

Plagiarism and the Honor System at Washington and Lee University

“Plagiarism” describes the use of another’s words or ideas without proper acknowledgment. *The students of Washington and Lee University have considered plagiarism a violation of the Honor System in the past; therefore, all forms of plagiarism including Internet plagiarism are taken very seriously.* Students at Washington and Lee need to be aware of the nature of plagiarism. Plagiarism takes many forms, including the wholesale copying of phrases or texts, or the use of ideas without indicating the source. Certain facts must also be properly acknowledged. Please use this guide as educational material to inform you of the aspects of proper acknowledgement. The following examples and information are forms of plagiarism; however, it should be noted that *plagiarism’s scope goes beyond the provided illustrations.*

I. Excerpt from Daniel Boorstin’s The Americans: The Colonial Experience:

The Quakers lacked neither courage nor energy. It was not so much the actual content of their creed as it was the uncompromising obstinacy with which they hung on to it and their attitude toward themselves, which were decisive. The two flaws fatal to the influence of this remarkable people on American culture were, first an urge toward martyrdom, and a preoccupation with the purity of their own souls; and second, a rigidity in all their beliefs. The first led their vision away from community and inward to themselves; the second hardened them against the ordinary accommodations of this world. Neither the martyr nor the doctrinaire could flourish on America soil.

A. Example of Wholesale Plagiarism of Boorstin:

The Quakers were both energetic and courageous. It was not so much the content of their belief as the uncompromising stubbornness with which they clung to it and their attitude toward themselves, which were decisive. The two problems that prevented the influence of these remarkable people on American culture were 1) urge toward martyrdom, and a preoccupation with personal spiritual purity and 2) a rigidity in all their beliefs. The first pushed their vision away from society and inward to themselves; the second hardened them against the ordinary accommodations of this world. Neither the martyr nor the doctrinaire could prosper in America.

Explanation: Even though the writer makes a variety of word substitutions, this is a compelling example of plagiarism. The passage is in no way the writer’s own work, since neither the language nor the ideas are original. It would still be plagiarism even if the source were indicated without quotation marks, since it presents Boorstin’s words as the writer’s own.

B. Example of Plagiarism of Boorstin’s Ideas:

Although the Quakers possessed various important virtues, principally courage and energy, a strong adherence to their creed posed two barriers to their leaving a lasting impact on American cultural history. A tendency toward individual sacrifice and martyrdom prevented them from forming communities, while their inflexible spirituality made them intolerant of the ways of others.

Explanation: The student generally manages to avoid Boorstin’s phrasing and language and to reorder the sentences and clauses. But, the student fails to acknowledge that the pair of causes of the limited cultural effect of Quakerism is derived from Boorstin’s analysis. The idea is plagiarized even though the language is not parallel. The writer needs to indicate the source, either through a footnote or an in-text citation.

C. Example of Proper Use and Acknowledgment:

Daniel Boorstin claims that the Quakers had little permanent effect on American culture and identifies two related “flaws” of self-centeredness in their outlook: “an urge toward martyrdom... [and] a rigidity in all their beliefs.” He feels that these qualities made them inflexibly asocial, unable to adapt to what he calls, “the ordinary accommodations of this world.”¹ While stressing the introversion of the Quaker worldview, though, he underestimates the extraordinary communal energy that it produced. The qualities he describes produced a highly functional – though admittedly self-contained and isolate – social subculture, dependent largely upon itself, which has persisted throughout American history.

Explanation: The writer has quoted some of Boorstin’s prose directly and has paraphrased other ideas and cited this use. Rather than simply repeating these ideas, the writer moves toward a conclusion. This conclusion not only draws from but also extends Boorstin’s analysis.

II. Citation of Facts:

Facts easily obtainable from a dictionary or some other ready source of reference are considered “general knowledge,” and their sources do not need to be acknowledged. For example, the year of Robert E. Lee’s birth can be obtained from a variety of sources and does not warrant citation. However, a more complex set of facts, such as the details of Lee’s strategy at Gettysburg, cannot be considered “general knowledge” and must be acknowledged. In cases of doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution and cite sources.

III. Conclusion:

Any information used from any written source needs to be explicitly cited to avoid plagiarism. In the case of printed materials, this information must include at least the author’s name, title of work, and publication data. In the case of internet sources, this information must include at least the title, author/organization, URL, and date of access.

A required text for all freshman English classes is Rules for Writers by Diana Hacker. This text provides information on plagiarism as well as proper documentation styles for various subjects. Copies of Rules for Writers are available at Leyburn Library’s circulation desk and at the Writing Center in Payne Hall. Information from this text is also accessible at www.dianahacker.com. Leyburn Library provides documentation information at <http://library.wlu.edu/Documentation/mla.html>. Other sources available in Leyburn Library are MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers by Joseph Gibaldi and A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations by Kate L. Turabian.

Whenever you have questions about documentation, citing, or possible plagiarism concerns, ASK YOUR PROFESSOR, the Reference Librarians, or the Writing Center Tutors.

¹ Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 34.