Plagiarism is bad. Don’t do it. Duh.

But what is plagiarism, exactly, especially in this modern era of digital cutting and pasting? Here are two simple definitions that apply especially well to the genre of analytical papers written for Swarthmore classes:

“Copying a segment of another’s work word for word, then conveniently ‘forgetting’ to include quotation marks, but ‘remembering’ to cite the source,” is described as the one example of academic fraud in the United States Army War College handbook.

The other is: “Directly quoting another author’s work without giving proper credit to the author,” i.e., without a footnote and/or a citation of the author in your Bibliography.

—**from a July 23 2014 *New York Times* article on a Montana senator (!!) accused of plagiarizing the thesis** he did for the United States Army War College (Carlisle, PA). That “thesis” supposedly gave him intellectual as well as military credentials; he used both to gain political clout. The Senator, John Walsh (D-Montana), withdrew his candidacy in August 2014, in effect conceding he was guilty and didn’t deserve to represent his state in the U.S. Senate. At that time, however, Walsh made no admission of guilt regarding the plagiarism question. He just said the debate over his “research paper” was a “distraction” to the real issues of his campaign. Not even his apology was original. His was a typical non-apology apology, a disgusting new genre rife in U.S. popular culture. More info:

<http://nyti.ms/1lwlQmS>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/us/politics/montana-senator-john-walsh-plagiarized-thesis.html>

on Senator Walsh’s withdrawal: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/us/politics/john-walsh-drops-campaign-under-pressure-from-democrats.html?mabReward=RI%3A9&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&region=CColumn&module=Recommendation&src=rechp&WT.nav=RecEngine

**When the meaning of a word is important, it’s always a good idea to look up the origin of the word using a good dictionary.** Plagiarism comes from the Latin *plagiarius* ("kidnapper, seducer, plunderer"), used in the sense of "literary thief" by the Roman poet Martial; also from *plagium* ("kidnapping") and *plaga* "snare, net."

(Note how these definitions suggest not just thievery and deception, but the irony that the thief may be caught in his or her own net! It’s true that these definitions also imply that the act is always rather cold-blooded and calculated. In real life, however, the actions of students are often more complicated to judge.)

**What are 2 good ways to avoid plagiarism**, or confusing whether words are yours or someone else’s?

1. When you take notes on your reading or any print or media source—regardless of whether you’re taking working with a digital device like your laptop or writing your notes by hand—be very careful to mark all direct quotations with quotation marks at the beginning and the end. If relevant, carefully note the page # or #s for each quotation as well—and the full bibliographic info on the text (place, publisher, date of publication, author’s full name, etc. If it’s a webpage, copy the webpage address down in full, along with the date you accessed it. All of these will be needed for your bibliography (your Works Cited).
2. I recommend that when note-taking you find a simple way to mark whenever you are paraphrasing another’s ideas rather than directly quoting them, or when you are adding your own commentary to your notes. Sometimes I use brackets [as in this sentence] to mark off my own words. But most often I just separate my own words off with a break—and I make sure all the author’s words are clearly marked with quotations, whereas my commentary or summaries are not.

These note-taking procedures won’t really take any extra time to do! *What does waste your time* is if you’re sloppy and then, when trying to finish your paper, realize you’re not sure what the page # is for a particular quotation, or whether words you want to use but copied in haste are the author’s or yours, and you have to go back to the source to re-check everything.

Remember too that if we professors get uneasy with how sloppy your use of quoted evidence is, or if your paper doesn’t really “sound” like you but rather like somebody else, it’s easy to take a phrase from your paper and Google/Bing it, or to use a website like Turnitin.com: very often a Web source for what you’ve “borrowed” will show up on our screen. I’m not sure how reporters who checked the Montana senator’s résumé got hold of his thesis, but they probably got it via an online source and then began running Internet searches on his language. Of course, he made their job easier: the majority of “his” thesis appears to be actually other people’s words, sometimes loosely credited, other times outright stolen, from texts readily available online.

**If you’re charged with plagiarism and the Swarthmore College Judiciary Committee—on which students, faculty, and Dean’s Office serve—hears your case**, they probably will find you guilty if they see any evidence that you copied another’s work and presented it as your own. The “I didn’t intend to plagiarize; I just left out by accident some quotation marks” argument probably will NOT be persuasive. (Trust me; I’ve served on the CJC.) In fact, students on the CJC are *especially* skeptical of a peer pleading “I didn’t mean to do it,” “I was rushed and just made a mistake,” and the like. In general, the CJC focuses more on the facts of the case, less on a student’s motives or circumstances or excuses.

**One last really important point, to end on a positive note!** Admitting that you are learning from other people’s words and ideas and find their words useful is NOT bad. Your own best ideas and words will come after engaging with others. Don’t succumb to the illusion that if are to write a good paper your ideas and words have to be 100% original. Lots of great work is collaborative. Honor those you’ve learned from, whether they reside at Swarthmore or exist elsewhere, including in the past. Your own contributions to the conversation will be the better for acknowledging accurately the voices of others.

I don’t know what you were taught in high school about plagiarism and citing all the sources you used, but the above advice should be helpful for any papers or similar projects that you do for Swarthmore classes, regardless of whether in the humanities, the social sciences, or the natural sciences.

See our English Department’s webpage on citing sources, especially for any paper you’ll write in a Humanities class (particularly literature classes in English or Modern Languagues): <http://www.swarthmore.edu/english-literature/how-to-cite-sources>

Hope this is helpful!

—Peter Schmidt