What is plagiarism and how to avoid it?

*A guide for students of the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu (updated 01.09.2016)*

**Definition of plagiarism**

In our field of studies, we engage with a lot of ideas and information developed and collected by other people. We use these ideas and information for understanding and for generating new thoughts and we incorporate them in our own writing or presentations. It is extremely important to give credit to those other authors where this is due.

Plagiarism is “using others’ ideas and words without clearly acknowledging the source of that information.”¹ Plagiarism takes many forms, beginning with any attempt to present as your own an entire paper that was written by someone else; but it also includes “borrowing” ideas (even if restated in your own words) without acknowledging the source; and it involves copying phrases, sentences or entire paragraphs from a book, article, or internet source without putting these passages in quotation marks and referring to the source.

Please note that using the work of others is not the problem: on the contrary, it is standard practice in academic work and is generally required whenever you write a paper. The important question is how you do this, and whether you acknowledge all authors and sources properly.

According to the Tartu University Regulations (effective as of 1 January 2016), academic fraud is defined as:

“203.1. in an assessment of learning outcomes, the use of any materials that the member of the teaching staff has not explicitly permitted the students to use;
203.2. illicit sharing of knowledge (e.g. prompting, copying other student’s work, etc.) by students participating in an assessment of learning outcomes;
203.3. participating in an assessment of learning outcomes for another student;
203.4. submission of the written work of another person as the student’s own, or the use of parts thereof without the appropriate academic reference;
203.5. second submission of the student’s own work, if the student has already received ECTS for it”

The University has relevant procedures for investigating and prosecuting instances of plagiarism, beginning with a formal reprimand and leading (where applicable) to full-scale deletion from the matriculation register. All cases of plagiarism and intellectual theft are dealt with pursuant to the Procedure for processing cases of academic fraud in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

Why is plagiarism a problem?

Plagiarism is theft – the theft of ideas and of someone else’s work. Students who plagiarize are not doing the work (independent learning, thinking and writing) that they are expected to do at the University, and therefore do not deserve credit for the work submitted. Plagiarism has become increasingly prevalent with the use of internet. Since it is so easy to find information and “ready-made” texts on almost any subject, students sometimes do not bother to spend the time formulating their own thoughts, analyzing and synthesizing the literature. Moreover, writing in a language other than your own is often difficult and having a nicely formulated text easily copied and pasted into paper (perhaps with little changes here and there) may seem like an okay thing.

Yet this is unacceptable – the University is a place where one should grow intellectually through individual learning, thinking and writing. Before you engage in copy-pasting you should ask yourself how you would feel if you found parts of your own text (a term paper, a report or else) or an idea that you had developed for a project suddenly presented by someone else as their own. You would feel cheated, betrayed and bereft of the acknowledgement you think you deserve for what you created. So, do not make others feel this way!

What happens to students who plagiarize?

Plagiarism can generally be easily detected. Course instructors are familiar with the important literature in their field – they may recognize the source much more easily than you think! They can also easily do an internet search to find the source of suspicious-looking text.

In a proven case of plagiarism, the policies of the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies and the University of Tartu as a whole are very strict and the consequences for the student can include any of the following: a failing grade for the course assignment, failing the entire course, expulsion from the program (and the University) and/or a letter to one’s home University (in case of short-term visiting students) from the Dean of the Faculty or Head of the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies.

Formal procedures are to be found at:
Some guidelines on how to cite sources

First of all, it is important to distinguish between using direct quotations and paraphrasing. If you are using someone else’s words literally, word-for-word (be it a phrase, sentence, or an entire paragraph) you must put the passage you are using in quotation marks (or present it in italics as a separate, indented paragraph). Thereafter, you must include a reference indicating the specific page from which the quotation was taken.

*For instance:*

> The new member states of the European Union want strong supranational institutions and “wish to be included in all integration arrangements, in order to avoid second-class membership in a multi-tier Europe” (Baun 2004: 138).

Avoid overusing direct quotation. Do not use someone else's words throughout your entire paper. The reader wants to see the results of your own intellectual efforts. In general, direct quotation should not be longer than 3-4 lines and should be used sparingly. Choose to quote someone directly when the words that person uses are meaningful, indicative or particularly illustrative of an argument you are making. Do not quote someone simply because he/she reports a fact, i.e. “The European Union has 28 member-states.” (Jones 2014:13).

**Paraphrasing** means that you are presenting another author’s ideas or arguments in your own words. Paraphrasing is generally preferable to direct quoting. However, using your own words for someone else’s ideas still requires you to acknowledge the source (i.e. give the author credit). This reference may include the page number, if referring to a specific idea, or it may simply provide the book’s or article’s year of publication.

*For instance:*

> Greater diversity in international organizations may even facilitate interest accommodation and compromise-seeking, increasing the likelihood of agreement, not stalemate. (Heritier 1999)

For good guidelines on “how to recognize unacceptable and acceptable paraphrases” see Indiana University’s [Writing Tutorial](#).

Watch also a short [video](#) by David Taylor on how to paraphrase properly.

Including a list of sources at the end of your paper

In the above examples, in-text citing was used, meaning that we listed the name of the author, the year the book/article was published, and the page number in parentheses. We placed this at the end of the sentence, where this source was used. This alone, however, is not sufficient. You also have to include a full list of the sources at the end of your paper.

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2 You can also use footnotes or endnotes instead of in-text citing, if you prefer. Just make sure you are consistent – do not combine different systems of referencing in one paper!
This section is generally entitled “References”. In this section you need to include full bibliographical information about each source. The entries will differ depending on the type of publication used. Books and edited volumes should include the author’s name, publication title, publisher, publisher’s location, and year of publication. For journal articles, you should include the journal name, volume number, issue number and page numbers of the article.

For instance, you should list a book as follows:


A journal article as follows:


If you are using internet sources, these should still be listed based on an author. Most texts will have an author, even if it’s, for example, a news item on a BBC website. If you cannot identify an author of a given text, image etc., then it is probably not a trustworthy source!

This is particularly true for encyclopaedic entries such as Wikipedia, where neither the author, nor other crucial information is provided (such as when something was written). If there really is no author for a reputable source (for example, a press release), then the overall organization should be listed as the author. Include the address of the website and note when you accessed it (because the content of the website can change!).

For instance:


At the same time, be careful with the formatting of long internet addresses. Sometimes these can drag over several lines and look very unprofessional. For student papers, it is also acceptable to simply embed the URL in the title of the source, using the ‘Hyperlink’ function in MS-Word (Ctrl-K).


All sources should be listed in alphabetical order, based on the first letter of the last name of the author.³

³ When you use in-text citing make sure that the list of references starts with the name of author and year of publication for better orientation.
Strategies on how to avoid plagiarism

As noted in the *Academic Writing Guideline for Writing in English* compiled by the Centre for Academic Writing and Communication (AVOK) “[p]lagiarism most frequently occurs when students procrastinate, write at the last moment, do not spend enough time revising their text, do not plan their arguments or their sources.” (p. 19) In order to successfully engage with different sources and enter into a dialogue with authors and ideas the result of which is a genuinely self-written term paper or thesis you should follow some basic rules:

a) Do not start writing the assignment last minute, but start early on in the semester to think about your theme and structure of argument.

b) When you read different texts in the pre-writing phase, take notes in a separate document and make sure to clearly mark the beginning and end of directly copied text with quotation marks and references (including the page number in order to find it again later!).

c) Once you start drafting your paper, never directly copy-paste text that you found on the internet or copied from a printed book into your essay or paper! You may not have any wrong intentions, but it is very easy to forget to mark the copied text as not yours in the process of writing. So keep notes and quotes separate from drafts of your paper!

d) Once you place a reference in the text, do not postpone providing the necessary information to a later stage in the writing process! Instead, make sure to include a footnote or in-text reference that includes all necessary information right away (see how to cite above).

e) Take your time to re-read and revise your text carefully before submitting it. Writing is a process that consists of many rounds of revision; of returning to the sources, verifying your claims, re-writing and re-reading. This back-and-forth process is a powerful tool against plagiarism (as well as for detecting spelling mistakes!), but the time you need for it should not be underestimated!

f) When you are not sure about whether or not a particular piece of information can be considered common knowledge and thus does not require a reference, do not hesitate to ask your course instructor or supervisor!

Where can I get more information?

The Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies cooperates closely with UT’s Language Centre and, in particular, the Centre for Academic Writing and Communication, AVOK. The Centre offers free consultations regarding all aspects of academic writing. Students can work directly with a consultant or ask generation questions about how to write, how to structure an academic paper or build up a coherent and well-grounded argument. See the Centre’s website for more information [http://www.maailmakeeled.ut.ee/en/avok](http://www.maailmakeeled.ut.ee/en/avok).
There are also plenty of helpful internet sources about plagiarism and how to avoid it. These have mostly been compiled by US and UK universities and libraries. Here is a selection:


- Indiana University, Writing Tutorial Services: [http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml)


- University of Essex, UK: [https://www.essex.ac.uk/myskills/Plagiarism_and_how_to_avoid_it.pdf](https://www.essex.ac.uk/myskills/Plagiarism_and_how_to_avoid_it.pdf)

- Leeds University Library, UK: [http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-plagiarism/](http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-plagiarism/).