Good academic practice: Guidance for students frequently asked questions

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1. How should I use these FAQs?

These FAQs contain advice concerning the Policy on Good Academic Practice which has been approved by the University’s Learning and Teaching Committee. All students are expected to be aware of this policy and to abide by it at all times. The Policy on Good Academic Practice must be taken as the definitive source of information.

2. Why do I need to read these FAQs?

You should note that an absence of intention to commit academic misconduct, extenuating circumstances, or a claim of ignorance of the University’s expectations on good academic practice is not an acceptable defence against an allegation of academic misconduct.

In academic misconduct cases, serious penalties may be imposed if you are found guilty.

3. What is good academic practice and why is it important?

All work submitted by undergraduate and postgraduate students is expected to represent good academic practice. As outlined by the University’s Training in Good Academic Practice:

Good academic practice is about approaching and completing your academic work with integrity. Fundamental values of academic integrity include honesty, responsibility, fairness, justice, and (self) respect for your work, learning and ultimately your degree. These are the values promoted by the University of St Andrews, the academic community of which you are a member. As a member of this community you are accessing, sharing and discussing others’ works, concepts and ideas, from which you will develop your own knowledge.

It is important that within this community all members are judged on their individual academic abilities, and that no student is allowed unfairly to take advantage over others, to affect the security and integrity of the assessment process, or to diminish the reliability and quality of a St Andrews degree. In short, it is important that no student participates in any form of academic misconduct but that, instead, they develop good academic practices which promote integrity, character and a work ethic worthy of the awarded degree. (University of St Andrews, 2018)

Good academic practice is therefore the responsible use of data, sources, evidence and other information, however derived, in your own academic work. It includes proper citation and referencing in written work, responsible use of experimental data, acknowledgement of sources, etc. Good academic practice is important in the wider academic community. We have a duty to others to acknowledge their input to works that we produce; we should not be seeking to claim credit for the ideas or analysis of others.

Therefore at this level of education we expect students to take ideas and information from various sources and work them up along with their own ideas and interpretations into an original piece of writing, documenting the sources they have used and distinguishing their own ideas from those of other people.
4. How can I learn about good academic practice?

All students matriculated at the University of St Andrews must complete the on-line training in good academic practice and any School specific training or materials available.

If you are in any doubt about good academic practice or about the training you are required to complete, your Adviser of Studies should be able to help you either themselves or by referring you to the appropriate person within the School.

5. Do different Schools at the University differ in their practices?

The nature of good academic practice may vary between disciplines. Different disciplines also have different conventions on how referencing should take place. Using the "wrong" referencing system for your discipline may reduce the grade you receive for your work. You should always consult your School Handbook for information regarding what form of academic practice is required for each module.

6. What is academic misconduct?

There are some activities by students in higher education that most people would find easy to identify as "cheating".

Some major areas of academic misconduct are:

- plagiarism;
- false citation;
- aiding and abetting;
- falsification of data;
- multiple submission;
- cheating in exams and;
- contract cheating.

7. What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the submission of someone else's work as though it were one's own. Plagiarism may occur unintentionally through poor work practices, as students may for example submit work that contains the words or ideas of others without realising that they need proper acknowledgement. A piece of work that contains plagiarised material may be subject to a penalty even if there were no intention to plagiarise. It is consequently very important for you to understand how to avoid producing work that contains plagiarised material.

8. How do I avoid plagiarism?

Copying and pasting material from a web site or book into a piece of written work is likely to be regarded as plagiarism (but see next question), even if it is just one sentence that is copied. While students are certainly expected to read the work of others, their written work should be in their own words, and the sources of information they are using should be acknowledged in a footnote, specific reference list, or bibliography depending on the
subject's requirements. Merely changing a word here and there through a copied paragraph is not enough either, and nor is taking the structure of another person's article and rephrasing the argument (known as paraphrasing).

9. But what if I do want to directly quote or use directly copied material?

If you wish to include material from one of your sources word-for-word, then it should be included within quotation marks and have its source clearly stated. This gives credit where it is due, and allows the reader to follow up the material presented. (This is quite normal practice in some disciplines, but is much less widely used in others).

If you wish to use a picture or diagram from one of your sources, then this is acceptable within the University’s Good Academic Practice policy as long as you specifically acknowledge the source. You should always consult your School Handbook for advice on how to acknowledge various sources for each specific discipline.

10. Are expectations at the University of St Andrews different from previous experiences with respect to plagiarism?

Earlier in your education it may have been entirely acceptable to find information from one or more sources and to copy these out with a few linking sentences into a report of some form. At University this approach is not acceptable. Most pieces of written work that you may be asked to tackle will involve some analysis or explanation from you, helping you to develop the higher-level skills of synthesis of an argument and explaining concepts to others. If at any stage you are not sure about what is allowable, please ask those teaching staff associated with the assignment for advice.

11. What is false citation?

Sources should be cited accurately, fully and in accordance with discipline-specific conventions. False citation is the use of incorrect citation or acknowledgment of a source. It may also include the citation of sources that were not used to prepare the academic work in a bibliography or other list of references.

12. What is aiding and abetting?

Allowing someone to copy your work is also an offence under this University’s policy, so both the copier and the original author may face proceedings. This misconduct could take the form of copying results of a laboratory experiment, part of an essay, or part of a computer programme, for example.

In many instances students are encouraged to discuss their work with other students, and such discussions may lead to modification in their own work, to their legitimate benefit. There may also be occasions where students are asked to work in a group and to submit the results of collaborative work. However, allowing someone to copy your work for submission and submit it as though it were their own is likely to give rise to an offence by both parties.
Helping another student to commit any other form of academic misconduct is also considered aiding and abetting.

If at any stage you are not sure about what is allowable, please ask those teaching staff associated with the assignment for advice.

13. What is falsification of data?

Falsification of data is the inclusion of falsified, invented, or fictitious data or information in a submission, or the deliberate and knowing concealment or distortion of the true nature, origin, or function of such data or information. In any academic study the integrity of the researcher is vital. Any data used in a lab report, population study, or economic report should be real and representative. It is entirely unacceptable to fabricate or alter data to fill in a gap in a graph, or to invent results of an experiment and then report them as genuine measurements.

It is also unacceptable to conceal data in order to improve the outcome of research.

14. What is multiple submission?

Work prepared for assessment should be submitted once and once only. Submitting the same material for more than one assessment task is academic misconduct. This applies to substantial portions of previously submitted work as well as to whole assignments.

On occasion assignments within a module may intentionally build on each other, such as submitting an outline before submitting a report. If at any stage you are not sure about what is allowable, please ask those teaching staff associated with the assignment for advice.

15. What is contract cheating?

Contract cheating is where a student commissions or seeks to commission another party (either paid or unpaid) to perform academic work on their behalf. The Quality Assurance Agency defines contract cheating as follows:

"Contract cheating' happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted. It is distinct from collusion, as the student contracts the third party to provide the assessment, usually a company or individual using a website to promote themselves and receive orders. Such companies have become known as 'essay mills', even though they supply more than just essays. The common approach is for the work to be outsourced once again by the mills to individual writers."

Regardless of whether a student is successful in commissioning the work, or eventually submits the commissioned work for assessment, the act of seeking to commission work is considered contract cheating.

Even asking a friend, family member, or another individual to complete any aspect of assessed work is considered as contract cheating as a student is contracting that work out to a third party to complete it on their behalf. Students should also be aware of
companies advertising services by ‘essay mills’ via University email accounts and educational forums online. The University does not endorse any services of this type. This does not preclude the legitimate use of proof readers by students. Students who are found to be offering essay-writing services will be dealt with under the non-academic misconduct policy.

16. What is cheating in exams?

Any attempt to gain improper advantage in the course of a University examination is academic misconduct. This includes, but is not limited to, bringing notes or other written materials to your desk in the examination venue, the use of electronic devices other than those specifically permitted for the particular examination, communication with other candidates during the examination, attempting to gain sight of another candidate’s work or deliberately allowing another candidate to see your work.

An extensive list of materials permitted in examinations is maintained by the Examinations Office and information can be found on the web:


If in any doubt, please speak to the Chief Invigilator of the examination venue.

17. How is plagiarism, multiple submission and contract cheating detected?

You should be aware that the University may use a variety of means to detect cases of plagiarism, multiple submission and contract cheating, including plagiarism detection software. Students may be asked to submit their work directly through plagiarism detection software or via Moodle or MMS, and staff may submit student work directly to plagiarism detection software for checking. Plagiarism detection software may keep a record of submitted work for checking against future submissions.

18. What if I am short of time to submit an assignment?

On occasion students may find it difficult to manage their time. This may lead to a temptation to take “short cuts” in the preparation of work rather than risk a penalty for late submission of work. Such short cuts might include not keeping notes of the sources of their material, or even submitting a piece of work copied from a book, internet source, or another student. However, it should be borne in mind that the possible outcomes for cases of academic misconduct are much more serious than for late submission of work. Please do remember that if work has to be submitted late for a good reason you can always approach a member of staff.

19. What will happen if I am suspected of academic misconduct?

If it is a first case and the offence is relatively minor you may receive a written warning from the Academic Misconduct Officer in your School. Do not ignore the written warning; take steps to ensure that you NEVER repeat this offence and be sure to complete any remedial academic integrity training required. Your name will be held on a central Academic Misconduct Register and more serious or second offences will be taken very seriously. If the case is more serious, you will receive a letter inviting you to attend a board of adjudication.
20. Can I bring someone with me to the Board?

At these adjudication boards (School and University) a student has the right to be accompanied by a representative who may be a person who is either presently matriculated as a student, or is an employee of the University of St Andrews or who is elected as a sabbatical officer or is an employee of the Students’ Association of the University of St Andrews.

21. What are the penalties for Academic Misconduct?

First cases of academic misconduct will often be handled by an adjudication board at School level, and penalties for students found guilty can range from a written warning to a mark of zero for that piece of work.

Once the relevant penalty is issued, the student’s name is submitted to the Academic Misconduct Register and the student must retake the online Training in Good Academic Practice course within five working days of the date of the sanction. Failure to retake the Training in Good Academic Practice course may be taken into consideration should the student be investigated once again for suspected academic misconduct.

Major or repeated cases of misconduct will be taken to a University Board of Adjudication, and there the penalties for those found guilty can be up to and including expulsion from the University.

In line with High Principle No. 9 in the Policy on Good Academic Practice, while extenuating circumstances are not an acceptable defence against an allegation of academic misconduct, extenuating circumstances can be presented to the Board for the purpose of sanction mitigation. Students must also provide evidence to support a claim of extenuating circumstances (e.g., medical evidence).

Whilst a student may present extenuating circumstances as a mitigating factor to the Board determining the sanction, the Board may decide that these extenuating circumstances are not sufficiently mitigating.

For further information about the various sanctions for UG, PGT and PGR students please see the Policy on Good Academic Practice.

22. Can I appeal the decision?

Students have a right of appeal against any decisions made by School or University Boards of Adjudication, on the following grounds only:

- In the case of appealing a sanction, but not the academic decision to uphold an allegation of academic misconduct (which is not permitted): extenuating personal circumstances materially affecting academic performance of which the University was not aware when the academic decision was taken, and which could not reasonably have been disclosed by the student (an explanation for earlier non-disclosure at the time of the hearing is always required);
• A defective or irregular procedure that has materially affected the academic decision of the relevant Board of Adjudication.

The student must write to the relevant Dean with their grounds for appeal within 5 working days of the decision, and if the Dean believes there are valid grounds for appeal, then this will be referred through the relevant route of appeal.

For further information, please see http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/students/rules/appeals/policy/

23. Where can I go for help?

The Academic Skills Consultant in the University’s central Learning and Teaching Service (CAPOD) has produced guidance on how to avoid committing academic misconduct. This material is available online as a Moodle course called Training in Good Academic Practice. There are also links to various academic writing web sites from the Study Support area of the CAPOD web pages. You may also approach CAPOD for help with Good Academic Practice.

The Education Advocate for students at the Students’ Association can give advice to students and may be able to accompany you to academic misconduct hearings.

For further information, please contact the Student Advocate (Education):

Iain Cupples
Student Advocate (Education)
Telephone: 01334 462726
Email: helphub@st-andrews.ac.uk

There are various useful sources of online guidance on plagiarism and other academic misconduct issues, collated and provided by CAPOD:

https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/capod/students/studyskillsandadvice/

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