Collaboration, Plagiarism, and Proper Attribution

Jamie Andrews
January 2000

This document is about collaboration and plagiarism, especially as it relates to graduate students. It will help you avoid charges of plagiarism and collaboration that could have serious consequences on your academic career.

1 Collaboration, Plagiarism and their Penalties

Plagiarism basically consists of taking someone else’s written material and presenting it as if you wrote it. It includes, but is not limited to: taking a fellow student’s code or written work and presenting it as your own with only minor modification; and taking written material from books, articles or web sites and including it in your own document without proper attribution. When two or more people collaborate in writing code or text and then each presents it as their own individual work with only minor modification, it is referred to as collaboration. Collaboration is considered to be equivalent to plagiarism; in this document, references to plagiarism will include collaboration unless otherwise stated.

Plagiarism rarely results in criminal prosecution, but it is considered to be serious misconduct in academic circles. At the level of professors and professional researchers, plagiarism can destroy careers [Koc99]. At the level of a Masters’ or PhD thesis or project report, plagiarism can definitely be a reason for failing the degree. Even at the level of undergraduate courses, plagiarism results in a mark of zero on the assignment and an additional deduction of marks.

Plagiarism is totally unacceptable at the graduate level, and should result in significant penalties at least equal to what is assessed at an undergraduate level.

2 Avoiding Collaboration and Plagiarism

If an assignment or project is explicitly labelled as something to be done in groups, then more than one person can work on it, as long as all the collaborators are explicitly stated as authors. However, on individual assignments and projects, collaborative plagiarism (where two people contribute to something but each presents it as their own work with minor modification) is considered to merit the same penalty as one person copying the other’s work. The rest of this section refers only to individual assignments and projects.

It’s OK to ask for help from a friend. However, this help must not extend to copying code or written text that your friend has written, or that you and your friend have written together. We are assessing you on the basis of what you are able to do by yourself.
It’s OK to help a friend. However, this help must not extend to providing your friend with code or written text. If you are found to have done so, a penalty will be assessed against you as well, since we want to do everything we can to discourage plagiarism.

It’s OK to read books, magazine and journal articles and web sites, and get inspiration from them. This is in fact one of the most important activities in doing research. However, this must not extend to copying text and presenting it as if it is your own, even if you make modifications to the text that you copy. In addition to being plagiarism, this practice usually results in hard-to-read, fragmented text that refers to concepts and terms which are not defined within the document.

3 Attributing Quotations Properly

It is certainly possible to include text from another article or web site in your written text – in fact, academics do this all the time – but the quotations from the other writers must be properly attributed.

There are two accepted methods for attributing quotations. For a quotation which takes up two lines or fewer of text, put the quotation in quotation marks ("“ at the start, (") at the end) and place a citation at the end of the quotation. For example:

One of the most important attributes of objects is inheritance, “the sharing of attributes and operations among classes based on a hierarchical relationship” [RBP+91]. Another is polymorphism....

The citation should refer to something in the bibliography, as it does in this document.

For a passage longer than two lines, indent the quoted text separate from your own text, and include a citation at the end of the quoted text. For example:

Rumbaugh’s description of the characteristics of a class are as follows.

Each class describes a possibly infinite set of individual objects. Each object is said to be an instance of its class. Each instance of the class has its own value for each attribute but shares the attribute names and operations with other instances of the class. [RBP+91]

This description differs from Jacobson’s in some ways....

Usually this method of quotation is done because the author wants to analyze it in some way. This method of quotation is therefore rare in computer science.

Either of these methods of quotation will avoid a charge of plagiarism. Of course, if you have too many quotations, and they make up too much of your text, your work will not be highly regarded because you will not have provided enough of your own work in your text; however, you will at least have avoided the more serious charge of plagiarism.
Mathematical definitions (definitions of general mathematical concepts needed for a proof) are usually considered exempt from the above restrictions. If you need to refer to a mathematical definition, it’s considered acceptable to simply repeat it directly, as long as it’s obvious from context where you got it from.

Finally, it’s considered acceptable to take sentences or even paragraphs from your own work and put them directly into other papers. This is standard practice for turning a conference paper into a journal paper, or a thesis proposal into a thesis, for instance. If too much of a published paper is taken from another published paper, however, this may be considered misconduct, or at least a reason to reject the paper for publication.

4 Examples of Plagiarism

To clarify the above, let me give some negative examples, examples of things that would be considered plagiarism. I will end each with the word (PLAGIARISM) to emphasize that these are not acceptable. All examples plagiarize [RBP+91], the book quoted in the last section.

Obviously, it is not acceptable to simply drop someone else’s text into your text without attribution; for example:

One of the most important attributes of objects is inheritance, the sharing of attributes and operations among classes based on a hierarchical relationship. Another is polymorphism... (PLAGIARISM)

It is not even acceptable to drop someone else’s text into your own text, without quotation marks, and then follow it by a reference; for example:

One of the most important attributes of objects is inheritance, the sharing of attributes and operations among classes based on a hierarchical relationship [RBP+91]. Another is polymorphism... (PLAGIARISM)

This is still plagiarism because it still looks like you wrote it yourself, and are merely referring to the work cited. You need the quotation marks to point out the text that was taken from elsewhere.

It is, of course, not acceptable to merely drop whole sections of someone else’s text into yours. It is also considered plagiarism to take someone else’s text and simply rephrase parts of it; for example:

Each class describes possibly an infinite set of individual objects. We say that each object is an instance of its class. Each instance of the class has a value of its own for each attribute, but it has the same attribute names and operations as other instances of the class. (PLAGIARISM)
If you are going to do so much rephrasing on a piece of text that it becomes not easily recognizable as plagiarism, you might as well just write your own sentences. The chance that you want to say exactly what another author has said in a particular place in your text is virtually zero; if you do, you can attribute the quotation properly, as described above.

References
