O
e of the best compliments a publication
can receive is the desire of others to use its
content for their own purposes, whether in
a second publication or in informal shar-
ing with colleagues. Unfortunately, the line between
the compliment of borrowing and the fault of plagiarism is
not well understood. Most people know that plagiarism
is wrong, but many outside of publishing or academia
may not understand exactly what it is and how to avoid it.

What Is Plagiarism?
To plagiarize is “to steal and pass off (the ideas or words
of another) as one’s own; use ... without crediting the
source”1. Notice the word steal. The key to determining
whether something is plagiarized is whether the writer
clearly identifies what he or she has quoted or para-
phrased from the original source. Using another’s pub-
lished work without attribution is unethical and infringes
on the rights of the author and the publication in which
the original material appeared. “Plagiarism of published
work violates standards of honesty and collegial trust and
may also violate copyright law.”2

You can also expose yourself to accusations of plagi-
arism by using another’s words, even with proper
attribution, if they are too close in form or content to
the original source.3 This is a matter of degree, and
sometimes is a judgment call, but it’s best to err on the
side of caution and make the phrasing your own. Would
someone reading your article alongside the article you’re
citing feel that your content was basically cut and pasted
from the source? If so, you’re risking plagiarism, and it’s
best to write your paper so that it doesn’t closely resemble
the source you’re citing.3

Some cases of plagiarism may arise because the author
simply does not understand publication ethics, which are
rarely taught in most professional academic programs.
For example, we became aware of a physician who in all
innocence, but without attribution, used large portions of
AFP articles and patient information handouts in a
weekly health column in his local newspaper. We applaud
this physician’s efforts to bring high-quality medical
information to his community. There is, however, a right
way and a wrong way to borrow published information.

Crediting the Original Source
Authors and editors of AFP and other journals work
hard to bring the most up-to-date information to their
readers. Citing the original source gives your presenta-
tion of the material more credibility, and it provides
the appropriate and deserved credit to the originally
published work.

This can be done very simply. For example, if you
want to use information from an article in this issue
for a newspaper column, you can credit it as follows:
“According to an article in the December 15, 2010, issue
of American Family Physician ...” and then paraphrase
the information you want to convey. Reuse of published
content in a more formal publication, such as an article
submitted to another medical journal, requires more
formal attribution in footnotes or references. In this
case, either quote the material exactly and enclose it
in quotation marks, or paraphrase the material, being
careful to keep the original meaning. As mentioned,
however, the challenge is in making the wording your
own, so that the paraphrase doesn’t look too similar to
the original source, especially for large portions of text.
With either method, the source must be cited.

When to Ask for Permission to Use Published Work
Directly quoting significant portions of a published work
or reproducing a table or figure requires more formal
permission from the original publisher. Unfortunately,
copyright law does not specify how much text may be
used without approaching the original publisher for
permission. The best approach: when in doubt, ask. We
are here to help you disseminate important primary care
information to your colleagues and patients. If you have
questions, please contact us at afpedit@aafp.org.

REFERENCES