

## **THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION**

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### **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, it 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.