

Yes this IS Plagiarism, Bad Manners, Illegal & Unethical

A public uprising in 2012 against the SOPA and PIPA acts in the House and Senate that would inject government censorship over the internet so that mega-billion dollar companies in the entertainment business could prevent digital piracy has refocused my attention on the issue of intellectual property and copyright law.

Let me bring this down to the scale of the individual social worker, psychologist, marriage and family therapist, counselor, life coach, and everyone else running a one person office and marketing on the internet.

If you think online piracy doesn't have anything to do with you as a solopreneur with a small static website, an infrequently updated blog, and a personal profile on a few locator directories, think again.

I hear stories of outrage time and again from colleagues and clients that some therapist or coach has copied something off their website nearly verbatim, and used it as their own. Under the law, this is considered theft of intellectual property.



It's bad enough when an article, blog post, or forum comment is ripped off. But shockingly, some of this has happened by colleagues taking personal profiles and even personal bio material.

I suppose we could be compassionate and understanding and give these perpetrators the benefit of doubt. Bless your hearts, maybe you don't know that everything written on the internet has an

inherent copyright that belongs to the original author. Maybe you really meant to ask permission, and just forgot. Maybe you think this is a form of practicing the adage that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

None of those generous excuses cut it with me. If you've taken what someone else has written — without their express permission — you are stealing. Pure and simple.

So let's assume you are just ignorant of the law, because of course, copyright law isn't typically taught in psychology and coaching programs — although it's a fair bet that plagiarism was mentioned once or twice. Maybe you think only books are copyrighted.

Here's what you need to know to avoid the very bad manners — not to mention the downright unethical, illegal behavior — of swiping that brilliant paragraph from the website of your colleagues down the street, or across the country.

1. Every one who writes something themselves and puts it on a website is considered the author of that writing with an automatic copyright protection for their work. It is not necessary to file for a registered copyright. The protection exists from the moment the website goes live on the internet. When a website goes live the content is considered published, just like it would be in a book.

The only exception to this is in the case of people hired to produce writing for companies that hold the copyright. That normally applies to big companies with lots of employees. If I write a letter to the editor for an online version of a local newspaper, by submitting that letter I might be automatically surrendering my copyright on it to the newspaper company. But what I originate on my own website is published by and belongs to me.

2. Everything written on a website, unless otherwise clearly marked, is covered by copyright, and no one else is allowed to use it for their own purposes unless:

- a. you ask and are granted permission
- b. you see a [Creative Commons](#) type of permission

3. Copyright law restrictions apply to

- web page content, even bio pages
- advertising content, even testimonials
- blog and forum post content, whether forums are public or private
- downloadable products like articles, tip sheets, and ebooks
- email content you write is yours, the reply from your colleague is theirs
- biographical profiles and mini-marketing messages on locator directories
- even social media posts are technically protected by original author copyright law unless otherwise surrendered by accepting the terms and conditions of the social media platform

Saying that you didn't see a copyright notice on a website and thought therefore that the material was free to take is like saying you didn't see an anti-theft notice on a package of cookies and thought it fine to open and eat at the grocery store while leaving the package on the shelf. We all know when we're taking something that doesn't belong to us, and when we're passing off someone else's hard work as our own.

And by the way, everything I said above about written material applies to photographs and other artwork. These too are considered intellectual property and may not be used without permission, or unless purchased or acquired from a clearly declared free source.

If you are struggling with writing your web content, your personal bio or your locator profiles, hire a web copywriter or use a service that provides article content for a fee. These are easy to find with a Google search.

No Hype Coaching Question: Does fear of plagiarizing prevent you from writing? What you should know about that is that neither ideas nor titles can be copyrighted. But, titles may be able to be trademarked. Check the law at those last two links if you're in doubt.

Still need writing help? I'm available for consultation, or for techie teaching via editing of your first couple drafts.