

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## What Is Plagiarism?

In a junior high science classroom, a girl named Cheryl read aloud her report on pearls. The last words she read were, "Related articles in *World Book* include: Birthstone, Button, Carbonate, Conch, Gem (color picture), Mollusk, Oyster." Cheryl had copied her report, word for word, from the encyclopedia. She hadn't even paid enough attention to see that the last sentence was a dead give away.

Cheryl was guilty of *plagiarism*. What is plagiarism? It is a form of stealing. It is the stealing of another person's words or ideas and using them as your own. Cheryl had plagiarized her report because she had pretended the *World Book* article was her own work.

### Plagiarism is a serious offense

Plagiarism is against the law. Of course it is unlikely that the police are going to come into a school and arrest a boy or girl for plagiarism, even if the student is guilty. However, older students and adults who are caught plagiarizing can get into serious trouble — losing lawsuits, having their careers ruined, flunking courses, being expelled from school.

For example, in 1987 Senator Joseph Biden withdrew as a candidate for President because of charges of plagiarism. One example was in a speech he gave to the California State Democratic Convention. The speech was remarkably similar to a speech given by Robert Kennedy in 1968. Biden was criticized for the speech because he did not give Kennedy credit for the words he used.

### Give credit to your sources

There is nothing wrong with using the words of another — if you give that person credit for the words. There are a number of ways to do that. The simplest way is just to say so. Tell who you are quoting, and then put quotation marks around the person's words.

What about changing a word here and there? Many students think that if you change "a" to "the" in a sentence, you aren't copying. They are wrong. You are still plagiarizing, even if you change several things slightly but leave the material essentially the same.

### Plagiarism applies to ideas, as well as words

Plagiarism can exist even if you don't copy at all! Using someone's ideas as your own is also plagiarism.

Suppose that a Dr. Joe Schmoe writes a newspaper article with a suggestion for improving the U.S. economy. He suggests that all students be required to drop out of school between the ages of 12 and 15, to save school districts money and to allow students more time to spend money at local malls. You think that sounds like a great idea, so you write an English paper suggesting the same thing — but never mentioning Dr. Schmoe. Even if you don't use Dr. Schmoe's words, you have plagiarized his ideas.

The solution? You don't have to give up the idea for your English paper. All you have to do is summarize Dr. Schmoe's ideas, giving him credit for them. Then you can go on to discuss and expand on those ideas — in your own words.

## Recognizing plagiarism

Let's see if you can recognize plagiarism. Read the following paragraph from the book *Madonna*, by Jessica Maxwell (Turman Publishing Company, 1987):

*It's too easy to think that Madonna became a star overnight; she didn't. Madonna worked very, very hard for six long years before she got her first record deal. She was poor, and she lived in ratty old rooming houses in New York City. There were times when all she had to eat was popcorn. "I lived on popcorn," Madonna says. "That's why I still love it. Popcorn is cheap and it fills you up."*

Now look at each of the following paragraphs from student reports on Madonna. Put a "P" beside each paragraph that includes plagiarized material, and be ready to explain what is wrong. Put an "OK" beside each paragraph that contains no plagiarism.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ It's easy to think that Madonna became a star overnight, but she didn't. She worked very, very hard for six years before she got her first record deal.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Madonna has worked hard to become a star. Things were hard for her when she was living in New York City, trying to get her first record deal. Sometimes she was so poor that she had nothing to eat but popcorn.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Madonna used to be poor and lived in ratty old rooming houses in New York City. There were times all she had to eat was popcorn.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Madonna is one of my favorite stars. Many people think she was an overnight success, but according to Jessica Maxwell in her book *Madonna*, Madonna "worked very, very hard for six long years before she got her first record deal."
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Madonna was very poor while she struggled to become a star. She used to live "in ratty old rooming houses in New York City. There were times when all she had to eat was popcorn" (Jessica Maxwell, *Madonna*, 1987).
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Madonna is strong. She worked very, very hard for six long years before she got her first record deal. It was hard for her. She was poor, and she lived in ratty old rooming houses in New York City. It must have been awful. There were times when all she had to eat was popcorn.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ "It's too easy to think that Madonna became a star overnight; she didn't. Madonna worked very, very hard for six long years before she got her first record deal. She was poor, and she lived in ratty old rooming houses in New York City. There were times when all she had to eat was popcorn. 'I lived on popcorn,' Madonna says. 'That's why I still love it. Popcorn is cheap and it fills you up.'"