PhD in English: Techniques to Avoid Plagiarism in Thesis Writing

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Abstract:

   Plagiarism has emerged to be the Enemy No. 1 of researchers in Indian universities, IITs and other research organizations as elsewhere in the world. This act of passing another person's work, ideas, or words as one's own is not always intentional, though. When it has claimed the jobs of even IIT professors, it remains to see how the intellectual community comes forward to tackle this menace. Research cannot be done in isolation and this dependence soon assumes the shape and form of plagiarism which continues to haunt the researcher even years after the work has been published. The fact remains that much plagiarism is unintentional although there is no safe passage for the innocent performer as there is no excuse for the ignorance of the law. In other words, the punishment for intentional plagiarists and unintentional plagiarists is almost the same. In this context there is one and only one safe route with regard to plagiarism – avoiding it altogether. It is, however, easier said than done. When there is apparently conflict of interest between the right to copy and copyright, this article advises researchers to eschew legal offensives and defensives and offers them some safeguards against plagiarism by way of certain techniques to nip the problem of plagiarism in the bud itself.

Key words: Plagiarism, plagiarism software, anti-plagiarism software, plagiarism-free, plagiarism check software.

Introduction

Two words which have already become buzzwords in research circles and are talked *ad nauseam* in university common rooms as well as in literary circles nowadays are (1) 'originality' (having a positive connotation) and the other (2) 'plagiarism' (one with a negative connotation) — words that are but two sides of the same coin. Plagiarism (pronounced as /pleɪdʒərɪzəm/) is defined as "the act of using another person's words or ideas without giving credit to that person."[1] To "plagiarize" is "to use another person's ideas or work and pretend that it is your own."[2] If recent news is any indicator, its worst hit victims have been research institutes and researchers. Legally speaking, plagiarism is an act of intellectual theft (of stealing other's words and ideas) and is thus an academic fraud, and hence verily a punishable offence. Even professors in some reputed research institutions (e.g., IITs) have lost their jobs and students their "seats" for committing plagiarism. There seems to be consensus among researchers/ scholars that a PhD thesis should be original and fully plagiarism-free (in principle), but they find it hard to avoid plagiarism. Consequently, there is an enormous gap between the professed theory and actual practice. Whether due to the "publish or perish" syndrome or due to ignorance, plagiarism continues entice researchers. Interestingly enough, hundreds of plagiarism-check software have come up to cater to the needs of universities and researchers, vying with one another to be a part of a PhD scholar's desperate effort to trace plagiarism in their thesis or dissertation and help to counterbalance, but the situation is just as before. Against this backdrop, this article discusses the main reasons that lead researchers (especially PhD scholars) to commit plagiarism (even when they know it pretty well that if detected it will ruin their career) and how to prevent them from falling a prey to this avoidable but nonetheless invincible monster. This paper aims to discuss the

issue of plagiarism, it nature and cause, and offers some practical solutions to research scholars pursuing PhD in English with a view to guiding them to turn their thesis or dissertation plagiarism-proof.

Plagiarism: Some Interesting Observations

Let us have a look at what some writers, researchers, and intellectuals think about terms like *originality* and *plagiarism*:

- "What is originality? Undetected plagiarism." *— Dean Inge* (English author and Professor of Divinity at Cambridge)
- "To steal ideas from one person is plagiarism; to steal from many is research." *— Steven Wright*
- "If you steal from one author it's plagiarism; if you steal from many it's research." *— Wilson Mizner*
- If we steal thoughts from the moderns, it will be cried down as plagiarism; if from the ancients, it will be cried up as erudition. *— Charles Caleb Colton*
- "I've been imitated so well I've heard people copy my mistakes." *— Jimi Hendrix*
- "When a thing has been said and said well, have no scruple. Take it and copy it." *— Anatole France*
- "Plagiarism is the fear of a blank page." *— Mokokoma Mokhonoana*
- In a way, fraud in business is no different from infidelity in marriage or plagiarism in scholarly work. Even people committed to high moral standards succumb. *— Miroslav Volf*
- No, generally I think influence is used as a nice word for plagiarism. *— Gilbert Gottfried*

The above comments show the almost inevitability of plagiarism happening if the researcher is not specially trained or guarded.

The Psychology behind Plagiarism

Plagiarism affects critical thinking or is simply the absence of critical thinking on the part of the researcher concerned. The research scholar has to be very careful when dealing with other people's ideas. With care ad caution, one can avoid plagiarism. As Turnitin (a company that has been fighting the menace of plagiarism through its anti-plagiarism software Turnitin) claims rightly, "Most cases of plagiarism can be avoided, however, by citing sources. Simply acknowledging that certain material has been borrowed, and providing your audience with the information necessary to find that source, is usually enough to prevent plagiarism."[3]

Plagiarism is born in the classroom unnoticed when teachers in their enthusiasm to impress their audience-students fake erudition and adroitly pass on the ideas of critics (often inaccessible to the recipients) masquerading them as their own ideas. Unconsciously though, more often than not, they have planted or transmitted the dreadful disease of plagiarism, like AIDS, in the innocent minds of the gullible students. Thus, plagiarism is very often done unintentionally rather than intentionally. As you see, the birth of plagiarism takes place in complete ignorance and due to the unconquerable weakness of role models to *impress* others as a result of their own delusion of grandeur and malcontentedness. Consequently, when the student grows up to assume the role of the researcher, he or she finds it very difficult to say 'no' to the snare of plagiarism because of the secret (natural) inclination. However, this is not always the cause of plagiarism, notwithstanding the fact that it is basically a psychological compulsion.

Plagiarism is chiefly the manifestation of a complex psychological problem arising out of superiority or inferiority complex, as the case may be with the researcher in question. A researcher commits plagiarism, even when he or she is aware

that plagiarism is an academic fraud and a criminal offence, because of some probable reasons:

1. The researcher suffers from lack of ideas, particularly how to begin or end a discussion.
2. The researcher does not know how to cite sources and give references.
3. The researcher thinks that his or her mischief (i.e., plagiarism) will go undetected.
4. The researcher feels that minor misappropriation cannot be a real danger.
5. The researcher finds it very difficult to avoid taking certain keywords and phrases from a source but thinks quotation marks or parenthesis citation will mar the beauty of expression or the very impact (or when the researcher wants to bury his or her own stupidity behind the impressive camouflage).
6. The researcher has found some big professors doing it without any problems whatsoever.
7. The researcher has been trained by some respectable people (insiders) training how to "de-plagiarize" plagiarized portions in the thesis or research paper (i.e., to avoid being caught eve by the "best" plagiarism software).

Remember, there is not a single person m the world who can claim in writing that he or she has never used other's words, but that does not make everyone a plagiarist. Not giving credit to another person's idea is the root cause of plagiarism. Plagiarism owes its existence to a sense of moral depravity, psychological insecurity, and research inefficiency. Having discussed the *what* and *why* aspects of plagiarism, we can now take up the *how* aspect of plagiarism for exploration.

An Anatomy of Plagiarism

Plagiarism can happen in many ways and in myriad forms, intentionally or unintentionally. When you represent another person's ideas or words, phrases or sentences and even when you use the ideas in your own words, you have committed plagiarism or intellectual theft. Plagiarism is regarded intellectual theft because one's ideas are by law intellectual property and it is created as soon as one has written it down. If you are not original in your thesis writing, you are liable to commit plagiarism in the following ways or in some other ways. Plagiarism is:

- turning in someone else's work as your own
- copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation
- changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of our work, whether you give credit or not.[4]

Writing a PhD thesis or dissertation is not as simple or entertaining as a child's play: it requires constant devotion, proper training in research skills and methodology, industry, and never-ending patience.

How Plagiarism Occurs

PhD scholars have a compulsion to come across other researcher's ideas and discuss their work or contribution to existing literature (which is called Literature Review). Literature review is a "systematic, explicit and reproducible

method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesising the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners" (Fink 12). As Prof. David Denyer states, literature reviews are the "foundations upon which your thesis is based, your data will be analyzed and your discussion/conclusions presented."[5] A review of literature can lead you to decide your research problem and vice versa. Review of literature can also help you determine the research methodology (research methods) you should use to solve your research problem.

It is the imperative need of the literature review that one must visit ad revisit the research works of other researchers. At this stage, some researchers try to avoid the compulsion of reading the original work themselves and prefer to "copy and paste" what others have said or discussed about those work or people. Shortcut of labour in research is a long cut on originality and critical thinking. Due to easy availability of "copiable" material on the internet, the possibility of verbatim copy has increased thousand fold. While doing the literature review, however, the researcher has to keep the following points in mind (just substitute 'PhD thesis or dissertation' in place of 'paper'):

> When you use sources in a paper, remember that the main focus of your paper should always be on what you are saying, rather than on what any individual source is saying. You will, of course, devote portions of your paper to what your sources have to say, but these sources should always be discussed in service of your own argument. Your reader will be interested in the ideas the source offers, but this interest will be primarily in terms of how that source contributes to, or is relevant to, your own argument. ("Choosing Relevant Parts of a Source")[6]

The researcher doing PhD in English must be careful for his or her occupation is to read, digest, and generate enlightened ideas.

University of Stirling's *THE LITTLE BOOK OF PLAGIARISM: What It Is and How to Avoid It* discusses some probable reasons why students plagiarize:

- When a student is not fully aware of what plagiarism is;
- When a student does not fully understand the conventions required in academic writing;
- It can be a panic response to poor time management when an essay deadline is looming:
- If a student feels a desperate need not to be seen as a failure and so copies to try to ensure 'success';
- It can be a response to different academic traditions;
- It can be a response to information overload and the ease with which text can be cut and pasted from the other electronic documents or pages on the Internet;
- It can be an attempt not to displease a tutor;
- The student may copy out text word for word during note-taking and then forget to reword (paraphrase) the text for the assignment. [7]

In all possible ways plagiarism creeps into the PhD thesis or dissertation and damages its core from within as much as a deadly virus spoils a lovely software.

Types of Entry Plagiarism Makes into the PhD Thesis:

1. *Direct Entry*: It happens when the researcher copies word for word from another person's work or from a website. As often found, a researcher copies portions from different sources amd directly puts it without change or with minor changes. Another way of direct plagiarism is paraphrasing the writing of another researcher. It may so happen that a researcher uses his or her own writing for several publications without adhering to norms.

2. *Indirect Entry:* Indirect entry of plagiarism takes place when the researcher uses ideas or words and phrases she or he

had heard spoken but that had never been recorded into tangible material forms (amd the speaker is also dead). It is thus in an indirect way plagiarism makes its entry into the thesis. It also happens when "the writer properly cites a source, but neglects to put in quotation marks text that has been copied word-for-word, or close to it. Although attributing the basic ideas to the source, the writer is falsely claiming original presentation and interpretation of the information."[8]

3. *Lateral Entry:* Plagiarism makes a lateral entry when the researcher has not copied anything from anybody but is still guilty of plagiarism, though in 100% cases it goes undetected. It happens when the PhD supervisor of the unashamed research scholar writes portions or pages for him or her or allows the scholar to generously copy passages from the guide's own thesis or research paper mostly when the areas of research are same or similar. This is quite expected as more often than not the supervisor decides the scholar's topic of research and especially that is suitable to him or her.

As you see, plagiarism is very pervasive in nature and is quite capable of stifling genuine research. An interesting question is often asked — Can plagiarism be completely eradicated? This researcher is quite affirmative that it can be possible by adopting both negative and positive measures. For example, the dire consequences of plagiarism should be impressed upon the researcher before starting PhD and blacklisting both the PhD scholar and the PhD supervisor(s) if plagiarism is detected in the former's PhD dissertation after its submission. Positive measures should be taken like training the scholars by competent researchers/librarians, etc. Appropriate software like Turnitin should be used to trace plagiarism. The most effective step lies in avoiding plagiarism from the Day 1 of the researcher's research life, if not from the Day 1 of the researcher's academic life. (Read Dennis S Bernstein's article "A Student's Guide to Research" to understand the nuances of

research: http://ieeecss.org/CSM/ library/1999/feb1999/03-studentguidetoresearch.pdf). The pleasure of real research is both exhilarating ad edifying. Plagiarism robs from you the pride of creating and disseminating knowledge while depriving you of the joy of discovery and invention. Besides, it makes you a laughing stock when your foolishness or trickery is out. Hence, avoid plagiarism.

Can Plagiarism be avoided?

Plagiarism is not only an academic fraud, but also a criminal activity and the researcher has committed the offence of violating the copyright law. The consequences of plagiarism must be brought to the notice of the PhD scholar. Frightening news like "Plagiarism costs IIM-B topper gold medal" (Published in *Business Line*, March 25, 2015), "Plagiarism punch knocks out IITs Charu Sudan Kasturi" (*Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, Oct 11, 2010), "Copycats from IIT-Kanpur?" (*TNN*; Oct 9, 2010), "UGC panel probing plagiarism charge against Pondy VC" (*The Times of India*, June 28, 2015), etc. will act much a deterrent for the researcher to entertain any thought of plagiarism. I suggest news concerning plagiarism in any corner of the world should be culled by the library concerned and regularly mailed to research scholars (PhD scholars). This is supposed to sensitize the PhD scholars about the growing menace of plagiarism. Even now as I am writing this article, I search the news in Google and I find "British academic detained in Thailand over old plagiarism row" reported by Reuters over Yahoo news. Plagiarism, the predator, is on the prowl; more than ever.

In fact, plagiarism has been and continues to be the greatest menace in doctoral research in India as elsewhere. Wary of this trend, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the highest regulating body of higher education and research in India, has tried to press certain plagiarism-tracking software

into the service of its affiliated research organizations (e.g., universities) while making it compulsory that every PhD thesis must be checked for plagiarism and the PhD scholar and the Supervisor(s) have to furnish a certificate vouchsafing that the thesis is free from plagiarism. The PhD scholar has to declare that he or she has given credit to all the sources (authors, research workers, reporters, etc.) whenever and wherever their works have been cited in the text or in the body of the thesis and that he or she has not included matters from others and cited as his or her own. The Supervisor and the Head of DRC have to issue a verified certificate that the contents of the thesis have been found free from plagiarism and fall within permissible limits. Irrespective of such strict provisions, the sceptre of plagiarism hovers over our universities, IITs and NITs, often claiming jobs of respectable IIT professors! It is good news for the aspiring PhD scholar that the best way to tackle the menace of plagiarism is as simple as fighting corruption – saying 'NO' to it from the very beginning of your research. As it becomes very difficult to withdraw yourself from this temptation after you have entertained it knowingly or unknowingly, it is far better not to ever have a tryst with it. This article highlights the grey area in between the two extremes — right to copy freely and copyright prohibitions — and discusses the "golden path" or middle path: "Honesty is the best policy".

The Right to Copy *vs.* Copyright

First of all, the PhD scholar should understand that the main purpose of doing research is to add to the existing knowledge by some original contribution. In this scheme of things, plagiarism does not fit at all because plagiarism is duplication of knowledge and hence an abominable crime. However, it may be so that one is very resourceful in ideas and has plenty of original and valid ideas, but still has a penchant for copying the

language of others. It happens when a researcher is not trained. In other words, the main cause of plagiarism, especially with the PhD scholars in English, may be attributed to either a lack of ideas (e.g., texts, research paradigms, formats, conventions, and contexts) or a lack of language proficiency (the specific register, syntax, coherence ad cohesion) or both. Of course, understanding why someone copies does not help much. The issue is if copying is inevitable, how much and how much not. In other words, it involves the issue of the right to copy versus copyright (i.e., the infringement of copyright).

Except common knowledge, matters in the public domain and permission of fair use, everything else is copyrighted material. Copyright allows its owner the following options:

- Reproduction
- Modification
- Display/ Performance
- Moratorium on unlawful use
- Selling the right

Copyright prohibits others from using or misusing the copyrighted material without the express approval or permission of the copyright holder. Plagiarism, as already stated, is an act of copyright infringement for having used or misused copyrighted material without giving credit. As it violates copyright law, it is punishable by the court of law. The punishment may include penalty (fine in terms of money) or imprisonment or both. For a PhD scholar, the punishment of plagiarism is rustication or expulsion from the institute and the PhD programme. For a PhD supervisor, the punishment of plagiarism is more severe: suspension or any other suitable punishment as per the provisions of the institute.
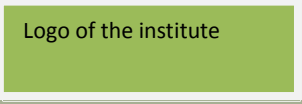
As follows from the above discussion, both the PhD scholar and the PhD supervisor must watch against plagiarism sneaking into the PhD thesis in any form (by direct, indirect or by lateral entry). The UGC Notification (Minimum Standards &

Procedure for Award of M.Phil. / Ph.D Degree, Regulation, 2009) mandates that besides giving own declaration that his/her work is free from plagiarism:
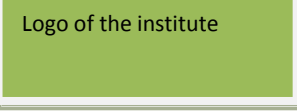
Every candidate shall submit with his/her thesis a certificate from the supervisor(s) that the thesis submitted is a record of original research work carried out by the candidate under his/her supervision and that the thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree/diploma, or other similar titles of this or any other university and that the dissertation/thesis represents independent work of the candidate.

Below are given two formats or templates of Certificate of Originality a PhD scholar may submit:

Example I: ORIGINALITY CERTIFICATE

Logo of the institute	**Department of --------------**
	Name of the Institute
	Place (locality) & country

Certificate of Originality

The research work embodied in this thesis entitled "_____" has been carried out by me at the Department of _____, University of _____, _____(place)_____, India. The manuscript has been subjected to plagiarism check by _____ software. The work submitted for consideration of award of PhD is original. Information derived from the published and unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and references are given in the list of sources. Further, this work has not been submitted to any other institute for award of ay degree or diploma.

Name and Signature of the Candidate

Example II: ORIGINALITY CERTIFICATE

Logo of the institute	**Department of --------------** **Name of the Institute** **Place (locality) & country**

Certificate of Originality

I, (Mr/Ms. _____, certify that the work embodied in this Ph.D. thesis, entitled "_____", is my own bonafide work carried out by me under the supervision of _____ from _____ to _____. The matter embodied in this Ph.D. thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree/diploma.

I declare that I have faithfully acknowledged, given credit to and referred to the authors/research workers wherever their works have been cited in the text and the body of the thesis. I further certify that I have not willfully lifted up some other's work, text, data, results, figures etc. reported in the journals, books, magazines, reports, dissertations, thesis, etc., or available at web-sites and included them in this Ph.D. thesis and cited as my own work.

Name and Signature of the Candidate

A verification report should be provided by the PhD supervisor(s). The verified certificate may look like this:

Verification

This is to certify that the above statement made by _____ is correct to the best of our knowledge. Further, a check for plagiarism has been made on the software available in the institute/University to check plagiarism and the contents of thesis have been found free from plagiarism within permissible limits.

Name and Signature of the Supervisor

(& other persons as per institution rule)

Date

The PhD scholar, however, will not be guilty of plagiarism if he/she uses *common knowledge*, materials in *public domain*, and copyrighted material under the term of *fair use*. Three terms such as *common knowledge*, *public domain*, and *fair use* need to be elaborated perhaps. Common knowledge is free shared as:

Common knowledge is information generally known to an educated reader, such as widely known facts and dates, and, more rarely, ideas or language. Facts, ideas, and language that are distinct and unique products of a particular individual's work do not count as common knowledge and must always be cited. Figuring out whether something is common knowledge can be tricky, and it's always better to cite a source if you're not sure whether the information or idea is common knowledge. If you err on the side of caution, the worst outcome would be that an instructor would tell you that you didn't need to cite; if you don't cite, you could end up with a larger problem [i.e., plagiarism].[9]

Public domain, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, is "the realm embracing property rights that belong to the community at large, are unprotected by copyright or patent, and are subject to appropriation by anyone."[10] It is available for everyone, free of cost, for possession for personal, social, or academic use.

Fair use is a limitation and exception to the exclusive right granted by copyright law to the author of a creative work. In United States copyright law, fair use is a doctrine that permits limited use of copyrighted material without acquiring permission from the rights holders.[11] The Stanford University library explains what *fair use* is:

In its most general sense, a fair use is any copying of copyrighted material done for a limited and "transformative" purpose, such as to comment upon, criticize, or parody a copyrighted work. Such uses can be done without permission from the copyright owner. In other words, fair use is a defense

against a claim of copyright infringement. If your use qualifies as a fair use, then it would not be considered an illegal infringement. … If you are commenting upon or critiquing a copyrighted work — for instance, writing a book review — fair use principles allow you to reproduce some of the work to achieve your purposes. [12]

The most important thing is that a PhD scholar should try to be as original as possible in order to avoid plagiarism.

Techniques to Avoid Plagiarism in a PhD Thesis

A PhD scholar should take special interest and care that his/her PhD thesis turns out to be highly qualitative and original, hence no chance for plagiarism. Quality thesis can be assured only when the scholar has the right contents for writing, resourcefulness, and style of writing. I concur with Gilmore's claim, which he makes in his book *Plagiarism: Why It Happens – How to Prevent It*, that plagiarism can be prevented.

In my own opinion, plagiarism can be fully avoided by the PhD scholar in the following 10 ways:

1. Read the style guide (find out what is actually prescribed for you, such as the MLA Handbook or the APA, etc.) ad learn how to locate sources, cite sources and make references.
2. Whenever you download any material from the internet, write down the date and the URL.
3. Whenever you read any printed material (such as book, article, newspaper) to take note, write down the source, name of the book, article, author's name, page no, edition of the matter, etc. to use in the thesis later (useful to cite sources and give references).
4. Never summarize another person's work without acknowledgement.
5. Never paraphrase another person's work without acknowledgement.

6. Use quotation marks when you verbatim copy something.
7. Acknowledge the source of the tables, diagrams and figures when they are not your own.
8. Use anti-plagiarism software for every paragraph you have written ad cite the sources wherever needed.
9. Compare what is your original work with what you have borrowed from others, and try to make the originality quotient 75: 25 (yours 75%, others' 25% maximum, including literature review)
10. Revise the first draft of your thesis till your originality quotient is achieved and never let it go beyond that after wards.

Conclusion

Plagiarism can sabotage the credibility of a researcher. It may spoil all the inventive ideas and unique research findings by creating an atmosphere of distrust. If you want to enjoy the pride of being a true researcher, you have to keep plagiarism miles away. And this can be done easily: just acknowledge the source and give citations and make references using the style guide. Let your *mantra* to drive away the evil of plagiarism be *Honesty is the best policy.*

ENDNOTES:

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