Plagiarism: What it is. How to avoid it.

I have seen a dramatic rise in the occurrence of plagiarism on essays and term papers. I believe that this stems from the ease of cutting-and-pasting from web sites, the fact that it's not always clear who authored the content of web sites, and the notion that whatever one pulls from the "ether" of the internet becomes one's own. It also doesn't help that there are so many role models for unethical behavior … in business, in politics, and yes, even in academia. This disturbing trend notwithstanding, I choose to believe that most students will avoid plagiarism if

1) they understand fully what it is,
2) they understand that it is unethical, and (if the ethics card doesn't turn the trick)
3) they understand that one can get kicked out of university for egregious plagiarism

I prefer to emphasize doing the right thing for its own sake.

With this in mind, I want to ensure that no student leaves my class without understanding this issue. On the flip side is a definition of plagiarism from the UW web site…it has good, essential information. Below are some of my recommendations for developing good habits to avoid plagiarism:

• If you are asked to write an essay in any class, it is assumed that you will engage your brain and write your thoughts in your own words. The purpose of an essay assignment is to get you to gather information and develop ideas, not to test your cut-and-paste skills.

• Avoid cutting and pasting altogether. Once you have imported someone else's verbiage into your document, it is difficult to escape the wording and structure they used. Sometimes you may even forget that you copied the text directly. If you TAKE NOTES from the web sites and articles you read, and WRITE FROM YOUR NOTES, you will be much less likely to make this mistake.

• If you use ideas or data from another person, you need to acknowledge the source with a citation, even if you rewrite it in your own words.

• The purpose of a citation is
  1) to give credit to the original author of an idea, and
  2) to let the reader(s) know where they can go to get more information, should your essay inspire interest and curiosity about your topic

• If you find text that says perfectly what you want to say, and you can not imagine any way to improve on it, you may use it IF you put it in quotes and cite your source. As a general rule of thumb, you should limit your use of direct quotes to no more than 10% of the total essay or paper.

Let's look at an example. Suppose the following statement appears in an essay, without any citation:

*Over more than 20 years of research, scientists have yet to observe a killer whale moving from one resident pod to another.*

This says to the reader: this is my idea/conclusion (based on reading 20 years worth of literature?).

*Over more than 20 years of research, scientists have yet to observe a killer whale moving from one resident pod to another* (Bower, 2000)

This says to the reader: this idea/info came from another author, Bower, but the words are my own. The sources should then appear in a Reference List at the end of your essay or paper.

"*Over more than 20 years of research, scientists have yet to observe a killer whale moving from one resident pod to another.*" (Bower, 2000)

This says to the reader: These are Mr. Bower's words (which in fact they are).

CITATION STYLES: Here’s an example of style commonly used in academia to cite a printed source:

Many web sites don’t tell you the name of the author or date that the article/site was posted. If they do, include those in the citation. If they don’t, simply give the complete web address in your reference list.

The following text is from UW's web site, section on academic misconduct:
http://www.uwtc.washington.edu/courses/tc231/course_info/plagiarism.html

Plagiarism

One of the most common forms of cheating is plagiarism, using another's words or ideas without proper citation. When students plagiarize, they usually do so in one of the following six ways:

1. Using another writer's words without proper citation. If you use another writer's words, you must place quotation marks around the quoted material and include a footnote or other indication of the source of the quotation.

2. Using another writer's ideas without proper citation. When you use another author's ideas, you must indicate with footnotes or other means where this information can be found. Your instructors want to know which ideas and judgments are yours and which you arrived at by consulting other sources. Even if you arrived at the same judgment on your own, you need to acknowledge that the writer you consulted also came up with the idea.

3. Citing your source but reproducing the exact words of a printed source without quotation marks. This makes it appear that you have paraphrased rather than borrowed the author's exact words.

4. Borrowing the structure of another author's phrases or sentences without crediting the author from whom it came. This kind of plagiarism usually occurs out of laziness: it is easier to replicate another writer's style than to think about what you have read and then put it in your own words. The following example is from A Writer's Reference by Diana Hacker (New York, 1989, p. 171).

   Original: If the existence of a signing ape was unsettling for linguists, it was also startling news for animal behaviorists.

   Unacceptable borrowing of words: An ape who knew sign language unsettled linguists and startled animal behaviorists.

   Unacceptable borrowing of sentence structure: If the presence of a sign-language-using chimp was disturbing for scientists studying language, it was also surprising to scientists studying animal behavior.

   Acceptable paraphrase: When they learned of an ape's ability to use sign language, both linguists and animal behaviorists were taken by surprise.

5. Borrowing all or part of another student's paper or using someone else's outline to write your own paper.

6. Using a paper writing "service" or having a friend write the paper for you. Regardless of whether you pay a stranger or have a friend do it, it is a breach of academic honesty to hand in work that is not your own or to use parts of another student's paper.

You may think that citing another author's work will lower your grade. In some unusual cases this may be true, if your instructor has indicated that you must write your paper without reading additional material. But in fact, as you progress in your studies, you will be expected to show that you are familiar with important work in your field and can use this work to further your own thinking. Your professors write this kind of paper all the time. The key to avoiding plagiarism is that you show clearly where your own thinking ends and someone else's begins.