



At a Crossroads: Plagiarism

by [Chris Jordan](#)

Studying long hard hours, working hard for grades, and cramming for exams are all part of being a student. For a lot of us, we have been students for most of our lives now, which makes it incredibly ironic that most of us have a very shaky understanding of what plagiarism is and what the ramifications of committing it are. The reality is that plagiarism is one of the few things that you can be expelled outright for at a university.

Most students get brief lectures about plagiarism in the first class of any course they take. If they want more information, they are usually directed to the course syllabus. That generally does not get through to students; they have many other things to worry about, and they believe that as long as they do not copy and paste someone else's work, they are fine. That is where a lot of students get into trouble. The definition of plagiarism is simply to take credit for someone else's work. As such, a lot of common study practices that students engage in could get them into trouble: working with other students, if done improperly, could lead to plagiarism.

Below are some quick tips to help you avoid plagiarism.

- **Unless the professor says you can work in groups, DON'T:** Collaborating in a course where you are not allowed to means you are submitting work that is not entirely your own.
- **If you work in groups, list who you worked with:** If you are allowed to work in groups, great. Just remember to credit your partners. Add an acknowledgments section to your paper or the header of your program and describe how they helped you.

- **Do not copy and paste when writing. THE END:** If you write an essay, it should be in your own words. That means you write your own thoughts about what you read, and you cite the source. Copying, pasting, and then rewording is not acceptable.
- **Do not give out your completed assignments:** This applies both when you are taking the class and when you have finished it. Giving your friends your assignments does not help them, and it leads to academic death.
- **Do not use lack of time as an excuse:** If you are running behind, and you just cannot get the assignment done for one reason or another, then tell the professor. Ask for an extension or just submit it as is, but do not copy and paste in order to finish on time. It is better to take a zero on an assignment than to risk being expelled.
- **Do not resubmit previously submitted work:** You cannot receive credit for a piece of work that you already submitted in another class; doing so is self-plagiarism.
- **When in doubt, ask your professor or TA:** If you are lost or confused about anything in your courses, you should talk to your professor or teaching assistant. They are paid to answer your questions, so do not feel bad about asking them.

At the end of the day, plagiarism is not dealt with effectively in most universities. A lot of it does not get reported, and there are many professors who just give a zero for an assignment, rather than go through the whole disciplinary process. As such, plagiarism is somewhat a game of Russian roulette: you might get away with it, you might get a zero on an assignment, or you might get expelled. My advice is to avoid plagiarism at all costs. It is better to take a lower mark than to plagiarize. Five years from now, no one will care what grade you got on an assignment, but they will care if you got caught plagiarizing.

If you haven't already, check your university's Web site for its plagiarism policy, and have a look at the ACM's (<http://www.acm.org/pubs/plagiarism%20policy.html>).

Biography

Chris Jordan (chris.jordan@acm.org) is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Computer Science at Dalhousie University. His research interests are information retrieval, natural language processing, and web mining. Web site: <http://www.chrisjordan.ca>