

## **Avoiding Plagiarism When Using Sources**

According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, to “plagiarize” means:

- 1) to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own;
- 2) to use (another's production) without crediting the source;
- 3) to commit literary theft; or
- 4) to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else’s work and pretending it was your own. Some plagiarism is clearly intentional. Taking an entire paper from the Internet and putting your name on top of it is an obvious example. Not all cases are as clear-cut, though, because not everyone who plagiarizes means to do so. Did you know that the following are also considered plagiarism?

- ⊗ Failing to put a quotation in quotation marks, even if you cite the source.
- ⊗ Giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation, such as saying that a statistic from one book is actually from another.
- ⊗ Making up a quotation or statistic and then citing an imaginary source.
- ⊗ Paraphrasing a source’s info or ideas completely in your own words yet failing to cite that source.
- ⊗ Copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not.

Many faculty members, university administrations, and publishers do not make a distinction between intentional and accidental plagiarism, and the consequences can include failure of the assignment or the course, academic probation, and professional disgrace. The best way to avoid a plagiarism charge is careful, thorough citation. Whether paraphrasing an idea or quoting directly from the text, you should include all necessary attributions required by your discipline’s style guide (APA, MLA, etc.). You should likewise *never* fabricate evidence.

### **The Common Knowledge Exception**

The only time that you do not need to cite facts or definitions is if they are considered common knowledge AND you have put them in your own words. In order for something to be considered common knowledge, it needs to pass ALL of the following three tests:

- ✓ The fact or definition must be a fairly simple, discrete piece of information.
- ✓ The fact or definition must be something that is widely known and can be found in multiple sources. It cannot be someone’s interpretation, theory, or analysis.
- ✓ The fact or definition must be presented in your own words.

That Benjamin Franklin was born in 1706, for example, is a well-known fact found in many sources. It is “common knowledge” and does not need to be cited. A detailed description of an event from his childhood that you read about in his autobiography, however, is not a “discrete piece of information” and must be cited, even if the facts are somewhat widely known.

## Paraphrase, Plagiarism, or Common Knowledge?

The following excerpt is from Ross Gay's "Some Thoughts on Mercy," an essay originally published in *The Sun Magazine* in July 2013. Read the source material closely, then analyze whether the sample student writing below is guilty of plagiarism and why.

Our current prison system, and the "drug war" that is responsible for that system's status as the largest in the world, actively cultivates the same story of a unique criminal blackness. I put "drug war" in quotes, because, as Michelle Alexander points out in her brilliant book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, if there were a true War on Drugs, then "people of all colors, ... who use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates," would be incarcerated at very nearly the same rate. But that's not the case.

Alexander's book is an incisive analysis of how the drug war has specifically targeted African American men, saddling huge numbers with ex-felon status, which makes employment, voting, housing, education, and more nearly impossible: in other words, effectively reinstating Jim Crow. Among her most striking observations is that in 1981, when President Ronald Reagan declared that he was "running up a battle flag" in the War on Drugs, fewer than 2 percent of the American public viewed drugs as the most important issue facing the nation. That figure jumped to 64 percent in 1989, thanks largely to a sensational (and racist) media campaign. She also points out that the police could make numerous drug arrests by raiding the fraternities and sororities at colleges, but for the most part they don't, because those students are not viewed as criminals: they're just kids who use drugs.

- A)** The United States has declared a War on Drugs, but if drugs were really the target of this war then people of all ethnicities would be arrested in fairly equal numbers, since drug use is equally prevalent among all groups in America. African Americans, however, are disproportionately likely to be arrested for drug-related crimes.
- B)** Writers like Michelle Alexander and Ross Gay have pointed out how African Americans are disproportionately more likely to be arrested for drug-related offense in the so-called "War on Drugs" despite using and selling drugs at similar rates as people of other ethnicities (Gay 6).
- C)** Ronald Reagan was president in 1981 when the War on Drugs began.
- D)** Fewer than 2 percent of Americans thought drugs were an important problem when the War on Drugs began in 1981, but eight years later 64 percent thought drugs were a pressing concern.
- E)** Secondly, I believe the War on Drugs was racist. The enemy in this war was supposedly the drugs, but the war was fought by arresting drug dealers and users who were mostly African American. Not all drug users are black, though. White college students are just as likely to smoke weed, snort Adderall, or take painkillers they haven't been prescribed, yet they're far less likely to be arrested for it. When the War on Drugs began, most Americans didn't even think that drugs were an important problem, but racist media campaigns that depicted "black criminality" led Americans to believe that drugs were one of the most destructive things in the country. (Gay 6)
- F)** The "War on Drugs" has had its most costly effects on African American men, saddling many of them with ex-felon status, which makes employment, voting, housing, education, etc. much more difficult (Gay 6).
- G)** According to Ross Gay, 46% of Americans thought drugs were a serious problem for the country in 1988 (Gay 6).

## Paraphrase, Plagiarism, or Common Knowledge?

**A)** The United States has declared a War on Drugs, but if drugs were really the target of this war then people of all ethnicities would be arrested in fairly equal numbers, since drug use is equally prevalent among all groups in America. African Americans, however, are disproportionately likely to be arrested for drug-related crimes.

This is plagiarism. Although the words and sentence structure are an original paraphrase, the ideas have been lifted from Ross Gay (and his source, Michelle Alexander) without being cited.

**B)** Writers like Michelle Alexander and Ross Gay have pointed out how African Americans are disproportionately more likely to be arrested for drug-related offense in the so-called “War on Drugs” despite using and selling drugs at similar rates as people of other ethnicities (Gay 6).

This is an acceptable paraphrase. The words have been changed, and the writer has included both an in-text citation and a clear attribution to where the ideas came from.

**C)** Ronald Reagan was president in 1981 when the War on Drugs began.

This is common knowledge and doesn’t need to be cited. These discrete facts about two well-known things that happened in 1981 can be easily remembered and are found in many sources.

**D)** Fewer than 2 percent of Americans thought drugs were an important problem when the War on Drugs began in 1981, but eight years later 64 percent thought drugs were a pressing concern.

This is plagiarism. Statistics are complex bits of data, and they must always be cited.

**E)** Secondly, I believe the War on Drugs was racist. The enemy in this war was supposedly the drugs, but the war was fought by arresting drug dealers and users who were mostly African American. Not all drug users are black, though. White college students are just as likely to smoke weed, snort Adderall, or take painkillers they haven’t been prescribed, yet they’re far less likely to be arrested for it. When the War on Drugs began, most Americans didn’t even think that drugs were an important problem, but racist media campaigns that depicted “black criminality” led Americans to believe that drugs were one of the most destructive things in the country. (Gay 6)

This is plagiarism. The wording is unique and a citation is included at the end, but the majority of these ideas have been taken directly from the source and presented as the writer’s own. Very little of this paragraph includes original thinking.

**F)** The “War on Drugs” has had its most costly effects on African American men, saddling many of them with ex-felon status, which makes employment, voting, housing, education, etc. much more difficult (Gay 6).

This is plagiarism. Words have been taken directly from the source without being put in quotation marks.

**G)** According to Ross Gay, 46% of Americans thought drugs were a serious problem for the country in 1988 (Gay 6).

This is plagiarism. It may be an accidental typo, but the numbers referenced do not accurately reflect the statistics included in the source. This would be especially bad if the writer used the mistaken evidence to prove a point that would be contradicted by the real facts.