



Plagiarism -- What it is, how to avoid it

Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work as your own.

That can be as plain as cutting-and-pasting a sentence from a website into your story. That's like looking over someone else's shoulder during a test and copying their answers. When that happens, you know you did it, and you know it wasn't right.

But it also includes taking ideas, even if you didn't copy the exact words. For instance:

The original source says:

Although Red Cloud was one of the most celebrated of the Oglalas, the facts of his early life, including the date and place of his birth, are obscure. All that can be said with some certainty is that he was born near the forks of the Platte River in 1821 or 1822.

-- Encyclopedia of North American Indians

Unfair use (plagiarism)

Despite being one of the most famous Oglalas, the facts of Red Cloud's early life, including the date and place of his birth, are obscure. All we know for sure is that he was born near the Platte River forks, either in 1821 or in 1822.

This is just repeating what was in the encyclopedia with a few small changes in the wording.

Good use of a source

Nobody knows just when or where Red Cloud was born. But the Encyclopedia of North American Indians says the famous Oglala chief was most likely born in 1821 or 1822, near the place where the North and South Platte rivers meet. That would put his birthplace near the present-day city of North Platte, Nebraska.

The writer changes the words, but also gives the source and adds new information to the passage.

Double-check your facts

You don't have to provide a source for basic, well-known facts. It's not copying anyone to write that Denver is the capital of Colorado. But beware of "facts" that aren't well known. Double-check things like the height of a mountain to make sure two or three sources agree. Besides, if you only look one place, maybe they mis-typed some digits. If you give the exact same "fact," not only are you wrong, but people may know where you got your information, and that, in a way, you stole it.

Having a ghostwriter -- even one who loves you -- is also a form of plagiarism

It's a good idea to let someone have a look at your work and make suggestions. But if having them "make suggestions" turns into having them "re-write your story," it isn't really your work anymore.