

Composition Project: Writing a Famous Plagiarist Report

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Introduction

This free pdf download describes a composition assignment that I have used successfully during my years of teaching at Ohio University.

Other teachers are welcome to download and read this pdf file and decide whether this assignment will work in their classes.

The pdf file is divided into two main sections following this brief introduction.

First is a description of the assignment. Of course, teachers can modify the assignment as they wish.

Following that are some examples of plagiarist reports written by students. Teachers may print them and use them as examples for their students. One way to get good writing from students is to show them good work written by other students. Of course, the authors of the plagiarist reports own the copyright to what they have written. I thank them for giving me permission to use their work in this pdf file.

Note: Currently, the MLA is in the process of changing how to write an MLA-style Works Cited list.

Note: Some of the student papers are very careful in citing sources, and even cite common knowledge.

Assign the Project

Recommendations

- Check out <<http://www.famousplagiarists.com/>>. This is an excellent site for finding out about famous plagiarists.
- Go to <slate.com> and search for “plagiarism.” Many articles will appear.

Teacher’s Expectations

What are your teacher’s expectations for the plagiarist report?

- You will keep up with the reading. In addition, you will talk in class.
- You will start writing this plagiarist report at least three days before it is due.
- You will spend at least five hours on this paper.
- You will revise this plagiarist report at least once.
- You will bring a good, complete, typed draft to the peer review session.
- You will get feedback on your plagiarist report during the peer review session.
- You will get feedback on your plagiarist report from at least one other person outside of class.
- You will proofread this plagiarist report at least twice.
- You will run a spelling check on the final draft of your plagiarist report.

The Project

Assign: Mandatory report. You will a report using MLA format about a plagiarist of your choice.

- You will need at least five reference sources; list them in a Works Cited List using the MLA format.
- Write 800 to 2,000 words.
- Remember to double-space your papers.
- Remember to hand in your early drafts.

Notes:

- Do not cite <wikipedia.com>. This site may be a good place to look for ideas, but it is an unreliable source. As you know, anyone can edit <wikipedia.com> and so any idiot can edit <wikipedia.com>. However, you may use <wikipedia.com> as a starting point to get some names of *possible* plagiarists to research at better-quality sites, although you will not use <wikipedia.com> as a source. That is, you will not cite <wikipedia.com>, and you will not put <wikipedia.com> in your Works Cited list. Since anyone can edit <wikipedia.com>, someone may list the name of a non-plagiarist as a plagiarist simply to make trouble for that person.

- Do check out <<http://www.famousplagiarists.com/>>. This is an excellent site for finding out about famous plagiarists.
- It's a good idea to define plagiarism in your report.
- Give some biographical details about the plagiarist.
- Identify what the plagiarism consisted of. Whose work did the plagiarist steal? Did the plagiarist copy word for word the work of someone else without giving that person credit? Did the plagiarist paraphrase the work of someone else without giving that person credit?
- What happened to the plagiarist, if anything?
- Of course, proofread your work carefully.
- Of course, avoid plagiarism in your report about a famous plagiarist.

Why Wikipedia is Not a Good Source

Example #1

The Pop-Tarts page is often aflutter. Pop-Tarts, it says as of today (February 8, 2008), were discontinued in Australia in 2005. Maybe that's true. Before that it said that Pop-Tarts were discontinued in Korea. Before that Australia. Several days ago it said: "Pop-Tarts is german for Little Iced Pastry O' Germany." Other things I learned from earlier versions: More than two trillion Pop-Tarts are sold each year. George Washington invented them. They were developed in the early 1960s in China. Popular flavors are "frosted strawberry, frosted brown sugar cinnamon, and semen." Pop-Tarts are a "flat Cookie." No: "Pop-Tarts are a flat Pastry, KEVIN MCCORMICK is a FRIGGIN LOSER notto mention a queer inch." No: "A Pop-Tart is a flat condom." Once last fall the whole page was replaced with "NIPPLES AND BROCCOLI!!!!!"

Source: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21131>
Volume 55, Number 4 · March 20, 2008

Example #2

Will Harris: I heard that you recorded a second solo album; is that still kind of in limbo as far as getting a release?

Ian Astbury: Um...I haven't recorded a second solo album.

Will Harris: Oh, okay. Dammit, I know you can't trust Wikipedia, but on Wikipedia, there is a report that you had recorded a second solo album that is just sitting in limbo waiting.

Ian Astbury: Wikipedia is the worst propaganda bullshit. It is so wrong on so many accounts.

Will Harris: Yeah, and I get burned every damned time I do any research on there, and I don't know why I keep going back to it.

Ian Astbury: Because it's there in front of us, and that's just us as human beings. We just don't look any further than the end of our noses.

Will Harris: Well, that is true.

Ian Astbury: That's why the culture is in such a shitty situation. We believe what we see and read and hear, so...I don't know.

Will Harris: Well, I'm notoriously naive, so that might have something to do with it in this case.

Source: Will Harris: A Chat with *Ian Astbury*, lead singer of *The Cult* (bullz-eye.com)
http://www.bullz-eye.com/music/interviews/2007/ian_astbury.htm
November 30, 2007

Example #3

Will Harris: Was the appearance on “Celebrity Duets” what led you to end up appearing on “Dancing with the Stars”?

Alfonso Ribeiro: I’ve never done on “Dancing with the Stars.”

Will Harris: (*Laughs sheepishly*) You know, I’ve learned from experience that I can’t always trust Wikipedia, but my odds are usually better with IMDb.

AR: Well, IMDb...I personally think that IMDB and some of those Wikipedia things are absolutely ridiculous, because I have been trying to write in to them and tell them, “I didn’t *do* this,” and they never change it. Like, supposedly, my parents are from the Dominican Republic. My parents are from Trinidad and Tobago! (*Writer’s note: As penance for my egregious error, I have duly removed Ribeiro’s name from Wikipedia’s List of People from the Dominican Republic.*) So they’re not always correct. But, no, all that I did was, I went on and hung out with my buddy Joey Fatone, who was currently doing the show. So I went and was sitting in the audience. That’s all I did.

Will Harris: Well, if it’s any consolation, they *did* have you appearing on the show through Round 9.

Alfonso Ribeiro: (*Sarcastically*) Wow. Yeah, because I guess I was there through Round 9 to watch my buddy. But I didn’t collect a paycheck, so I don’t know how it’s considered work.

Will Harris: You got me. And I can’t get them to change anything at IMDb, either, for what it’s worth.

Source: Will Harris: A Chat with Alfonso Ribeiro
http://www.bullz-eye.com/television/interviews/2008/alfonso_ribeiro.htm
 Date Downloaded: 21 August 2008

Example #4

I occasionally teach a Great Books (Humanities) course at Ohio University. In one class I was teaching Dante’s *Inferno*. While I was grading papers, I noticed that the same factual error appeared in some of the papers. At first I thought that I had taught my students something that was incorrect, but I checked my lecture notes and they were correct. I then checked the Wikipedia article on Dante’s *Inferno*. Sure enough, it contained the error. The error was corrected in a day or two, but that was too late to help my students.

Is It Ethical to Plagiarize?

- What would happen if everyone were to do what you are thinking of doing?

If everyone plagiarizes papers, the professor will think of another way to have students write papers that are not plagiarized. For example, a professor friend of mine recently stopped giving take-home exams (the answers to which were sometimes plagiarized) and started giving in-class essay exams. There is a contradiction here. The student makes the rule “I will plagiarize my paper,” but if every student follows the rule, soon it will become impossible to plagiarize. Students will no longer have the opportunity to learn how to write papers outside of class—this kind of writing is a job skill. Alternatively, if everyone in a course that requires papers (such as a composition course) plagiarizes, then everyone will receive lower grades, perhaps even F’s.

- Would you want done to you what you are thinking of doing to other people?

Suppose the student writes a truly excellent paper, then later finds out that the professor has plagiarized the paper and published it in a journal. Of course, now the student is unable to publish the paper that the student wrote because the student will be accused of plagiarizing the professor’s paper. Is this fair?

- What are the consequences of the action you are thinking about doing?

One consequence, of course, is that the student will learn much less than the student would have learned if the student had actually done the work. It also means that parents and taxpayers are getting a poor return on the money that they are paying for the student’s education. Also, a teacher who has been overwhelmed with cases of plagiarism may think of leaving the education field in order to pursue a lucrative and exciting career as an international jewel thief. In addition, if lots of students plagiarize at Ohio University, then OU will become known as the Plagiarism School, and the value of a degree from OU will be lessened. Finally, being caught plagiarizing can result in a grade of F for the paper, a grade of F for the course, and/or referral to OU Judiciaries.

- When is it ethical to use someone else’s words and ideas?

Of course, the correct answer is when the student gives credit to the other person.

- Suppose someone plagiarizes an excellent communication created by an experienced professional working in the field and that communication receives an A. What happens to the student-written papers that would have normally received an A?

The standard for an A in the course is likely to go up. If the plagiarized paper gets an A, then the student-written papers that would have normally received an A may receive grades of A- or lower.

How to Write a Research Report on a Famous Plagiarist

Step 1: Understand the Assignment

The first thing, of course, is to understand the assignment. Ask the teacher about the length of the paper. Also review how many sources you need to cite in your report and list in your Works Cited list. As you should know, you will be using the MLA format, and your teacher will be your reader.

Step 2: Read Some Good Sample Research Reports

It is always a good idea to read some good examples of the communication you will write. You may be able to pick up some good ideas for your own paper. Also, knowing that other students have written good research papers on famous plagiarists will help you know that you can also write a good research report on a famous plagiarist.

Step 3: Pick a Famous Plagiarist to Research

You should pick one or two famous plagiarists to research. The second plagiarist is your backup topic in case you can't enough information on your first topic. Go to <famousplagiarists.com> and see if anyone looks interesting.

Step 4: Outline Your Report

It may seem unusual to outline your report at this point, but if you know the kinds of information you are going to need for your report, then you can limit your research to those kinds of information. Knowing that your reader is your teacher can help you to know what should be the content of your paper. For example, you know that your teacher wants you to know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, and so it is a good idea to define plagiarism and to explain how to avoid committing plagiarism. Of course, you also know the other things that need to be in your report: biographical information about the famous plagiarist, the evidence that famous plagiarist committed plagiarism, and what happened to the famous plagiarist as a result of the plagiarism. Here is an outline that you might use:

- Introduction: Introduces the Topic
- Definition of Plagiarism and Information About How to Avoid Committing Plagiarism
- Background Information About the Famous Plagiarist
- Evidence That the Plagiarist Committed Plagiarism
- What Happened to the Plagiarist as a Result of the Plagiarism

The outline above has five sections, but that doesn't mean that you must limit yourself to five paragraphs. The section that gives evidence that the famous plagiarist committed plagiarism may be more than one or two paragraphs long.

Step 5: Do the Research

When you do the research, do more than simply Google the name of the famous plagiarist and the word “Plagiarism.” Spend time in your school library learning about such databases as Academic Search Premier and LexisNexis Academic. Google will return many, many hits, some very good and some very bad. Academic Search Premier and LexisNexis Academic will have already weeded out many very bad hits, leaving behind the good stuff. With many databases, you may email what you have found to yourself. At home, you may then print out the articles, etc.

Step 6: Become Familiar with What You Have Researched

Read over what you have researched. Highlight the important points. Note especially the content, such as the evidence of plagiarism, and the quotations you will use when you draft your report. Make sure that you have enough sources and enough content to write your report.

Step 7: Write the Draft

Of course, you will need to write a first draft. Write as well as you can, being aware, of course, that you can revise what you wrote to make it better.

Step 8: Double-check In-Text Citations

This is the first of a number of steps to make sure that you know how to format a research paper and cite sources accurately. The MLA format uses in-text citations. For example, if you have a quotation or a paraphrase, the information that identifies the source of that quotation or paraphrase will follow it in parentheses. Usually, that information will be the author’s last name and the page number. Sometimes, no author name is given in the source, so you will use one or a few words to indicate the source’s title. Sometimes, the source does not have page numbers, so you won’t be able to put them in your in-text citation. Be aware that short quotations (four or fewer lines) and long quotations (five or more lines) of prose are formatted differently. Short quotations appear as part of a paragraph that you have written. Long quotations are set off in indented block style.

Note: If the sources do not have page numbers, no page numbers will, of course, appear in the in-text citations.

Note: Use the word “sic” to point out a mistake that appears in the original source. This lets the reader know that you did not make that mistake. For example, we should italicize the titles of books and movies, but often WWW sources don’t do that.

Step 9: Double-check Common Knowledge

Common knowledge is knowledge that is widely known and that appears in many reference sources. For example, “John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963” is common knowledge. Common knowledge does not need to be cited. Double-check your report to make sure that you have cited everything that needs to be cited.

Note: Even when knowledge is common, the words in which is expressed can be plagiarized. For example, the definition of the word “plagiarism” is common knowledge, but you can’t just steal a definition from a dictionary. If you take a definition of “plagiarism” word for word from a definition, you need to cite the dictionary. However, if you write your own definition of “plagiarism” using your own words, you do not need to cite that.

Step 10: Double-check Introductions to Quotations

Don’t just stick quotations into your paper. Introduce them.

Here is an example of an introduction to a long quotation:

According to the Merriam-Webster’s On-Line Dictionary, to plagiarize is “to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one’s own” (Plagiarism.org 2008).

Here is an example of an introduction to a long quotation:

Dr. Thomas J. Schaeper of the History Department of St. Bonaventure University gives us this specific example of the similarities between Haley’s novel and Courlander’s novel:

This passage appears in Courlander’s book: ‘He must hear what the farmer cannot hear. He must smell what others cannot smell . . . his eyes must pierce the darkness.’ The following appears in *Roots*: ‘He must hear what others cannot, smell what others cannot. He must see through the darkness.’ Haley defended himself by saying the hundreds of similar passages were the result of sloppy notetaking; he claimed that he simply forgot what were Courlander’s phrases and what were his own. (“Plagiarism”)

Note: Long quotations are often introduced by an independent clause that ends with a colon.

Step 11: Double-check MLA Format for Quotations

Remember, short quotations of prose have four or fewer lines. Long quotations of prose have five or more lines. Short quotations of prose are part of the sentence in which they appear. Long

quotations of prose are set off by themselves in block style. That means that they are indented more than you indent the beginnings of paragraphs.

Step 12: Double-check the Works Cited List

Currently, we are in a transition period between the old MLA format for Works Cited lists and the new MLA format for Works Cited lists. You may use either one. You will need a good English handbook to use. All good English handbooks will cover the MLA format for Works Cited lists.

The Works Cited list should appear at the end of your essay. It provides the information necessary for a reader to locate and be able to read any sources you cite in the essay. Each source you cite in the essay must appear in your Works Cited list; likewise, each entry in the Works Cited list must be cited in your text.

The Modern Language Association has recently changed its rules for creating a Works Cited List. Go to this Web site for a free download explaining the new rules:

<http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/pdf/Hacker-MLAupdates.pdf>

Step 13: Double-check MLA Format for Academic Papers

In the upper right hand of each page, including the first page and the Works Cited page, put your last name and the page number.

In the upper left corner of the first page, put this information:

Your Name

Teacher's Name

Course

Date

For example:

Jane Anonymous

Prof. David Bruce

ENG 151

3 May 2009

Double-space everything in your paper, including the long quotations and the Works Cited list.

Step 14: Revise

Write more than one draft of this paper. Hardly ever will a paper come out perfect the first draft.

Step 15: Evaluate and Revise as Needed

Keep doing this as needed. Repeat any steps that you need to repeat, including “Step 2: Read Some Good Sample Research Reports.” Write a good paper.

Step 16: Proofread, Proofread, Proofread

Proofreading is always important. Of course, you can proofread earlier as well. I tend to proofread after every draft. But always, at the end of writing your paper, you should proofread, proofread, proofread. Proofread three times.

Step 17: Hand in the Paper

After you print out your paper for what you hope is the final time, look it over. If it needs corrected, correct it and print out a new draft. If it looks OK, staple the pages together in the proper order, write “final draft” on it, put in a 2-pocket folder with at least one early draft, and hand it in on the due date.

Common Knowledge

What is Common Knowledge?

Common knowledge is knowledge that is widely known. It consists of facts that many, many people know. These facts appear over and over in reference guides such as dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Does Common Knowledge Need to Be Cited in Your Papers?

It depends.

Common knowledge consists of facts. If the facts are put in your own words, commonly known facts do not need to be cited. Here are some examples of commonly known facts:

John F. Kennedy died in 1963.
 Columbus is the capital of Ohio.
 Madonna sang the song “Like a Virgin.”
 Paul Newman starred in *Cool Hand Luke*.

Important: Common knowledge does not consist of words arranged in a particular pattern. In other words, you can’t copy part of an encyclopedia article (or other source) and paste it into your paper without properly citing the source, including using quotation marks (for short quotes) or block format (for long quotes). If you were to copy part of an encyclopedia article (or other source) and paste it into your paper without using quotation marks and without citing the source, you would be committing plagiarism. Someone worked hard to write the encyclopedia article (or other source) and that person (or the person’s organization) must get credit for that work.

However, if you take some commonly known facts from the encyclopedia article (or other source) and some commonly known facts from other sources and write them in your own words, then you do not need to cite the sources.

An Example

The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition, 2001-07, contains this information at the beginning of its article on John F. Kennedy:

1917–63, 35th President of the United States (1961–63), b. Brookline, Mass.; son of Joseph P. Kennedy.

Early Life

While an undergraduate at Harvard (1936–40) he served briefly in London as secretary to his father, who was ambassador there. His Harvard honors thesis on the British failure to judge the threat of Nazi Germany was published as *Why England Slept* (1940). Enlisting in the navy in Sept., 1941, he became commander of a PT boat in the Pacific in World

War II. In action off the Solomon Islands (Aug., 1943), his boat, PT 109, was sunk, and Kennedy was credited with saving the life of at least one of his crew.

The facts recounted here are common knowledge; however, you cannot copy these words and paste them in your paper without properly citing the source, including using quotation marks (for short quotes) or block format (for long quotes). If you do that, you are guilty of plagiarism.

In addition, you cannot copy these words and paste them in your paper, and then change one or a few words and not properly cite the source, including using quotation marks (for short quotes) or block format (for long quotes). If you do that, you are guilty of plagiarism.

How Can I Avoid Plagiarism?

Obviously, if you quote word for word, you must use quotation marks (for short quotes) or block format (for long quotes) and you must properly cite the source.

Chances are, what you should do is to consult other sources about John F. Kennedy and find other commonly known facts about him. Then, when you write about his early life, write without consulting your sources. Check to make sure that you are not inadvertently quoting one or more of your sources and make sure that what you write is commonly known facts. If you have used your own words and have used only commonly known facts, you will be OK.

Here are some commonly known facts about John F. Kennedy:

John F. Kennedy was born in 1917, and he died in 1963.

John F. Kennedy was the 35th President of the United States.

John F. Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts.

John F. Kennedy was the son of Joseph P. Kennedy.

John F. Kennedy was of Irish Catholic descent.

John F. Kennedy attended Harvard University and graduated in 1940.

After graduating from Harvard, John F. Kennedy joined the United States Navy.

In 1943, while John F. Kennedy was in the Navy, a Japanese destroyer sank the PT boat he commanded. He led the survivors to safety and became a war hero.

John F. Kennedy became a Democratic Congressman from Massachusetts.

From 1953 until 1960, John F. Kennedy was a Democratic Senator from Massachusetts.

In 1953, John F. Kennedy married Jacqueline Bouvier.

In 1955, John F. Kennedy wrote *Profiles in Courage*. This book won a Pulitzer Prize.

In 1963, John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

All of the facts above are commonly known and appear in many, many reference sources. However, you can't simply copy and paste them in one of your papers without giving this handout and me credit. If you were to copy and paste them in one of your papers without giving this handout and me credit, you would be guilty of plagiarism.

Common Knowledge Assignment

Take the commonly known facts above and use them to write a paragraph about John F. Kennedy. Remember to vary your sentence length (don't use lots of very short sentences), sentence structure (once in a while, use an introductory clause, or join two independent clauses together), and sentence beginnings (don't begin lots of sentences with "John F. Kennedy"). If you use your own words, you do not need to cite anything because all of the facts listed above are commonly known. In your paragraph, use most of the facts above.

Checklist for Plagiarist Report

Check the Content

Here are a number of topics that a good famous plagiarist report may cover.

- Introduction: Introduces the Topic
- Definition of Plagiarism and Information About How to Avoid Committing Plagiarism
- Background Information About the Famous Plagiarist
- Evidence That the Plagiarist Committed Plagiarism
- What Happened to the Plagiarist as a Result of the Plagiarism

The section “Definition of Plagiarism and Information About How to Avoid Committing Plagiarism” may be short, but the section “Evidence That the Plagiarist Committed Plagiarism” may be long.

Check the In-Text Citations

You must show that you know how to format a research paper and cite sources accurately. The MLA format uses in-text citations. For example, if you have a quotation or a paraphrase, the information that identifies the source of that quotation or paraphrase will follow it in parentheses. Usually, that information will be the author’s last name and the page number. Sometimes, no author name is given in the source, so you will use one or a few words to indicate the source’s title. Sometimes, the source does not have page numbers, so you won’t be able to put them in your in-text citation. Be aware that short quotations (four or fewer lines) and long quotations (five or more lines) of prose are formatted differently. Short quotations appear as part of a paragraph that you have written. Long quotations are set off in indented block style.

Check Common Knowledge

Common knowledge is knowledge that is widely known and that appears in many reference sources. For example, “John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963” is common knowledge. Common knowledge does not need to be cited. Check the report to make sure that you have cited everything that needs to be cited.

Note: Even when knowledge is common, the words in which is expressed can be plagiarized. For example, the definition of the word “plagiarism” is common knowledge, but you can’t just steal a definition from a dictionary. If you take a definition of “plagiarism” word for word from a definition, you need to cite the dictionary. However, if you write your own definition of “plagiarism” using your own words, you do not need to cite that.

Check Introductions to Quotations

Don’t just stick quotations into your paper. Introduce them.

Check MLA Format for Quotations

Remember, short quotations of prose have four or fewer lines. Long quotations of prose have five or more lines. Short quotations of prose are part of the sentence in which they appear. Long quotations of prose are set off by themselves in block style. That means that they are indented more than you indent the beginnings of paragraphs.

Check the Works Cited List

Currently, we are in a transition period between the old MLA format for Works Cited lists and the new MLA format for Works Cited lists. You may use either one. You will need a good English handbook to use. All good English handbooks will cover the MLA format for Works Cited lists.

The Works Cited list should appear at the end of your essay. It provides the information necessary for a reader to locate and be able to read any sources you cite in the essay. Each source you cite in the essay must appear in your Works Cited list; likewise, each entry in the Works Cited list must be cited in your text.

Check MLA Format for Academic Papers

In the upper right hand of each page, including the first page and the Works Cited page, put your last name and the page number.

In the upper left corner of the first page, put this information:

Your Name	Your Name
Prof. Name of Prof.	Prof. David Bruce
Course	ENG 151
Date	3 May 2009

Proofread, Proofread, Proofread

Proofreading is always important. Of course, you can proofread earlier as well. I tend to proofread after every draft. But always, at the end of writing your paper, you should proofread, proofread, proofread. Proofread three times.

Peer Review Sheet: Plagiarist Report

1. Exchange papers with another student.
2. Read the other student's Plagiarist Report.
3. Write down briefly your opinion of the other student's Plagiarist Report. Good? Bad? Interesting? Boring?
4. Write down any questions you would like to ask after reading the Plagiarist Report. Was everything clear to you? Did you understand all the terms that were used? Do you have any questions about what did or did not happen?
5. Write down one thing that the writer did well, in your opinion.
6. Write down one thing that the writer should improve, in your opinion.
7. Write down any other suggestions for improvement that you have for the paper.
8. Go through the Plagiarist Report again and make any proofreading corrections that need to be made.
9. Does the writer use the correct MLA format for the paper?
10. Does the writer correct cite sources in the paper?
11. Does the writer use the correct format for the Works Cited List?

12. Go over the Plagiarist Report orally with the writer. Make any comments or suggestions for improvement that you would like to make. Of course, the writer will do the same things with the Plagiarist Report that you wrote.

13. Give this sheet of paper to the writer, then exchange Plagiarist Reports with another writer and go through the process again.

14. Go home and revise your Plagiarist Report.

Alyssa Christian

Christian 1

Professor Bruce

English 153

9 October 2008

Matthew Lesko: The Cost for Free Money

Plagiarism is a very severe offense that involves stealing someone else's work. What constitutes plagiarism can be a grey area. Often, people feel as though they are not plagiarizing, but it is very easy to do so without realizing it. It is hard to imagine that professionals plagiarize a lot in their everyday lives. As I searched for a famous plagiarist to report on, I came across many famous people I knew of and was in shock to hear that they have plagiarized before. To my shock, Martin Luther King, Jr., Helen Keller, Joe Biden, and even Osama Bin Laden are some people who have plagiarized. It is even harder to imagine not only writing but also movies and music can be plagiarized. I was most intrigued to report on Matthew Lesko.

Matthew Lesko, for those who are not sure who he is, is the crazy infomercial guy on "Free Money." He is the man whom you often see wearing the bright exclamation mark suits trying to help people get free money from the United States government. Matthew researched for over 25 years, trying to help others take advantage of government money. He wrote many books that are well known today on the government money programs. His books were used to advise and inform people of "free money." He was always fast paced on selling his bestselling books and trying to get help for those in need of money. Did Matthew really know what he was doing was plagiarizing government documents and other publicly available sources of information? As we will see, the answer is yes, Matthew Lesko did know he was plagiarizing.

Christian 2

As I was researching Matthew Lesko along with plagiarism in general, I wondered what it took to be a plagiarist. Many people I talked with were unsure what a plagiarist was and what defines plagiarism. This is scary to hear because then you think, how do we know that we are doing this severe offense against someone when we don't even know what it is that we are doing? Those who are unsure what plagiarism is could very well be committing a crime without even knowing it. Is this the case for some of the famous plagiarists; it just makes me wonder if these people got charged on something that they had no clue could be so severe. I understand that it is a horrible thing to plagiarize someone else's work that they have spent time on. Maybe we should be taught plagiarism in an early stage of school so we don't get caught up in a scandal of plagiarizing.

Plagiarism. It is such a little word that means a lot. According to the Merriam-Webster's On-Line Dictionary, to plagiarize is "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own" (Plagiarism.org 2008). If you really think about it, you often think, can you really steal ideas and be guilty of fraud? I just can't comprehend how the use of ideas can be considered fraud because often you think of an idea and then later find out that someone else thought of the same idea before you and copyrighted it. Sometimes, we type up a report on research that we have done and forget to cite the source. I have caught myself many times doing a paper and forgetting to cite the source which results in my having to go back and do my research all over just so I don't get accused of plagiarizing when I don't mean to do so. It is such a pain to cite sources, but it is understandable why we have to do so. I know if I was a writer and someone didn't acknowledge my work I would be a little upset but I also see how people feel when they get accused of plagiarizing. Some famous plagiarists have felt sorry and apologized for acting in

a wrongful matter while others don't understand how they have been accused so they refuse to apologize.

Fortunately, you can do many things to prevent plagiarizing. When in doubt, cite your sources just to be sure that you don't plagiarize. Often when you paraphrase you could be plagiarizing too. Make sure to cite even paraphrases of material that is not common knowledge and double-check your work before turning it in to your professor in order to not get caught in a mistaken plagiarism.

Matthew Lesko plagiarized by using government documents and other public polices. It is questionable if government documents can really be plagiarized because they are offered to anyone for free. The evidence that he plagiarized was found is his bestselling "free money" books. I think that Matthew Lesko was accused in a wrong manner for this part but in other ways I am glad that he got accused of plagiarizing. He basically found ways to tell people that they could get free money from the government when in reality the money didn't exist. He was trying to find easy-to-use formats in using the government document programs. The reason that this is considered to be plagiarizing is because he didn't cite the government source he used in his books and infomercials. Lesko must have not cared too much for being accused of plagiarizing from his statement according to an article from the *Washington Post*: "I plagiarized the whole thing. I didn't write a lick." By "the whole thing," he is referring to *Getting Yours: The Complete Guide to Government Money*, his first book.

Why didn't cite his sources? Not because finding the information needed to cite the sources was difficult. According to Wilda Williams in the article "Finding Federal Data Bases," a federal database lists the database's name, address and phone number of the agency

responsible. So I strongly feel as though Matthew should have cited his sources before he set out his books for millions to see.

The only major consequences Lesko had to face was his books being criticized in a review by W.G. Swearing:

He simply cut and pasted text from government publications for his first *New York Times* bestseller, and has been ‘writing’ that way ever since. His description might be a little breezy, however. The real value Lesko adds is in his rigorous and tireless research efforts, as well as the extremely logical and helpful organization of the material.

Even though Lesko is one of the few famous plagiarists to not face very severe consequences, it is still a big deal to use someone else’s work.

In reality, plagiarism can be a scary, unforgivable task. You can get caught in an act of fraud without realizing it. Even though plagiarism is a bad thing, it is often hard to figure out that you are really stealing someone else’s work. Make sure you check your work and cite every source you use to be sure you don’t get caught in the consequences Matthew Lesko had to take for plagiarizing government documents. Plagiarism is a severe act of stealing someone’s ideas or own words without referencing them.

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David Edwards

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Professor Bruce

ENG 151

6 April 2009

Joe Biden: Habitual Plagiarist

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr., the oldest of four, was born on November 20, 1942, in Scranton, Pennsylvania (“Joseph Biden Featured Biography”). He graduated from the University of Delaware with a bachelor’s degree in 1965 and from Syracuse University in 1968 with a law degree (“Joseph Biden Featured Biography”). After being on the New Castle county council in 1972, he was elected as a Senator of Delaware (“Joseph Biden Featured Biography”). Later in 2008, he was elected as the vice-president of the United States.

Though one might say that Mr. Biden’s career has been highly successful, few know that he has a history of plagiarism. Plagiarism is an extremely serious offense and is defined as “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own” (“Plagiarism Definition”). It is considered unethical and many have been kicked out of college, been fired from jobs, and had awards revoked because of plagiarism. Melanie Grobler relinquished the Eugyne Marias literature prize after it had been found that she plagiarized it from Canadian author Anne Michaels (Breytenbach).

After graduating, Mr. Biden began a law degree at Syracuse University in New York (“Joseph Biden Featured Biography”). During his first year in law school, he plagiarized five pages of his fifteen-page paper and included only one footnote to the review article that the material came from (“Biden Admits Plagiarism”):

CBS News tonight quoted an aide to Mr. Biden as saying he had been exonerated. However, an academic official said Mr. Biden had been found guilty, “threw himself on the mercy of the board” and promised not to repeat the offense. This, according to the official, persuaded the board to drop the matter and allow Mr. Biden to remain in law school. (“Biden Was Accused”)

Biden openly admitted plagiarizing a portion of the paper was “a mistake,” saying he did not have a strong understanding of the rules for citing sources (“Biden Admits Plagiarism”). As a result, the university judiciaries ruled that Mr. Biden would receive a failing grade in the course and would be forced to retake it the next year (“Biden Admits Plagiarism”).

Biden’s second offense of plagiarism occurred in 1987 during his presidential campaign; he was accused of using the words of the British majority leader, Neil Kinnock (“Professional Board Clears Biden”). He called using Kinnock’s words without crediting him “an oversight” (“Professional Board Clears Biden”). The following is a portion of the speeches given by Neil Kinnock and Joe Biden:

NEIL KINNOCK at Welsh Labour Party conference May 1987: “Why am I the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to be able to get to university? Was it because our predecessors were thick? Does anybody really think that they didn’t get what we had because they didn’t have the talent or the strength or the endurance or the commitment? Of course not. It was because there was no platform upon which they could stand.”

JOE BIDEN IN Sept 1987 during his first presidential campaign: “Why is it that Joe Biden is the first in his family ever to go [to] a university? Why is it that my wife... is the first in her family to ever go to college? Is it because our fathers and mothers were not

bright? ...Is it because they didn't work hard? My ancestors who worked in the coal mines of northeast Pennsylvania and would come after 12 hours and play football for four hours? It's because they didn't have a platform on which to stand.” (“Joe Biden plagiarised Neil Kinnock speech”)

It is amazing how closely related the two speeches are. This hurt Biden's reputation as a 1988 presidential candidate, and eventually he was forced to quit (Greenburg). After he had been caught using Neil Kinnock's words, his other speeches were looked at closely by the public (Greenburg). He was found to have used sentences from Robert Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, and Hubert Humphrey without giving credit to them (Greenburg).

After Joe Biden dropped out of the presidential election, two cases of plagiarism from Joe Biden's past, including his paper in college and the Neil Kinnock speech were reviewed by a professional board (“Professional Board Clears Biden”). The board evaluated the circumstances because his law license could be revoked (“Professional Board Clears Biden”). They ruled that Biden had not broken any rules and was able to keep his license (“Professional Board Clears Biden”).

To plagiarize once by mistake is much less severe than to claim to mistakenly plagiarize many times; this tells plenty about Biden's character. He was adequately punished for his first offense in college, but he should have had more severe consequences for his later offenses of plagiarism. It is clear that Joe Biden has a problem with plagiarism and it is hard to believe that his reputation was not hurt when running for vice-president in the 2008 election. Plagiarism was not brought up much during the 2008 election. It is as if the public does not care if our vice-

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president is a plagiarist (Greenburg). An editorial in *The New York Times* states, “What makes Senator Biden's behavior mystifying is recklessness. It's one thing to misappropriate someone else's words. It's another to take passages so clearly someone else's that you're likely to get caught. [. . .] Mr. Biden needs to begin speaking in his own words” (“A Few Words”).

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Morris 1

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ENG 153

14 May 2008

Alex Haley and *Roots*: Acclaim and Controversy

Alexander Palmer Haley was born August 11th, 1921 in Ithaca, New York. Haley's works consisted of historical fiction that involved African Americans as the main characters and depicted their struggles that most African Americans realistically faced in the years before the civil rights movement (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Haley was educated both at Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College at Elizabeth City Teachers College, later working as a journalist while serving in the United States Coast Guard from 1939 to 1959. Haley gained recognition from fans and critics in 1965 when, after an interview for *Playboy* magazine with political activist Malcolm X, he published *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with collaboration from Malcolm X himself (*Encarta*).

Haley established himself as a renowned African American author upon publication of *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* in 1976. Haley's saga traces several generations of an African American family, covering events such as the enslavement of his African ancestors to events in his own life. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* sparked a lot of interest in African American history and genealogy in the United States. The novel won Haley a Pulitzer Prize in 1977, and in the same year the novel was adapted into a highly successful television program (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Unfortunately for Haley, his highly successful novel and iconic status as a renowned African American activist was marred by a plagiarism suit not long after the novel's publication.

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(Plagiarism consists of "submitting material that in part or whole is not entirely one's own work without attributing those same portions to their correct source" (Northwestern University).)

Harold Courlander, author of *The African*, published about ten years earlier, filed suit against Alex Haley for plagiarism, citing numerous examples from *The African* that appeared nearly verbatim in *Roots*. Dr. Thomas J. Schaeper of the History Department of St. Bonaventure University gives us this specific example of the similarities between Haley's novel and Courlander's novel:

This passage appears in Courlander's book: 'He must hear what the farmer cannot hear. He must smell what others cannot smell . . . his eyes must pierce the darkness.' The following appears in *Roots*: 'He must hear what others cannot, smell what others cannot. He must see through the darkness.' Haley defended himself by saying the hundreds of similar passages were the result of sloppy notetaking; he claimed that he simply forgot what were Courlander's phrases and what were his own. ("Plagiarism")

Whether or not Haley's nearly exact replication of Harold Courlander's work was accidental, it nonetheless constitutes plagiarism.

Fortunately for Haley, the judge in the U. S. District Court in New York did not want to completely destroy the reputation of such a prominent figure in African American life. The judge urged Haley and his legal support to consider settling the case, lest Haley be charged with perjury. Haley eventually agreed to settle the case, and Courlander walked away from the ordeal with \$650,000. This amount of money would be comparable to approximately two million

dollars today. Luckily for Haley, the media paid little attention to the suit (Cashill). Most likely this was due to Haley's popularity.

Only adding to the controversy surrounding Haley's novel were Gary Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, two leading genealogists of the late 1970's (Cashill). They took it upon themselves to further investigate the validity of Haley's apparent genealogical research behind *Roots* and the novel's supposedly nonfiction classification. The Mills expected to find minor discrepancies, but what they found went far beyond minor slip-ups:

‘We expected ineptitude, but not subterfuge,’ observed Elizabeth, herself the editor of the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*.

The records showed that in the pre-Civil War period, Haley got virtually everything wrong. In “*Roots*,” for instance, Haley tells in great excited detail how he tracked down the very ship that Kunta Kinte had taken from the Gambia to ‘Naplis, the Lord Ligonier in 1767 [. . .] In fact, as the Mills discovered, the man that Haley identifies as Kunta Kinte, a slave by the name of Toby in the possession of the John Waller family, could not have been Kunta Kinte or Haley's ancestor. Toby had been in America as early as 1762, five years before the Lord Ligonier arrived. Worse for Haley, Toby died eight years before his presumed daughter Kizzy was born. (Cashill)

Despite the controversy that surrounded Alex Haley until his death in 1992, he remains a prominent figure in African American Literature culture. *Roots* remains an American classic, and the TV miniseries was one of the most watched in history. Haley was nearly sued a number

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of other times; however, “the other suits lost. But, [Haley] said, ‘The one who really lost was me,’ because what people remember is that he was sued” (Blau).

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