



Avoiding Plagiarism: Advice for students

Academic Integrity

Every piece of written work submitted to a supervisor or Director of Studies, whether for supervision or examination, should be entirely your own work and should not contain material from unacknowledged sources. Any breach of this rule lays you open to the charge of plagiarism.

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is simply theft. This applies to even a single phrase (of five words or more) or a sentence, as well as to more substantial section of a source. It applies to words or ideas taken from books, journals, from an internet site or from a fellow student. If this is done with the deliberate intention to deceive a reader, the College will take disciplinary action.

There is also a University Policy on plagiarism, which does not permit “unfair means” in Tripos examinations. If essays, dissertations or project work submitted for examination are found to be plagiarized, the examiners may either award a lower class, or refer the case to the University Court.

It is possible for students to commit plagiarism unwittingly through carelessness or ignorance. The process of investigating a charge of plagiarism is time-consuming and unpleasant for everyone concerned. For everyone's sake, you should take every care not only to avoid plagiarism but also to avoid giving your reader any reason to suspect it in your work.

Cheating vs Collaboration

We encourage collaboration: working with your lab partner; discussing supervision work; helping each other to understand lecture notes. Explaining something to someone is one of the best ways of learning — and discovering if you really understand it.

Drawing on other people's work, finding inspiration from lectures, articles, conversations and books are crucial to scholarship and creativity. Where work you hand in for supervision is the result of collaborative work or copied from lecture or from text book notes (as may happen in mathematics, for instance), then you should make this clear at the appropriate place in the text. Acknowledging assistance and inspiration and direction are, in some cases, more relevant than direct references.

Plagiarism is different from legitimate use of others' work; it is a form of cheating. It involves passing off someone else's work, writing or ideas as your own and copying something someone else has done: e.g. copying whole or part of someone else's essay, book, article, computer program, or lab write-up. It is regarded as a serious crime: don't be tempted to try it.

How do I avoid a charge of plagiarism?

The first thing to say is, “If you are in doubt about how or what to reference, then seek advice”. Your supervisor or Director of Studies can give you advice. However, common sense will help you avoid most of the problems.

The main thing is to provide full and meticulous references to any material that you draw on in an essay. References should enable the reader to turn to the passage you are referring to or quoting in the same edition of the book or article that you use. It is important to include full details of publisher, place of publication and date and any other information that pinpoints the particular edition.

By putting in full references you are enabling your reader to check the quotation and its context. It also alerts others to material that might be of interest should they wish to follow up the topic themselves. There are various style guides on referencing and footnotes. Your supervisor or Director of Studies will suggest which model to follow.

For some technical material — particularly in mathematics — bibliographies are not always appropriate, but you should still take care to acknowledge any material which is not your own work. Your DoS will advise you on this.

If references are inaccurate or incomplete or missing, then, whether you mean to deceive or not, your work by definition contains material from “unacknowledged sources”. For instance, if you fail to provide a bibliography, you are either implying that the work is entirely your own, or else that the work is based on unacknowledged sources. A source which cannot be traced because of inadequate references is in effect “unacknowledged”.

Further information can be found at <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/plagiarism/>

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