

"Plagiarism isn't just a lie, it isn't just cheating (in cases of contests or academia) and it isn't just copyright infringement (in many cases), it's also incredibly stupid."

— Jonathan Bailey, *Plagiarism Today*

How to Take Somebody Else's Good Idea and Make it Your Own — Legally

By Jennifer Stevens

Recently I read an article with somebody else's name on it that sounded an awful lot like something I'd written. Most of it had been lifted word-for-word. The writer apologized profusely. Case closed.

Still, it got me thinking about the ways you can successfully approach a topic when lots of folks have written about it before.

Penning articles can be a great way to build your credibility, promote your expertise, and woo clients. But, copying somebody else's text — in addition to being illegal — makes you look lazy.

Lifting ideas, though ... that's a different matter. Ideas cannot be copyrighted. When you pluck one — *and you make it your own* — you look enterprising.

It's not that hard to do. The trick is to "cook" an idea your own way. Think about it like this ...

Say you go to an orchard to pick apples with a couple of friends. Baskets full, you each head home to whip up a dessert. One friend makes an apple pie. The other makes an apple tart. You make an apple cobbler. You all start with the same raw ingredients: those apples ... plus sugar, flour, butter, cinnamon. But, you each make something unique.

You can do the same thing with ideas.

An easy, surefire way is to draw on your own experiences. Here are four ways to do that:

1.

Come up with an appropriate analogy that's all your own. My apple-picking analogy here? It came to mind because some friends and I recently took our kids to *Happy Apple Farms*. I had apples on the brain. Lots of people have written about plagiarism, but I seriously doubt any have discussed it in the same breath with apple cobbler.

2.

Peg your ideas to a recent experience you've had or to a current news item. An easy way to freshen a "classic" idea is to relate it to something you just did or read or to some recent newsworthy event.

For instance, if I were to pen an article titled, "How to Write Good Descriptions." I could begin by referencing a piece I read recently in *The New York Times*. The descriptions were particularly strong. I'd explain to my readers *why* they're so engaging. I could talk about what that writer did so well — and show my readers how they could do the same thing.

Often you'll find great jumping-off points in the news. Say, for example, that you want to write an article about how best to handle a public-relations challenge. You could open your piece by referring to the recent Toyota scandal. What lesson would you have your readers learn from the way Toyota handled their crisis?

3.

Aim for a fresh audience. An idea that might feel pretty standard-issue to a certain group of readers can be truly eye-opening to another. So, think about the ways you can take the know-how you use every day in your own area of expertise and find new folks to share it with.

For example, take an idea like using "picture, promise, proof, push" in a promotion. That's not new to you if you've studied copywriting technique. It's a "classic" idea to an audience of copywriters. But if you're a [travel writer](#), in all likelihood that's new to you. So, I could write about how you take this proven copywriting technique and apply it to travel articles. And, that would be a whole new take on the subject.

4.

Start with somebody else's idea, say it's their idea ... and then refute it, agree with it, or build upon it. Start with an assertion somebody else makes and react to it. Say you read an article about how to use vinegar to remove laundry stains. The author asserts that there's no more powerful natural stain-fighter. You could agree, maybe even quote the writer and send your readers to her piece. But, then your piece might continue, "But vinegar is good for a whole lot more than laundry. Here are five household hassles vinegar takes care of instantly ... "

Have you ever found yourself reading an article and nodding vigorously in agreement? Well, begin there. Tell your readers that you just read this piece, and it's spot on. Tell them they should go read it, too. But then explain why you feel that way. Use an example from your own life. Share a story that further supports that other author's idea.

My point, finally, is simple: You don't need to copy somebody else's words. Even if the idea you want to write about has been written about thousands of times before. Look to your own life. Look to what's going on in the world around you today. Share your reactions. Your opinions. That's how you take a "classic" idea and make it your own.

[Ed. Note: Master copywriter Jen Stevens regularly shares her know-how in articles she writes about copywriting (and travel writing, too). Jen will be offering her insights and expertise to AWAI members at this year's FastTrack to Copywriting Success Bootcamp and Job Fair. For details and a discount, [go here](#).]

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