

A DIVA'S CHRONICLES...



**TO CITE OR NOT TO CITE:
IT'S NEVER A QUESTION**
by Crystal Jordan

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A Quick Review

A little about my credentials—when I'm not writing romance, I'm an instruction librarian at a university library. This means I teach college students how to research and how to cite the sources that they find. A lot of what I'm about to tell you may seem like review, but I get more students who miss questions about plagiarism than most people would believe. It seems easy, doesn't it? If an idea isn't yours, you cite it. If you pull a sentence from another person's work, you cite it.

The problem is that with the proliferation of information online, it becomes easier and easier to steal ideas and not get caught. It also becomes harder and harder for writers to know when they're taking an idea and putting their own unique spin on it and when they're stealing someone else's idea. But we're all aware of the adage that there are no new ideas in fiction, there is only the twists writers use to make ideas their own. It's a thin line writers tread, and there are many pitfalls along the way. I don't have a quick fix for you; I don't have any easy answers. What I can give you is a quick guide on how not to end up accused of plagiarism. Plagiarism is theft of intellectual property. Or more specifically, to plagiarize is "to commit literary theft : present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source." I took this definition from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online. This is how I would cite my source: "Plagiarize." Merriam-Webster Online. 2006. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. 25 Feb 2007 <<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/plagiarizing>>.

The Internet is Copyrighted

The internet may seem like a free-for-all of information and ideas, but it is not. The information on the internet belongs to website authors just like book and article authors, so you have to cite it. Here's an example that might bring this point home to you. As a romance author, I have a website. Many other authors do the same because the internet can be used as a tool to promote

our work. On my website, I have blurbs and excerpts for my works in progress. This lets my readers know what might be coming out and what books they might want to read of mine. That information is copyrighted. I wrote it, I own it, and if someone uses my idea or takes my writing from my excerpts and uses it in their writing, that's plagiarism.

However, there is public information that you don't have to cite, such as historical dates. You can read a book or website about the Alamo and use the historical data found there, such as when the Alamo happened, who was involved, why the event occurred, what events lead up to the Alamo, what happened as a result of the Alamo. You don't have to cite that information if you use fact as a base for your fiction. What you do have to cite is if you use the book or website author's unique political theories to fuel your work. That information is owned by the author.

I'll be the first to admit there is a lot of gray area when it comes to citation, but if you're ever in doubt: cite. You can never get into hot water if you cite a source when you don't have to. You can get into some serious trouble if you don't cite when you should.

Citation Station

There are many ways to cite your sources. These ways are called citation styles. The style I used to cite my definition of plagiarism is the Modern Language Association (MLA) Style. Any citation style will work, but you should be consistent if you cite more than one source in an article, web page, or book. Many different websites exist that can assist you in citing sources, so I'll give you a few of my favorites:

Purdue University's OWL English Website (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>)

Cornell University's Guide to Bibliographic Citations
(<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/bibcitations.html>)

Duke University's Citation Guide (http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/cite/works_cited.htm)

All of these sites can give you a basic explanation of how to cite sources. If you don't have time to learn, but know you need to cite a source, you can take the quick and easy way out. I'd suggest using a citation generating program. My favorite is available free online.

Citation Machine (<http://citationmachine.net/>)

Citation Machine, and other programs like it, allows you to pick your preferred citation style, type in the information about the book, article, or web page you want to cite and it will generate a citation for you. None of these programs are perfect, so learning how to cite is well worth your time.

All's Fair in Love and Literature

You can use a small percentage of another person's work as long as you cite it, and it's not a legal issue. A few sentences from a book or website aren't a problem. When it becomes a legal issue is when you use a large percentage, or even all, of another author's book or article. This violates fair use. It is not that you cannot use some or all of another author's work, but if you use more than a sentence or two, you have to contact the author and obtain their permission.

Please note that I'm a librarian and not a lawyer, so consult an expert on fair use and copyright

if you have any legal questions. This is a simple explanation of what can become a complicated problem. The bottom line is if you use a lot of someone else's work, just a citation isn't enough. So, either limit your use of other writers' work, or be prepared to contact the author and possibly a lawyer.

And yes, mentioning lawyers is a scare tactic on my part. Plagiarism and fair use are serious legal issues. I would hate to see any writer get in trouble over what may have been a mistake made out of ignorance. Be aware of where you get your information, and know when and how to cite a source if you need to.

About Crystal:

Crystal Jordan began writing romance after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be eaten away by homework. She is originally from California, but has lived and worked all over the United States. Currently, she serves as a librarian at a large research university in the Rocky Mountains and writes paranormal, futuristic, and erotic romance.

For more about her, visit her online home at <http://www.crystaljordan.com>

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