Practising academic integrity: Rules about copying at university

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Conventions about copying are context specific
Rules, expectations and practices around copying and drawing inspiration from others’ work are quite different, depending on the context and situation. This is because each context has its own particular practices, traditions, rules, values and expectations.

At university there are very strict and specific conventions about copying and using others’ work. This means there are important rules and practices students are expected to follow whenever they use others’ ideas, information, examples, data, images or words in assignments and exams.

Examples
Being aware that conventions about copying vary depending on the context and situation will help you to understand what is expected when you write assignments and exams at university.
Example one

**Context:** family  

**Situation:** copying and using a family recipe

Copying and using a family recipe is a common practice. Writing out, and using your father’s recipe might be a way to show love, to express identity, remember past shared meals, and build a sense of belonging.

There are still conventions (rules and expectations) operating here. It is very likely you would ask your father before copying and using the recipe. Also, it would not be OK to claim credit for this recipe as if you had created it. Instead, it is likely you would introduce the dish as a family recipe - if cooking it for others.

In **this context**, copying is not only appropriate, it is highly valued.

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Example two

**Context:** school  

**Situation:** exam

Formal rules about copying and drawing inspiration from others’ work operate when sitting exams at schools. Like most educational contexts, schools explicitly state rules about copying, and usually provide lists of acceptable and unacceptable conduct.

In open-book school exams you are expected to follow the set rules and put in the effort required to complete the exam. In this situation copying from fellow students is viewed as cheating. However, students are expected to refer to and use appropriate sources (text books and other class materials) to answer questions in exams.

In **this context** referencing is not expected. However, it is convention to name authors or titles of sources when writing short answers and essays in open-book exams at school.
Example three

**Context:** popular Australian culture

**Situation:** cooking shows, music, visual arts

It is common in Australian popular culture for people to draw inspiration from valued traditions and famous works. For example, a celebrity chef on a cooking show might introduce their new ‘Tuscan-inspired’ dish, or their version of a classic pizza. Or, during a radio interview a band might note the ‘1960s feel’ of the music on their new album. And a visual artist might explain the visual arts traditions they have drawn upon to create their latest exhibition.

There are specific popular culture **conventions** about drawing inspiration from others’ work.

First, copyright laws must not be broken.

Second, the practice of **informal referencing** is commonly used in popular culture. Chefs, musicians, film-makers, poets, sculptures, architects, graffiti artists and fashion designers all routinely **informally reference** the traditions, trends, and works they have drawn inspiration from. In this way authors/creators are careful to avoid taking credit for others’ work.

Clearly stating how valued traditions have influenced a new work, is also one way to add to its value and credibility in popular culture. For example, by introducing a ‘new’ Tuscan-inspired dish, the celebrity chef ‘borrows’ the credibility and value of this cooking tradition. Similarly, a musician introducing a new song as ‘Beatles-inspired’ links their work with this highly valued music.

In the context of popular culture it is OK to draw inspiration from others’ work, so long as copyright is respected, and the influence of others’ work is recognised via **informal referencing**.

In all three examples (above) the conventions (informal rules and expectations) about copying and drawing inspiration from others’ work are different. Understanding that the conventions about copying and drawing inspiration from others’ work vary depending on context is the first step to understanding the very strict and specific conventions about copying at university.

**Why is it important to understand that conventions about copying are context specific?**

Understanding that every context has its own rules and expectations about copying and drawing inspiration from others’ work enables us to alter our practices and conduct accordingly. Using referencing to scrupulously show use of others’ work is appropriate and expected at university. However, formal referencing is not appropriate in other contexts, such as family, socialising on Facebook, or school. The key is to be aware you need to change your conduct depending on the context and situation.
Adhering to university conventions about copying and drawing inspiration from others’ work is essential to practising student academic integrity and avoiding forms of academic misconduct and associated penalties.

**University conventions about copying and drawing inspiration from others’ work are very strict**

Practising academic integrity is all about carefully acknowledging every time you use others’ work. At university, there are very strict and highly valued conventions about using others’ work in assignments and exams.

1. **Students are expected to read and use relevant, credible sources when writing assignments and exams**

   No matter the topic, there will be existing published sources you will be expected to read and use when writing assignments and exams at university. Drawing upon, and responding to, existing knowledge is a highly valued academic writing convention. Students **demonstrate understanding** by referring to and using credible sources in assignments and exams.

2. **Students are expected to correctly and consistently reference every time they use others’ work**

   At university, the convention is to clearly and explicitly show when you use sources (others’ work) in your writing. This means you need to show **every time** you use ideas, information, data, examples, images, or words from **sources**. At university the main way to do this is via consistent and correct referencing.

   You need to reference even if you are not copying words or images from a source (direct quotations). If you are paraphrasing (putting the meaning of the source into your own words) or summarising (picking out the key points) you still need to reference. This is because the convention at university is to carefully show **every time** you use others’ work.

   It is important to understand that it is **not** the responsibility of the marker (reader) to recognise famous quotes or ideas used in your writing. At university, it is **your responsibility**, as the writer, to clearly show every time you use ideas, information, data, examples, images or words from sources.

3. **ALL sources used in your writing must be acknowledged via referencing**

   It is important to understand you must acknowledge whenever you use others’ work, no matter what type of source it is. It is just as important to acknowledge (reference) your use of unit materials including the study guide, lecture podcasts, e-readings and discussion board posts, as it is to acknowledge your use of journal articles, book chapters, reports, newspaper articles, pamphlets, or websites.
4. As a general rule, it is OK to copy and include very small sections of sources in your writing, if you do so sparingly, and reference

Students do copy small sections of sources in order to include them into their writing. Direct quotations (word for word extracts from sources) are the most common ways students include very small copied sections of sources in assignments and exams.

However, direct quotations should be used sparingly. Usually, direct quotations are used to define concepts, or when the wording (phrasing) of the original source is essential to your topic. It is very important to clearly show that you have copied someone else’s words and used them in your assignment. Do this by referencing and formatting the direct quotation according to your set referencing style guide.

Sometimes students will copy images, photos, graphs or tables from sources, to include in their writing. Again, this should be done sparingly and must always be referenced.

In some types of scientific writing the use of direct quotations is not acceptable. It is always important to ask your teachers about academic writing conventions in your discipline or area of study.

5. Usually, students include sources in their writing by paraphrasing or summarising

When you write assignments and exams at university you will be expected to show you have read and understood existing knowledge. This means you will be expected to include ideas, information, arguments and findings from relevant, credible sources.

Students usually include sources in their writing by using paraphrases and summaries. Paraphrases are where you put the meaning of the source into your own words. Summaries are where you identify the main points of a source. Summaries and paraphrases must be referenced.

6. It is NEVER OK to copy others’ work and present it as your own work

At university it is never OK to copy someone else’s work and present it as your own efforts. This is a very strong convention. Using ideas, words, information, images, or data found in sources without acknowledgement is considered copying at university, and is a serious breach of academic integrity.

Remember, as the writer, it is your responsibility to always carefully show when using others’ work, and clearly show where your work ends and others’ work begins. This is achieved by correctly and consistently referencing.

Related Quick Guides

Student academic integrity: An introduction, Student academic misconduct: An introduction, Practising academic integrity: An introduction to referencing, Practising academic integrity: Submitting your own work for assessment