



Avoiding Plagiarism in Theological Writing

The Scriptural Mandate: Thou Shalt Not Steal! (Exodus 20:15)

Definition

"Plagiarism is the unintentional or intentional act of incorporating the ideas or words of someone else into your own writing without properly acknowledging them." -Lucretia B. Yaghjian. *Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric for Theological and Biblical Writers*. (2006), 129.

Plagiarism should not occur if you have taken the research, reflection, or writing process seriously. Yes, the technicalities of the citation styles and the challenges of time management need to be mastered but you should be motivated to come to your topic with passion and application, be prepared to adopt an organized and intentional research and reading strategy, and be focused on producing something that is your own. As the University of Toronto code suggests:

"Plagiarism is at once a perversion of originality and a denial of the interdependence and mutuality which are at the heart of scholarship itself, and hence of the academic experience." (Appendix A, 2.p)

Theological Considerations

Avoid the sin of omission! In theological writing we are engaged in a conversation more than in other disciplines. However, as with any academic discipline we are required to take account of different sources and at the same time try to come up with something original. In conversation with different sources, we must also develop a confidence in our own words and learn the language of expressing them theologically. In such cases it behooves us to acknowledge our use of the ideas, opinions, and published work of our conversation "partners" whether these be contemporary theologians or the great masters of the past. If we make use of their work then we need to acknowledge such use either by quotation or referencing (endnote or footnote). If we have borrowed or learned from someone else (and this is inevitable), we have to acknowledge our intellectual debt. Like any conversation there are rules of etiquette in theological dialogue, in this case an acknowledgement of the use of the expressed ideas of others. (Another aspect of etiquette is proper citation style, for which see our separate guide entitled, ([Citation and Bibliographic Formats for Theological Papers](#))).

Why You Must Document Sources

- It is a requirement
- It gives credibility and authority to your work
- It is a courtesy to your readers so that they can check your information themselves independently
- Your work has to be your own and you have to be trusted to do it
- It is scholarly etiquette

- Stealing in any form is prohibited by the eighth commandment (Exodus 20: 15 Thou shalt not steal).
- So the instructor can check your information if necessary.

What You Must Not Do

- Buy essays and submit them as your own
- Copy from your friends work and submit it as if it were your own
- Borrow sections from monographs, articles, or internet sources either by copying them verbatim, compressing them into shorter sentences, or altering the original in any way, without documenting them
- Paraphrase information, in whole or in part, from a source and present it as your own without citing that source.
- Lift ideas from the original and re-use them in a hidden or mosaic way in your own work
- Submit the same paper as an assignment for different courses
- Make up a source because you can't locate the original one from which you obtained your information
- Assume that because material is on the Internet it is in the public domain and hence does not have to be cited

What You Must Do

- Document your sources from the start: from note-taking to the final draft of your paper.
- Cite your sources, print or electronic, where the information therein is unique
- If information is taken directly from a source you need to quote and cite it
- If information is paraphrased, you need to cite the source
- Acknowledge your use of class lecture notes
- Learn to competently paraphrase sources in your own words
- Use quotations sparingly and quote only when you have to, but when you do quote an author you must acknowledge this use through the use of a reference or footnote
- Learn the proper rules of citation. (See [Citation and Bibliographic Formats for Theological Papers](#)).
- Accurately cite your sources of information

When Must You Document Sources

The rule is: if someone else wrote it, then quote it, and /or footnote it.

How Do I Document Sources

Follow the format outlined in the companion guide [Citation and Bibliographic Formats for Theological Papers](#).

Remember, there is no need to document or cite information that is common knowledge, in the public domain, or found in a number of sources. Thus, for example, the fact that Martin Luther was born in 1483 or the disciple Peter was a fisherman, can simply be stated and go unreferenced. It is unique, particular, and specific information that you need to reference.

The Test

Devised by the School of Education, Indiana University, there are 10 questions to answer that will test your knowledge of how to recognize different kinds of plagiarism. If you do not reach the 100% score the first time, then you may retake the test until you do. On completion you can receive a confirmation certificate as a statement by you that you understand plagiarism and know how to avoid it. Once you have successfully completed the test, please inform your instructor accordingly.

[Take the Test](#)

If you still do not understand what plagiarism is after taking this test please consult with your instructor.

Consequences: Disciplinary Action

If you have taken the test, then we assume that you understand what plagiarism is, and that if you are still unsure that you have consulted with your instructor. After that we assume that you will not knowingly indulge in plagiarism again.

However, if a paper you submit is deemed to have infringed the plagiarism rules, then one or other of the following may be resorted to:

- You may be required to redo the assignment
- You may be requested to submit photocopies of the articles and the addresses of websites used in researching your paper
- You may be given a failing grade for the assignment
- You may fail the course
- You may be dismissed from the College

In all cases of dispute a record of your conversation on the matter with the instructor will be documented and you will be required to sign a statement attesting to the veracity of the statement contained therein.

Print Resources on Research and Writing

- Badke, William B. *The Survivor's Guide to Library Research*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990. [UTL Call# Z710.B23 ROB/TRIN/SMC/STAS/VIC].
- Core, Deborah. *The Seminary Student Writes*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000. [UTL Call# BR117.C67 KNOX/REG/VIC/TRIN/STAS].
- Turabian, Kate L. et al. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 7th ed. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. [UTL Call# LB2369.T8 ROB/TRIN/SMC/VIC/EMM/STAS].
- Vyhmeister, Nancy J. *Your Indispensable Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers: for Students of Religion and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001. [UTL Call# BL41.V94 KNOX/EMM/TRIN. LB2369.V94 REG/SMC/STAS].

- Yaghjian, Lucretia B. *Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric for Theological and Biblical Writers*. (New York: Continuum, 2006).[UTL Call# BR44.Y34 ROB/KNOX/REG/EMM/TRIN/STAS].

Online Resources on Writing and Plagiarism

Duke Divinity School: [Citing Sources](#)

Duke Divinity School: [Avoiding Plagiarism](#)

Purdue University: [Avoiding Plagiarism](#)

Northwestern: [How to Avoid Plagiarism](#)

Acadia: [Interactive tutorial](#)

University of Minnesota (Center for Writing): [Plagiarism Resources](#)

The Learning Center: [Plagiarism Resources](#)