

Plagiarism

[English Department]

What it is

It is very important that in your first months at the university you come to understand the form of cheating or theft called **plagiarism**, and so learn to avoid it. It may be you know what it is already. Plagiarism is when you take other people's words and ideas and then pretend they're your own. It's basically a form of theft or stealing, only you are stealing other people's words (rather than stealing their possessions): you are not acknowledging the source of your ideas or of your words.

The following definition of plagiarism is taken from the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (New York: MLA, 1977), pages 4–5:

Plagiarism may take the form of repeating another's sentences as your own, adopting a particularly apt phrase as your own, paraphrasing someone else's argument as your own, or even presenting someone else's line of thinking in the development of a thesis as though it were your own. In short, to plagiarize is to give the impression that you have written or thought something that you have in fact borrowed from another person. Although a writer may often use another person's words and thoughts, they *must be acknowledged* as such.

It is very important that you should be aware of what constitutes plagiarism. If you have any doubts about what exactly it is, please read the extended treatment in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (6th edition), chapter 2, available in the Hunter Street Library. Please also see the advice in the [Writing Guide](#) or do the quiz on plagiarism in the section below. You need to be aware that plagiarism, including plagiarism from Web sources, is very easy to detect. In the past, students have been severely penalised for this form of cheating, and it's really very easy to avoid.

Quiz

Here is a quiz to help you understand the correct use of referencing and quotation, and the difference between this and the form of cheating called plagiarism. Work

through the quiz carefully, and then check your answers against the correct answers supplied at the end.

Let us imagine you are writing an essay on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. During your research for the essay, you come upon the following entry in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, pp.364–65, and you copy the entry into your notebook or onto your notebook in your computer. You also make a note of the author / editor, and the full title and other details, for your Bibliography – thus:

Drabble, Margaret, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 6th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Here is the quotation that you copy down during your research:

The Beautiful and Damned (1922), a novel about a wealthy, doomed, and dissipated marriage, was followed by *The Great Gatsby* (1925), widely considered his finest work. This is the story of shady, mysterious financier Jay Gatsby's romantic and destructive passion for Daisy Buchanan, played against a backdrop of Long Island glamour and New York squalor; the story is narrated by the innocent outsider Nick Carraway, Gatsby's neighbour and Daisy's distant cousin, who observes from a distance as adultery, hard drinking, fast driving, and finally murder take their toll, as the age of 'miracles, art and excess' turns to ashes.

Now, let's suppose that you decide to refer to this view in your essay. Here are some of the ways in which you might do it. Which of the following constitute plagiarism (losing you marks, perhaps resulting in a 0% grade)? Which constitute intelligent citation of critical reference (improving your essay's sophistication and your grade)? Try to work out each one for yourself, and then check your answers at the end.

A. *The Great Gatsby* is the story of a strange, elusive financier called Jay Gatsby, and his romantic but ultimately unreal and destructive passion for the upper-class girl Daisy Buchanan.

B. The story of *The Great Gatsby* is about a shady, mysterious financier who makes his money from illegal bootlegging and fraudulent bond-dealing. It is a story rooted in its historical moment: the high-life of the 1920s, and the distortions created by wealth.

C. Margaret Drabble, summarizing the novel, describes Gatsby as a 'shady, mysterious financier' brought low by his 'romantic and destructive passion for Daisy Buchanan' (pp. 364–5). Her terms here are exact. There is something both idealized and at the same time unreal about the way Gatsby views Daisy.

D. Drabble sees Nick Carraway, the narrator, as essentially an 'innocent outsider ... who observes from a distance as adultery, hard drinking, fast driving, and finally murder' create an intense and terrible tragedy (p. 365). In some ways, however, to describe Carraway as 'innocent' seems not altogether accurate. Certainly, he comes into the world of the East Coast from the relative safety of a Midwest town, ...

E. *The Great Gatsby* came after *The Beautiful and Damned*, and is widely considered Fitzgerald's finest work. Jay Gatsby, formerly James Gatz, is a shady financier who falls in love with a wealthy rich girl, Daisy Fay. His passion for her is both romantic and destructive, for Gatsby himself is both idealistic and a criminal.

F. *The Great Gatsby* foregrounds its love story, yet at the same time Fitzgerald seems intent on emphasizing matters of class status and money. The romantic and the sordid jar against each other. There is both the world of Long Island glamour, represented by Gatsby's lavish parties, and the world of New York squalor, represented by the seedy flat which Tom Buchanan uses for weekends with his mistress.

G. *The Great Gatsby* foregrounds its love story, yet at the same time Fitzgerald seems intent on emphasizing matters of class status and money. The romantic and the sordid jar against each other. There is both the world of 'Long Island glamour' and the world of 'New York squalor' (Drabble 365). The first is represented by Gatsby's lavish parties at his mansion on East Egg; the second by Tom Buchanan's special flat in New York, which he uses to see his mistress, Myrtle Wilson.

H. The *Oxford Companion* describes Gatsby as a 'shady, mysterious financier' and Nick Carraway as an 'innocent outsider'.³ For much of the novel, there is little emphasis on the exact sources of Gatsby's wealth. Nick is certainly 'innocent' in that he comes to the east coast from a small midwestern town, and at first he does not fully understand the fast-moving, amoral world in which he finds himself.

³ *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, pp. 364-5

3.3 Quiz answers

A. This is basically plagiarism, though admittedly of a refined kind. The writer has changed some words around but kept the basic thought, the main opposition.

'Strange, elusive' have been substituted for 'shady, mysterious'; 'ultimately unreal'

has been added into the phrase 'romantic ... and destructive passion'. Yet the essential thought is still directly inspired by the original, which is not referred to in any way. The reader will assume that these are the writer's own words, not a thought stolen from *The Oxford Companion to Literature* .

B. This is also plagiarism. Admittedly, the writer has stolen only one phrase – the description of Gatsby as a 'shady, mysterious financier' – but it is a good phrase, full of good knowledge about the novel, and its source is completely unacknowledged. If you steal a few pounds from someone, rather than a hundred pounds, well ... it's still theft!

C. This is excellent – correctly referenced quotation. The writer indicates clearly what is quotation and where it is from, and then develops the quoted thought with his / her own words. You can see immediately which are Drabble's thoughts and words, and which are the writer's. The simple mention of Margaret Drabble will immediately allow the reader to turn to and see the full reference to the source in the Bibliography.

D. This is again excellent and correct reference. The writer uses ellipsis to take up only the part of the original sentence that he wants, and then begins to modify Drabble's point with his own thoughts.

E. This is plagiarism. Again, the writer is making a very typical mistake: because he has changed around word-order somewhat, and added in his own thoughts, he wrongly believes that he has made the thought his own. But he hasn't really. Steal a five-pound note and crease it a bit – it still isn't yours! Here the view that *The Great Gatsby* is Fitzgerald's 'finest work' is straight from the original, with no acknowledgement. Similarly, the interesting opposition of 'romantic and destructive' is still stolen, even though the sentence around it has been modified.

F. Plagiarism again, even though a lot of the thoughts and words here are entirely the writer's own. This is really silly plagiarism, because the writer is gaining nothing from not indicating the few phrases he has taken over. He has taken over the opposition between 'Long Island glamour' and 'New York squalor', and, even though these phrases are surrounded by his own amplifications, this is still plagiarism. It's minor plagiarism, but plagiarism nonetheless. If you find that someone has stolen a few words, how do you ever trust them about other words that are supposedly their own?

G. Excellent, and completely correct. The writer has now done what he exactly failed to do in the case of F. He's made clear where he is taking up someone else's thought, and so allowed his own amplifications of those thoughts to stand out all the more. This impresses the reader both with the easy way it refers to someone else's thoughts and the way those thoughts are developed. Note: the writer doesn't have to say that Drabble said this; he just puts her name within the bracketed reference, and this, of course, will tally with the Bibliography. First-rate!

H. Excellent reference again, this time using the footnote method to give the book and page reference. Note: the footnote (done on 'insert' / 'footnote' in Word) only needs to give a little bit of information, assuming that the full reference will be in the Bibliography.