

Statement on Plagiarism--from the American Historical Association  
(Adopted May, 1986; amended May 1990, May 1993, May 1995, and January 2002\*)

## 1. Identifying Plagiarism

The word plagiarism derives from Latin roots: *plagiarius*, an abductor, and *plagiare*, to steal. The expropriation of another author's text, and the presentation of it as one's own, constitutes plagiarism and is a serious violation of the ethics of scholarship. It undermines the credibility of historical inquiry.

In addition to the harm that plagiarism does to the pursuit of truth, can also be an offense against the literary rights of the original author and the property rights of the copyright owner. Detection can therefore result not only in academic sanctions (such as dismissal from a graduate program, termination of a faculty contract, or denial of promotion or tenure) but in legal action as well. As a practical matter, plagiarism between scholars rarely goes to court, in part because legal concepts, such as infringement of copyright, are narrower than ethical standards that guide professional conduct. The real penalty for plagiarism is the abhorrence of the community of scholars.

Plagiarism includes more subtle and perhaps more pernicious abuses than simply expropriating the exact wording of another author without attribution. Plagiarism also includes the limited borrowing, without attribution, of another person's distinctive and significant research findings, hypotheses, theories, rhetorical strategies, or interpretations, or an extended borrowing even with attribution. Of course, historical knowledge is cumulative, and thus in some contexts—such as textbooks, encyclopedia articles, or broad syntheses—the form of attribution, and the permissible extent of dependence on prior scholarship, citation and other forms of attribution will differ from what is expected in more limited monographs. As knowledge is disseminated to a wide public, it loses some of its personal reference. What belongs to whom becomes less distinct. But even in textbooks a historian should acknowledge the sources of recent or distinctive findings and interpretations, those not yet a part of the common understanding of the profession, and should never simply borrow and rephrase the findings of other scholars.

Plagiarism, then, takes many forms. The clearest abuse is the use of another's language without quotation marks and citation. More subtle abuses include the appropriation of concepts, data, or notes all disguised in newly crafted sentences, or reference to a borrowed work in an early note and then extensive further use without attribution. All such tactics reflect an unworthy disregard for the contributions of others.

## 2. Resisting Plagiarism

All who participate in the community of inquiry, as amateurs or as professionals, as students or as established historians, have an obligation to oppose deception. This obligation bears with special weight on the directors of graduate seminars. They are critical in shaping a young historian's perception of the ethics of scholarship. It is therefore incumbent on graduate teachers to seek opportunities for making the seminar

also a workshop in scholarly integrity. After leaving graduate school, every historian will have to depend primarily on vigilant selfcriticism. Throughout our lives none of us can cease to question the claims our work makes and the sort of credit it grants to others.

But just as important as the selfcriticism that guards us from selfdeception is the formation of work habits that protect a scholar from plagiarism. The plagiarist's standard defense—that he or she was misled by hastily taken and imperfect notes—is plausible only in the context of a wider tolerance of shoddy work. A basic rule of good note-taking requires every researcher to distinguish scrupulously between exact quotation and paraphrase. A basic rule of good writing warns us against following our own paraphrased notes slavishly. When a historian simply links one paraphrase to the next, even if the sources are cited, a kind of structural misuse takes place; the writer is implicitly claiming a shaping intelligence that actually belonged to the sources. Faced with charges of failing to acknowledge dependence on certain sources, a historian usually pleads that the lapse was inadvertent. This excuse will be easily disposed of if scholars take seriously the injunction to check their manuscripts against the underlying texts prior to publication.

The second line of defense against plagiarism is organized and punitive. Every institution that includes or represents a body of scholars has an obligation to establish procedures designed to clarify and uphold their ethical standards. Every institution that employs historians bears an especially critical responsibility to maintain the integrity and reputation of its staff. This applies to government agencies, corporations, publishing firms, and public service organizations such as museums and libraries, as surely as it does to educational facilities. Usually, it is the employing institution that is expected to investigate charges of plagiarism promptly and impartially and to invoke appropriate sanctions when the charges are sustained. Penalties for scholarly misconduct should vary according to the seriousness of the offense, and the protections of due process should always apply. A persistent pattern of deception may justify public disclosure or even termination of an academic career; some scattered misappropriations may warrant only a formal reprimand.

All historians share responsibility for maintenance of the highest standards of intellectual integrity. When appraising manuscripts for publication, reviewing books, or evaluating peers for placement, promotion, and tenure, scholars must evaluate the honesty and reliability with which the historian uses primary and secondary source materials. Scholarship flourishes in an atmosphere of openness and candor, which should include the scrutiny and discussion of academic deception.

\*This statement is based on an earlier version prepared by John Higham (Johns Hopkins University) and Robert L. Zangrando (University of Akron).