

Student Guide

Avoiding Plagiarism

Scope

[Academic integrity](#) is essential to our university's values, promoting trust, honesty, and fairness. Academic misconduct means any action that might give a student an unfair advantage in assessments like exams, essays, projects, or dissertations. [Plagiarism](#) constitutes one form of academic misconduct and is defined as the presentation, by a student, of work for assessment that draws from another source without acknowledgement of that source.

Plagiarism is a serious breach of academic integrity and can lead to penalties such as loss of credits or expulsion, as outlined in our [Regulation A13](#) and [Student Academic Misconduct Policy](#).

To avoid plagiarism, start your university studies by learning and applying good academic practices. This is more than just getting your references right or changing a few words to pass off ideas or the work of others as your own. It is about using your skills to create good quality, original work.

1. Definition

1.1 **Definition of plagiarism:** as noted above. This work could include written text, [GenAI \(Generative Artificial Intelligence\)](#) generated texts, artwork or designs. It is extremely important to check with your course leader before using GenAI tools, as their use requires prior authorisation or specific accommodation for disabilities.

1.2 **Types of plagiarism:** There are two main types of plagiarism: (a) accidental and (b) deliberate. Accidental is where you have tried to acknowledge the work of others but have not done it well (see 1.5 for some examples). Deliberate is where you have purposefully used the work of others without acknowledgement and includes contract cheating, where someone else does the work for you, or misuse of GenAI tools. All are considered academic misconduct, and this guide aims to help you avoid accidental plagiarism.

1.3 **Student responsibilities:** It is essential to learn and adhere to citing and referencing conventions in your subject area, take detailed notes, and fully engage in induction and learning how to avoid plagiarism. In cases of doubt, consulting your course leader, personal tutor or [librarian](#) is advised. Not fully acknowledging sources, even unintentionally, may still result in academic penalties.

1.4 **Avoiding and documenting plagiarism:** Academic writing often builds upon others' work, which is acceptable with full acknowledgment. However, reproducing entire works, even if cited, is poor practice. Documenting your sources of evidence through proper referencing and citations is vital in academia to maintain integrity and demonstrate independent academic judgment.

1.5 Here are some of the **common forms of plagiarism:**

- **Verbatim (word for word) plagiarism / quotes:** Use sparingly, but if using, always follow [appropriate quotation practices](#) for direct quotes from someone else's work and include citation and referencing. It is important to make clear what is your original work and what is borrowed.
- **Copying from the Internet:** When you use information from the Internet or GenAI tools, you must cite where it came from and include it in your reference list. Internet sources need careful evaluation because they may not be peer-reviewed, and it is sometimes difficult to evaluate author expertise.
- **Paraphrasing too closely:** If you change only a few words from a source or follow the original structure too closely, it counts as plagiarism (also known as patchwriting, see section 4 below for an example). Instead, try summarising the author's (or authors') main points in your own words to demonstrate your understanding and cite and reference to show you have done this. Make sure you cite and reference all materials you derive from lectures.
- **Collusion:** When working on [group projects](#), be clear about what collaboration is allowed. You must credit any help you get and follow the project guidelines strictly.
- **Inaccurate citation and referencing:** Make sure to cite and reference your sources according to the rules of your discipline. If you cannot access the original source, indicate that your understanding is based on a secondary source. This is called [secondary referencing](#).

- **Failure to acknowledge assistance:** Apart from proofreading or help from a tutor or supervisor tutoring, acknowledge any significant assistance you receive in your work, for example, advice from fellow students, laboratory technicians and other external sources.
- **Use of material written by professional agencies or other people (also known as contract cheating):** Do not use work that has been written for you by someone else, even with permission. Original research is key to your learning.
- **Self-plagiarism (also known as Auto-plagiarism):** Do not submit work for assessment that you have already used for another degree or course unless your course's specific rules allow it. If you need to refer to your previously published or submitted work, you must cite it clearly. ([University of Oxford](#), 2023).

2. Avoiding plagiarism: effective use of sources

2.1 Learning the techniques below require you to engage deeply with your source material, allowing you to add your own analysis and interpretation, thereby enriching your work's academic value.

- **Quotations:** Use quotations to support your arguments, but sparingly—aim for them to make up no more than 5% of your total word count. Always include in-text citation and accurate referencing. Follow the citing and referencing guidelines for your discipline, e.g. use quotation marks or indentation when using original wording which is crucial to the argument, or a particular phrase has significant impact. Generally, it is more effective to explain concepts in your own words to show your understanding.
- **Paraphrasing:** Effective paraphrasing involves thoroughly understanding the original text. Start by reading the text, then set it aside. Write down the main ideas from memory, which helps confirm your grasp of the material and allows you to express it in your unique voice. Ensure that your paraphrasing is a reflection of your own interpretation, rather than a slight rewording of the original.
- **Summarising:** Summarising involves condensing the main points of the text into a much shorter form, capturing the core arguments without distorting their meaning. This technique checks both your understanding of the material and your ability to express it succinctly. Regular practice with different texts can sharpen this skill.
- **Synthesising:** Combine ideas from multiple sources to create a new perspective. This shows your ability to integrate various viewpoints and contribute original thought to the discussion.
- **Critical Thinking:** Apply critical analysis to the sources you read. By questioning and evaluating what you read, you naturally begin to form your own conclusions and interpretations, which can be expressed uniquely in your writing.
- **Using a similarity checker.** [Turnitin](#) is the *only* approved tool provided by Heriot-Watt University. The similarity report helps to highlight text where you may not have attributed text correctly, need to review formatting of citations and review sources for text matching thus ensuring your work is original and properly attributed.

• Example 1: A Clear Case of Plagiarism

The examples below illustrate the basic principles of plagiarism and how students might avoid it in their work by using some very simple techniques:

Examine the following example in which a student has simply inserted a passage of text (*in italics*) into their work directly from a book they have read:

University and college managers should consider implementing strategic frameworks if they wish to embrace good management standards. *One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action.* Managers are employed to resolve these issues effectively.

This is an example of bad practice as the student makes no attempt to distinguish their own work from the passage they have inserted. Thus, this constitutes a clear case of plagiarism. Simply changing a few key words

in such a passage of text (e.g., replace '*problems*' with '*difficulties*') does not make it the student's work and it is still considered to be an act of plagiarism.

• Common Mistakes

Students may also find the following examples from the ([University of Essex](#)) of common plagiarism mistakes made by other students useful when reflecting on their own work:

- "I thought it would be okay as long as I included the source in my bibliography" [without indicating a quotation had been used in the text]
- "I made lots of notes for my essay and couldn't remember where I found the information".
- "I thought it would be okay to use material that I had purchased online."
- "I thought it would be okay to copy the text if I changed some of the words into my own".
- "I thought that plagiarism only applied to essays, I didn't know that it also applies to oral presentations/group projects etc".
- "I thought it would be okay just to use my tutor's notes".
- "I didn't think that you needed to reference material found on the web".
- "I left it too late and just didn't have time to reference my sources".

None of the above are acceptable excuses for not acknowledging the use of others' work and thus failing to maintain the academic integrity expected at Heriot-Watt University.

What follows are examples of the methods that students should employ to correctly cite the words, thoughts or ideas of others that have influenced their work:

• Example 2: Quoting the work of others

If a student wishes to quote a passage of text in order to support their own work, the correct way of doing so is to use quotation marks (e.g., " ") to show that the passage is someone else's work, as follows:

"One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action".

For longer quotes, it may be possible to indent the quotation and omit quotation marks, depending on the citing and referencing style.

• Example 3: Referencing the work of others

In addition to using quotation marks as above, students must also use an in-text citation. If the work being quoted is a book, article, or any other kind of source with page numbers, the page number/s the quote comes from would also normally be required in the in-text citation. Thus, using an author/date style such as Harvard:

"One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action" (Hill and Jones, 2001, p. 121).

The same reference could also be made to a book using a numeric style such as IEEE.

"One of the key problems in setting a strategic framework for a college or university is that the individual institution has both positive and negative constraints placed upon its freedom of action" [1, p. 121].

More often, a piece of work will have multiple references, which demonstrates to an examiner that the student is drawing from several sources. For example, two separate articles may be cited as follows in the Harvard Cite Them Right style:

It has been asserted that Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom continued to be poorly funded during the 1980's (Brown, 1991), whereas, more recently, Smith (2002) argue that the HE sectors actually received, in real terms, more funding during this period than the thirty-year period immediately preceding it.

or using the IEEE style:

"It has been asserted that Higher Education in the United Kingdom continued to be poorly funded during the 1980's [1], whereas more modern writers [2] argue that the HE sectors actually received, in real terms, more funding during this period than the thirty-year period immediately preceding it".

• Example 4: Use of reference lists

Whichever citing and referencing style is used, a reference list must also be included, which allows the reader to locate the works cited. In most styles the reference list is placed at the end of your document, but you should check your assignment guidelines and the rules for the style you are using.

Reference lists must follow the rules of the style you are using. You can find the rules for some referencing styles on the [Skills Hub](#) and in [Cite Them Right Online](#). If your assignment tells you to use a different style (e.g. SIAMS), ask your lecturer, supervisor, or a librarian for assistance in finding the correct set of rules.

• Example 5: Patchwriting and secondary referencing

- An example of this is taking a sentence and merely replacing words with synonyms or altering the sentence structure slightly, which does not constitute true paraphrasing is shown below. This example shows in-text citations using the Harvard Cite Them Right style:
 - **Example passage from Messabia, Fomi and Chokri (2022):** Health responses to the spread of COVID-19 had a direct impact on economic policies. Business owners and managers had to adopt new business and organizational strategies to ensure the resilience and survival of their businesses under the new health policies (Cortez and Johnston, 2020).
 - **Plagiarised (patchwritten) example:** Economic policies were directly impacted by health measures taken in reaction to COVID-19's outbreak. To secure the resilience and survival of their companies under the new health rules, business owners and managers have to implement new organizational and business strategies (Cortez and Johnston, 2020).
- In the above example, the student has taken work from Messabia, Fomi and Chokri (2022), while Cortez and Johnston (2020) are cited, the student has not read that source, but is presenting Messabia, Fomi and Chokri (2022)'s interpretation of that work as their own. This is known as secondary referencing. You should only cite the source you have read. In addition, they have only changed a few words with synonymous terms and changed the order of the sentence. Therefore, it has not changed sufficiently to be regarded as the student's own work.

It is your responsibility to make it clear where you are citing sources within your work and what the sources are in your reference list. **Failure to do so is an act of plagiarism.**

3. Building academic integrity: essential skills and resources

3.1 The best way to avoid plagiarism is to learn good academic practice from the very beginning of your academic career. It is not just about having accurate citation and referencing (although this is extremely important) or changing words to avoid detection, it involves applying your academic abilities to enhance the quality of your work and get the grades you deserve.

To help you with this, you can consult the [English Gym](#), and the [Skills Hub](#):

- The English Gym provides academic English language and study skills support to all students.
- The Skills Hub provides study skills, library skills and IT skills support to all students. The Skills Hub offers [online learning](#), [live classes](#) and you can also [make appointments](#) with staff for further help.

See below for a list of some of the resources available to help you become a better academic writer and develop the key academic skills for successful studying:

English Gym	Skills Hub	
Academic English grammar	Critical thinking	Academic posters
Academic English vocabulary development (in your subject area)	Writing using sources	Presentations
Academic writing	Essay writing	What do markers want?
Communicating in an academic environment	Writing reports	Making the most of feedback
Critical thinking	Reflective writing	Citing and referencing. Endnote
Effective reading and note-taking	Writing a literature review	Coping with your reading list How to make good notes

For help with academic writing, specifically for SoSS students, the [Academic Writing Centre](#) is available.

You can also discuss a sample your written work by booking a one-to-one consultation with the English Gym, the Academic Writing Centre (SoSS students only) or the [Global Learning Advisors](#).

3.2 Citing and referencing styles/formatting can vary from subject to subject and therefore students should always seek the advice from the teaching staff in their own School/Institute about the correct way required. There are two main styles of referencing:

- **Author-date styles** like Harvard and APA use author name/s and date of publication as the in-text citations
- **Numeric styles** like IEEE and SIAMS use numbers as the in-text citations.

Correct citing and referencing comes in two parts, the in-text citation and the full reference given in the reference list at the end of your document. There should be nothing in your reference list that does not have a corresponding in-text citation (and vice versa).

For detailed guidance on citing and referencing see [the Skills Hub: Citing and referencing](#).

We also provide access to Cite Them Right. This useful guide provides citing and referencing help with Harvard; APA; Chicago; IEEE; MLA 9; OSCOLA and Vancouver styles. It is available as:

- an online guide called [Cite Them Right Online](#) (use your HW username and password for free access)
- an [eBook](#) and a [print book at your campus library](#)

Consider reference management software to help. Reference management software can help you collect and organise your references and ensure consistency with your in-text citations and reference list. [EndNote](#) is free for all staff and students at Heriot-Watt University and has useful features in addition to citing and referencing functions. It can be accessed via the [EndNote guide](#). Students can sign up to Skills Hub classes on how to use EndNote. Other reference management software options are available, though they are not supported by the university.

3.3 Academic work typically combines published information with your own ideas, results, or findings. Therefore, accurate citing and referencing extends beyond just avoiding plagiarism. It engages you in academic discussions, broadens the context of your work, and supports your arguments with credible evidence. Moreover, accurate citing and referencing allows others to investigate into the topics you discuss, thereby enriching the academic community. For help with finding resources for your subject, see the [Subject Guides](#).

3.4 For those struggling with writing and for those who do not have English as their first language, remember that expressing your own ideas, even imperfectly, demonstrates your learning and understanding better than perfectly written but unoriginal work. This process is essential for developing your independent thought and enhancing your academic growth.

4. Top tips for avoiding plagiarism

As a summary of some of the content above, the following top tips will help you to avoid plagiarism:

- **Learn how to paraphrase:** Understand and articulate source material in your own words, ensuring a complete rephrasing of content. Avoid patchwriting, where only minor changes are made to the text.
- **Use quotes judiciously:** Use quotations only when the exact wording is essential to the argument. Remember to use quotations sparingly and ensure they are properly cited with both quotation marks and an in-text citation right where they are used, not just at the end of the paragraph. This demonstrates precise handling of source material without over-reliance on the original wording.
- **Effective notetaking and attribution:** Develop a habit of effective notetaking by reading the material, setting it aside, and then summarising the key ideas in your own words. This practice helps prevent inadvertent plagiarism and ensures you genuinely understand and can articulate the concepts. Always credit every idea, fact, or quote to the original author from the beginning of your discussion to prevent misattribution.

- **Avoid common pitfalls:** Be vigilant against subtle forms of plagiarism such as using well-phrased ideas from sources or discussions and presenting them as your own without proper citing and referencing. This includes the proper handling of what might be considered common knowledge in your discipline; if in doubt, cite and reference the source.
- **Conduct thorough research:** Ensure that all ideas or data included in your paper are backed by thorough research and the original sources are accurately cited and referenced. This thoroughness supports the authenticity of your work and your integrity as a researcher.
- **Uphold academic integrity across all media:** Maintain integrity not only in text but in all forms of media including computer code, illustrations, graphs, and unpublished data from lectures or theses. Never submit work that is not yours, reuse past assignments without permission, or allow your work to be copied. This applies to both published and unpublished sources and ensures respect for intellectual property.

5. References

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