, and sociology provide definitions of plagiarism and paraphrasing that are consistent with those of conventional writing manuals that provide coverage of these issues (22-25). Such detailed coverage at the undergraduate level supports the assumption that, at the professional level, authors already know the rules. Another reason for not including coverage may be that, as an ethical issue, plagiarism is likely to be addressed in other sources of information, such as a discipline's code of ethics. Finally, sections on citation procedures represent, to a great extent, a discipline's way of insuring that authors of original works are properly credited. Therefore, although explicit sections on plagiarism might not be provided in many of the writing guides reviewed, there is an implicit message in these guides that authors must duly credit others whose ideas, text, or data are being borrowed.

In spite of the above considerations, and in view of the fact that plagiarism continues to flourish, we believe that writing manuals across all disciplines should provide explicit sections on plagiarism that include clear definitions and examples of the various forms that plagiarism can take. In addition, given that a significant portion of scholarly writing involves summarizing and paraphrasing others' ideas and text, writing manuals should pay particular attention to this area and offer clear guidelines as to what forms of writing constitute proper summarizing and paraphrasing techniques. Finally, and perhaps most difficult of all, definitions of plagiarism and guidelines for summarizing and paraphrasing text should be standardized across disciplines. We believe that, in the absence of such standardization and given the increasing nature of cross-disciplinary collaborations, there is the potential for an even greater number of plagiarism cases in the future.

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Appendix 1: Writing manuals reviewed for their coverage of plagiarism and paraphrasing.

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