First Essay: Plagiarism

Present and defend the best definition of plagiarism that you can. I suggest you start by considering definitions you find in a dictionary, legal reference work, or a university website about academic misconduct. You will probably want to consult several references and compare the definitions you find. You may think one of them is adequate, or you may want to write your own definition. In any case, provide a careful discussion of the relative virtues of features of the definitions you have examined, in light of your own understanding of the term. The essay should be no longer than five pages long, about 1800 words. It must be typewritten, double-spaced.

A good definition should clearly and correctly categorize actions according to whether or not they fall under the rubric in question, and not just categorize some actions as plagiarism, some as not plagiarism, and yet others as neither plagiarism nor not plagiarism. Hence, the best definitions are those that give both necessary and sufficient conditions for determining that something falls within the denotation of the expression in question:

- **Necessary conditions:** those which must be satisfied by an entity if the expression is to be correctly applied to it. For example, an entity to which the term human correctly applies necessarily has the property of being a mammal.
- **Sufficient conditions:** those which, if satisfied by some entity, suffice to guarantee that the expression can be correctly applied to it. For example, if an entity can speak English or some other language, that is sufficient grounds to take that entity as one to which one could correctly apply the term human.

A necessary condition is not necessarily sufficient, nor is a sufficient condition always necessary: There are lots of mammals that aren’t human, so being a mammal doesn’t suffice to guarantee one is a human. And there are humans who cannot speak, so that that sufficient condition on human-hood isn’t necessary.

A definition which bears on legal matters should always make clear what the necessary conditions are for application of the term, as this is crucial for applying the law. Examples or lists of types of core cases where a term is applicable are often given in a statute to make clear when sufficient conditions are realized for a term to be applicable; similarly, a statute might list exceptions to try to make clear the limits of the applicability of a term. But that can be tricky in the law, as we have discussed in class: the law’s framers might not be able to foresee all potential applications or exceptions. Suppose that a statute pertains to crimes committed with a lethal weapon, and then lists those weapons considered lethal (say, knives, guns, or bats); if later a new kind of lethal weapon is developed (a laser axe), then as the statute stands a judge who was a strict textualist might reject its application to a case involving this new weapon. This is why a set of criteria for applicability of the term is generally to be preferred to such lists. (But come to think of it, how would one define what it is to be a lethal weapon? Does it require that it be manufactured with the intent of being suitable for a violent attack, or
merely that it be so usable? Does a baseball bat constitute a lethal weapon? This is not an easy chore.)

One useful way to get started, often used by lexicographers, is to think about closely related terms and whether they are or are not (a) synonyms (in the truth-conditional sense we have discussed), (b) hypernyms (inclusive of the denotation of the expression to be defined) or (c) hyponyms (included within the denotation of the expression to be defined). It can also be useful to look at expressions that are potentially antonymous to the expression being defined. To give you the feel of the kind of comparison I have in mind, consider how plagiarism is related to theft, how they differ. What other relevant notions and terms can you think of?

Stick to the subject. A short, clear paper is far better than a long, rambling one. But on the other hand, you can’t successfully toss this off without thinking carefully about the alternative ways one might define the term. The assignment is to give a definition and defend it. We don’t want to hear about your experience of plagiarism, how you feel about the regulations, etc.

Finally, a couple of general suggestions about writing:

1. After you have made a first draft, do a short outline of the topics you discuss in it, and think carefully about how you might re-organize the material both to make it clearer and to make a better argument.
2. Use spell-check and grammar check before you turn a paper in. This doesn’t mean you have to do everything these programs suggest (and in fact, using them automatically can be disastrous), but it results in a far more polished end-product.
3. As a final step, read your copy aloud to yourself to check for clarity, comprehensibility, and felicity. Neither spell-check nor grammar check suffice to guarantee these requirements of a good paper. Reading aloud may help you to realize when your sentences run on, or suggest better punctuation to make your intent more easily understood.