Plagiarism Myths and Realities

Myth: I can use anything I want from the Internet. It’s Public Domain.

Reality: There is a huge amount of information on the Internet, much of which is not in the Public Domain and, is therefore, protected by copyright law. Look at it this way: did you create it (the ideas, arrangement of words, sounds, etc.) or did someone else? If some else did it, you are plagiarizing unless you give credit to the author.

Myth: It’s okay to copy as long as you give credit to the source.

Reality: If you copy, then you must acknowledge the source and use quotation marks around what you copied.

Myth: It’s okay to copy words from different sources, change the wording, and put them together in your own way.

Reality: “Students have been expelled from college or deprived of their degrees for a single distinctive phrase or term that has been stolen.” (Plagiarism Myths You May have Heard (or Repeated) and THE FACTS, http://www.abac.edu/library/PLAG/myths.htm). Furthermore, you may not claim to have written it if you simply took someone else’s work and made a few word changes.

Myth: I didn’t plagiarize; I paraphrased the whole thing.

Reality: If you paraphrase someone else’s words, you must give credit for the ideas, or you are plagiarizing!

Myth: If you cite a work, you can’t copy from it; but if you don’t cite it you can copy as much as you want because no one will know it’s not your work.

Reality: Trying to conceal plagiarism by doctoring your “Works Cited” list makes your intent to cheat easily apparent.
Myth: Everybody does it and they don’t get caught, so it’s okay if I do it.

Reality: Plagiarism is illegal. The fact that some people have gotten away with it, doesn’t make it right. Those who do get caught face very serious consequences.

Myth: Does anybody really care if I plagiarize?

Reality: “Plagiarism is taken very seriously by academics. Scholarly ideas in academe are like money in other parts of society. Stealing other people’s ideas is every bit as bad as emptying out someone’s bank account.” (Plagiarism Myths you may have heard (or repeated) and the Facts, http://www.abac.edu/library/PLAG/myths.htm).

Myth: My professor will never know if I buy (borrow) a paper from an online site and make a few changes. Besides, those sites wouldn’t exist if it weren’t legal.

Reality: In fact, it’s not difficult to find where these papers come from. If you turn in a paper that arouses your instructor’s suspicions, he/she can easily research its origins. It is not illegal for the sites to exist. What might be illegal is your use of the materials you get from these sites. When you buy a paper, that’s all you have purchased – the paper. The work is not yours, and trying to claim it as your own is fraud. You are totally responsible for what you choose to do with the work.

Myth: My sister gave me a paper to use that she wrote last year. There’s nothing wrong with that and it sure helped me out.

Reality: Even if your sister wants to “give” the paper to you, the intellectual property belongs to her. To misrepresent the work as your own is fraud and would expose all involved to the risk of being disciplined for academic dishonesty.

Myth: As long as my instructor can’t prove I didn’t write a paper, he/she has to accept it.

Reality: If an instructor suspects and can present compelling evidence of plagiarism, it will be up to the student to respond knowledgably to questions about his/her work and to provide detailed information about the work process, in order to prove the work is his/her own.

Adapted with permission from “Myths about Plagiarism” by Denise C. Ashkenas, Northern Virginia Community College and “Plagiarism Myths You May have Heard (or Repeated) and THE FACTS”, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, Tifton, GA. Created 08/2009 dk