WHEN IN DOUBT, ATTRIBUTE

Copying someone else's ideas or words is plagiarism, whether done knowingly or unknowingly.

The most basic way is the wholesale lifting of sentences or paragraphs from someone else's published or circulated work.

A more subtle, and arguable, way is the use of someone else's original ideas or theses in one's own work without attribution, said Professor Davin Chor of Singapore Management University's School of Economics.

“What's especially unacceptable is if the work is submitted with the intention of passing it off as one's own idea,” he added.

When plagiarism happens in universities here, students found guilty may fail the class, be suspended or even expelled, depending on the severity of the offence and whether it is a repeat offence.

A “serious” offence is when almost the entire submitted work is copied without attribution.

Professor Mark Featherstone, interim dean of the Nanyang Technological University's College of Science, said some short expressions of facts are common and, as such, “not plagiarism”.

These expressions include:
- Money can't buy you love.
- The weather was horrendous.
- DNA is a double helix.
- Human beings are primates.
- Earth is the third planet from the Sun.

Suppose a passage contains a few well-worn phrases. A combination of the phrases in a particular order is unique, and copying the passage without attribution would then be plagiarism, he said.

An example of such a passage would be: “Because the weather was horrendous, Evelyn stayed indoors to listen to an album titled Money Can't Buy You Love. She also read that DNA is a double helix, that human beings are primates, and that Earth is the third planet from the Sun.”

The same standards apply in book publishing.

Non-fiction book writers are expected to attribute their information sources on which they base their opinions.

Attribution is often done as a footnote or at the back on a dedicated citation page, with details like chapter, book, publisher and year published.

Non-fiction books include biographies and academic journals.

“Even if the source is Wikipedia, it has to be attributed,” said Ms Catherine Khoo, secretary of the Singapore Book Publishers Association.

Fiction writers do not have to attribute anyone as their work has to be original.

As for journalism, Straits Times editor Han Fook Kwang says it is best always to attribute, so readers know what the source was.

“The key is to be honest with our readers,” he said.

“There might be instances where it's not so clear if it is plagiarism, especially when it concerns ideas and not printed words, but I prefer to be cautious about this - when in doubt, attribute. It doesn't take much to do this, and our readers will appreciate our honesty.”