

Ethical Issues in Research and Writing

Introduction

The entire discussion of ethics in research and writing generally revolves around the issue of plagiarism; that is the appropriation of an individual's ideas and/or writing and claiming them as your own. However, there are other issues involved that must be dealt with in the context of this course.

Later in this course you will be exposed to the issues of *Critical Thinking and Logic*. In that section the entire subject of *logical fallacies* will be discussed. It needs to be remembered that the unintentional slip into a fallacy is not necessarily an *ethical lapse*; however, the intentional use of the more sophisticated fallacies to either confuse or obfuscate in a research paper does constitute a serious ethical issue.

As the authors state in *The Craft of Research*:

Everything we've said about research begins with our conviction that it is a thoroughly social activity, one that links us to those whose research we use and in turn to those who will use ours. It is also an activity no longer confined to the small social world of the academy. Research is now at the center of industry, commerce, government, education, health care, warfare, even entertainment and religion. It influences every part of our society and our lives, public or private. Because research and its reporting have become a seamless part of our social fabric, in these last pages we offer some brief reflections on an issue beyond its technique—the inescapable connection between reporting your research and the principles of ethical communication.¹

Beyond the issue of plagiarism, the authors list three “obvious” and four “less obvious” ethical considerations:

The Obvious:

- Ethical Researchers do not steal by plagiarizing or claiming the results of others.
- They do not lie by misreporting sources or by inventing results.
- They do not destroy sources and data for those who follow.

The Less Obvious

- Responsible researchers do not submit data whose accuracy they have reason to question.
- They do not conceal objections they cannot rebut.
- They do not caricature those with opposing views or deliberately state their views in a way they would reject.
- They do not write their reports in a way that deliberately makes it difficult for the reader to understand them, nor do they oversimplify that which is legitimately complex.²

¹ Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 255

² *Ibid.*, p. 255-56.

Plagiarism in all its Forms

Plagiarism is defined as the act of “taking and using the thoughts, writings, inventions, etc., of another person as your own.” This definition requires, what is called “intent.” The most serious forms of plagiarism will manifest some level of knowledge of the act and generally display an effort to conceal the plagiarism. This is not to say that the “I didn’t know” defense is valid; since at this point in the student’s academic career the assumption is that they do know.³ Additionally, the further along a student progresses in their seminary education the more responsibility accrues (Luke 12:48). An act of plagiarism which might cause a first year student to receive an “F” for the course and a severe reprimand (formal or informal) may very well lead to the expulsion of a senior and would certainly lead to dismissal from a post-graduate program. Additionally, graduation is not a “pass go” where the consequences of plagiarism simply evaporate. Should serious plagiarism be discovered in a thesis or dissertation—even years after graduation, the seminary may move to revoke the offender’s degree.

The authors of our text most clearly:

It is the concern for the integrity of the work of the community that explains why researchers condemn plagiarism so strongly. Intentional plagiarism is theft, but of more than words. By not acknowledging a source, a plagiarist steals some of the little reward that an academic community can offer, the enhanced respect that a researcher spends a lifetime trying to earn. The plagiarist steals from his community of classmates by making the quality of their work seem worse by comparison and then perhaps steals again by taking one of the few good grades reserved to reward those who do good work.⁴

A subset of plagiarism is perhaps the more significant problem of “claiming the results of others.” This problem can be as simple as laziness or as serious as a deliberate attempt to deceive. Laziness is perhaps the most frequent cause of this problem. For example, while doing your research and you come upon a quotation in one of your readings. The problem of plagiarism occurs when you take that quotation from that reading and place it into your paper without using a “cited in” notation. This situation can lead to two problems:

- (1) You have claimed research that you have not really performed; and
- (2) You are taking a chance that the work you have taken this quotation from has cited it correctly.

Whenever a student finds a quotation in another work they are under an ethical obligation to go to the original source, verify the citation and context, only then listing it in a footnote or bibliography. “Quoting or referring to ideas of others through second hand information is precarious. It does not pass for research.”⁵ If they are unable to view the original source, a “cited in” reference must be used for this quotation. This is not only an ethical consideration but may well save the student from the embarrassment of perpetuating a misquotation, a quotation taken out of context or wrong information.

On this subject Ross makes five helpful points:

- Be wary of the general statements writers make about customs, manners, or general background information, especially if it is undocumented.
- Philological comments and grammatical comments need special, up-to-date, critical evaluation.
- Statistics can slant the entire argument.
- Do not assume that because a liberal wrote the book his ideas are wrong, or because a conservative wrote the book his material is all trustworthy.

³ The defenses against guilt in plagiarism based on the practices of a non-American student’s cultural background are simply not valid.

⁴ *Craft of Research*, p. 257.

⁵ Allen P. Ross. *Sharpening Your Skills in Research and Writing*. (Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.), p. 4

- If you learn to demand evidence and accuracy in the sources you read, you will begin to provide accurate, convincing evidence in what you write.⁶

Plagiarism is not limited to copying verbatim statements from a source into a paper or thesis without attribution. There is also the problem of “inadvertent plagiarism.” This occurs when the writer attempts (oft-times poorly) to simply paraphrase a quotation. Just paraphrasing a quotation (without attribution) from a source is inadequate, it is still plagiarism. For example:

Don't paraphrase a source so closely that you seem to follow the source word for word, even though the actual words differ. For example, the following would be a plagiarizing paraphrase of this paragraph:

*If you paraphrase, avoid language so similar to the source that your words correspond to its words, despite the fact that the words differ. For instance, this plagiarizes what you just read.*⁷

Inadvertent plagiarism is avoided by doing the hard work of taking research, distilling it in your mind and then writing your own thoughts, interpretations and conclusions, giving attribution as often as necessary.

Finally, there is one other type of plagiarism that must be avoided; the issue of “self plagiarism.” This type of plagiarism has its own special caveats. Self-plagiarism occurs when a student submits the same paper, or significant portions of a paper to different professors for different classes without first informing or seeking permission from the professor(s) involved. This type of plagiarism is only applicable when academic credit is sought for work that should be unique and original to an individual course.

Plagiarism is a sin that is easily avoided. Here are some simple guidelines:

1. **Give credit where credit is due—just as you would like to receive it.** Inevitably, you will use other people's discoveries and concepts. Build on them creatively. But do not compromise your honor by failing to clearly acknowledge where your work ends and that of someone else begins.
2. **Provide proper citation** for everything taken from others. These include interpretations, ideas, wording, insights, factual discoveries, charts, tables, or appendices that are not your own. Citations must **clearly and explicitly** guide the reader to the sources used, whether published, unpublished, or electronic. Cite a source **each time** you borrow from it. A single citation, concluding or followed by extended borrowing, is inadequate and misleading.
3. **Indicate all use of another's words, even if they constitute only part of a sentence, with quotation marks and specific citation.** Citations may be footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical references.
4. **Paraphrase properly.** Paraphrasing is a vehicle for conveying or explaining a source's ideas and requires a citation to the original source. It captures the source's meaning and tone in your **own** words and sentence structure. In a paraphrase, the words are yours but the ideas are not. **It cannot be used to create the impression of originality.**
5. Facts widely available in reference books, newspapers, magazines, etc., are **common knowledge** and need no citation. Facts that are not common knowledge but are derived from the work of another must be cited. **Interpretations and theories** provide an author's assessment of a set of facts and com-

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb. *The Craft of Argument* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001), p. 164.

monly embody that author's opinion. The interpretations and theories of another must be cited in footnote, endnote, or parenthetical reference.

6. Provide a citation when in doubt. Different venues have different practices; for example, footnotes are not used in memoranda or computer programs. But, regardless of practice, the distinction between what is honorable and not remains recognizable. If in doubt, ask. If still uncertain, err on the side of caution.

7. STAND ALONE CAPABILITY. There may be instances when an original, complete document/publication may be organized into manageable components (chapters, parts, cases, annexes, appendices, enclosures, etc.), which lend themselves to being used separate and apart from their parent volume. When using components from their parent publications/sources, the contributor shall make every reasonable attempt to ensure proper citation is maintained within or incorporated on the separated portion so that it can stand alone.⁸

Lastly, to avoid the temptation to the sin of plagiarism, allow for the proper amount of time to both research and write your papers. Later in this course there will be a section on the subject of "Time Management." Virtually every instance of plagiarism I have encountered has its root in either laziness or poor time management.

Misreporting

Misreporting sources or the invention of "facts" is perhaps more devious than plagiarism in that the intent to deceive is clear. Whereas the root sin of plagiarism is stealing; the root sin of misreporting is lying.

Misreporting can really take one of two forms:

1. The actual creation of a source that does not exist. This can either be an entire work or the adding to the words of a writer with an extra paragraph, sentence or phrase. The goal is to bury the misreporting in obscurity where it is hoped that it is never found.
2. The removal of a key phrase, sentence, etc., which alters or distorts the meaning of the source cited. This is sometimes accomplished with the use of an ellipsis (. . .) or just removing the offending portion. See Turabian 5.18ff for the proper use of the ellipsis.
3. Misreporting can also simply be high-handed misrepresentation of a source or set of sources. The problem in identifying this type of misreporting is that most often one must examine and/or question the motives of the researcher. This misreporting occurs when the researcher/writer either knows or should know that they are engaged in misrepresentation.

Destruction

Experience demonstrates that this is a rare occurrence in standard academic research. This type of activity is typically restricted to corporate, scientific, or governmental research where no back up material exists. However, one word of caution: due to the instability of Internet sources the researcher is wise to make a hard copy of Internet material for future reference just in case a site suddenly ceases to exist! This protects the integrity of the research and guards the integrity of the researcher.

Questionable Sources

⁸ History Department United States Naval Academy: "USNA Statement on Plagiarism." (24 March 1998). <http://www.nadn.navy.mil/History/plagiarism.html> (6 August 2003). Emphasis in the Original.

The goal of research is a search for truth, not the simple accumulation of facts to prove a thesis. In a court case if either the prosecution or defense puts forth evidence or allows testimony to be presented that they either know or have reason to believe is false, that is called subornation of perjury. This is a case where the person (or writer) is one step removed from the falsity of the statement or proposition, but nonetheless guilt is incurred.

For example, in a well-known reference work an author in an article makes a case for a particular viewpoint.⁹ That author's use of sources and her resulting conclusions have been called into question in a public forum and a paper has been presented in a scholarly forum and in print detailing the assertion and evidence.¹⁰ Additionally, this author's research and conclusions have been called into question in previous years in different areas.¹¹ That being known, it would be improper to use the article without comment in your paper. As will be discussed in section on logical fallacies, this type of comment is not a violation of the *ad Hominium* fallacy.

One of the banes of research in the last decade or so has been the Internet and the proliferation of "information" on web pages. One word of caution: self-published articles located on the web must receive careful scrutiny before using them as source material. Unlike material published in journals, or even material placed on the web by educational institutions there is often no "peer review," that is the material has not been examined by others who are skilled or expert in the area.

Inability to Rebut an Argument

In the process of research one naturally gathers details that both support and oppose one's thesis. One of the key issues in researching a thesis is the ability to have the integrity to *change or abandon* one's thesis in the face of irrefutable arguments. If, in the course of your research, you come upon an obscure source whose argument opposes your position; an argument that you cannot intellectually overcome or defeat, you cannot simply bury it or pretend it does not exist and hope that no one ever finds out.

False Caricature

This was covered briefly in the section on Logical Fallacies; however, in terms of ethics the fallacy of the *Straw Man* or *Argumentum ad Hominium* can become the more serious matter of bearing false witness. The *Straw Man* fallacy certainly has no place in scholarly writing; but when the fallacy is expanded and enhanced to the point that the reputation or character of your opponent is needlessly or unjustifiably called into question. Once an item goes into print and circulates the damage is very difficult to undo. Certainly this kind of tactic has no place in Christian scholarship.

Complexity and Simplicity

Certainly, some writers are just obtuse (as are some preachers). They can take any subject, even those that are relatively straightforward, and make it incomprehensibly complex. Additionally, some students make up for poor research by simply multiplying words. I read a thesis once that was conservatively 40% longer than it needed to be. It was mostly repetition, even to the point of using the same block quotations two or three different times. One, more creative student once turned in a paper to me that had a minimum page requirement, apparently he didn't know enough words, so he simply changed the font on the computer to 16 point type.

⁹ Cathrine Kroeger, "Head" in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downer Grove and Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 375-77.

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem. "The Meaning of ("Head"): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001), p.25-66.

¹¹ Carroll D. Osburn. "Authenteo (I Timothy 2:12). *Restoration Quarterly* 25:1 (1982)(, p. 1-12.

However, there is a difference between poor writing skills and the intentional act of masking a poor thesis (or sermon) in complex language. Conversely it is also an ethical lapse to offer vague and simplistic analysis of issues that are in reality quite complex.