Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism

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Although instructors frequently warn students not to plagiarize essays, issuing dire warnings about failing grades or even expulsion, plagiarism continues to be a problem. For many of us, plagiarism is a highly emotional issue. When we discuss it with our students, we often speak in outraged terms of "cheating," "theft," and "academic dishonesty." For some reason, a suspected instance of plagiarism can transform a caring, reflective teacher into an academic cop, judge, jury, and executioner.

Even though there always will be dishonest students, most cases of plagiarism result from honest confusion over the standards of academic discourse and proper citation. We might more successfully combat the problem by spending more time in class helping students learn how to avoid it.

Plagiarism remains a constant problem, in part, because it encompasses such a wide variety of errors in academic writing. In fact, plagiarism can be a difficult term to define for students. Consider for a moment the following acts that we include under the general heading of plagiarism:

Buying a paper from a research service or term paper mill. Advertisements for companies selling term papers appear twice weekly in our campus newspaper. Few students or teachers would disagree that turning in a purchased paper constitutes plagiarism.

Turning in another student's work without that student's knowledge. With students using word processors, this form of plagiarism is becoming more common. Last year, for example, we had a case where a student copied an essay from his roommate's computer disk and turned it in under his own name without his roommate's knowledge. Again, most teachers and students would agree that this is plagiarism.

Turning in a paper a peer has written for the student. A student and peer conspire, and the student claims credit for a paper his or her friend has, in fact, written. Although such instances of plagiarism may be difficult to substantiate, we have had some rather obvious cases of it. Last semester two roommates taking different sections of a course from the same teacher turned in the same paper, somehow believing the instructor would not realize that she was reading the identical essay twice. When confronted, the two students admitted that one of them wrote the essay knowing his friend would also turn it in. The two students saw nothing wrong with their action. They explained to their teacher that they were simply trying to save time and could not understand why she was so upset.

Copying a paper from a source text without proper acknowledgment. With this form, the student simply opens an encyclopedia, book, or journal article, directly copies information, puts his or her name on the essay, then turns it in. Although most teachers would certainly identify such an act as plagiarism, some students would not. They frequently maintain that this is the type of "research" process they were taught in high school; they declare that they were never told to acknowledge the source of material in their papers or to quote, paraphrase, and document information.

Copying material from a source text, supplying proper documentation, but leaving out quotation marks. Many of the first-year students I work with have a difficult time understanding how a passage can be both documented and plagiarized. According to Frank McCormick (1989), many teachers have an equally hard time always spotting this type of plagiarism. By adding documentation, students have acknowledged the source of the ideas contained in the passage, but, by leaving out quotation marks, they have failed to acknowledge the source of the language they used to explain those ideas.

Paraphrasing material from a source text without appropriate documentation. Closely related to the previous form, students have restated the ideas of the source text in their own words.

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but have failed to acknowledge their debt to that source for the ideas or information. The need to document such passages properly frequently mystifies students. “But almost everything in my paper will have to be documented,” they often lament, to which teachers can only reply, “That’s right.”

Clearly, the term plagiarism covers a multitude of errors, ranging from sloppy documentation and proofreading to outright, premeditated fraud. Few other terms that we commonly use in our classes have such widely differing meanings. It is small wonder that simply handing students a brief statement on plagiarism does not help much.

Why Do Students Plagiarize Work?

We should recognize the many reasons that students turn in plagiarized essays. Part of teaching students how to avoid problems is understanding their reasoning and acknowledging the differences between intentional and unintentional misrepresentation.

Clearly, some students make the conscious decision to cheat. Whether they are lazy, feel some pressure to receive a higher grade, or realize that they do not have time to write a paper themselves, these students buy, steal, or copy someone else’s work and turn it in as their own. Although many of these students may still ultimately choose to cheat, we can discourage them from plagiarizing if we help them understand the consequences of their actions and teach them better time management and writing strategies.

Even students making a good faith effort to avoid plagiarism can run into problems. As Frank McCormick (1989:134) observes:

It is easy enough to explain the flagrant violations. We and our students readily agree on the perfidy of submitting borrowed or stolen papers or of paying another person to write them for us. Once our explanations move beyond the flagrant cases of plagiarism, however, we are left with the more difficult task . . . of equipping our students with a body of rules and competencies which many of them find . . . difficult to master. . . . Few students enter college fully understanding the relationship between plagiarism and the rules about quoting, paraphrasing, and documenting material.

Another reason that students cheat is incorrect instruction. According to Doris Dant’s (1986) survey of 309 first-year students at Brigham Young University, 17 percent “reported being actively encouraged by [their high school] teachers to copy reports word for word from other sources,” and 50 percent said that in writing their essays they had copied much of the material word-for-word from sources texts without penalty (82). To avoid plagiarism, 32 percent felt that all they needed to do was to paraphrase information and supply a bibliography (in-text documentation was not needed); 15 percent believed that they could directly copy material as long as it was documented (quotation marks were not needed); and 6 percent reported that they had never heard of plagiarism.

Although we have to remain skeptical of reports from students about what they were taught in high school, these survey results do raise questions about the quality of our teaching. Without adequate repetition and reinforcement, students frequently misunderstand our instructions on plagiarism and source-based writing. Many studies have shown that student writing is largely driven by rules. That is, their writing is rarely haphazard: they write according to their understanding of what the teacher wants and expects (Bartholomae 1980; Flower 1981; Rose 1980). Some students turn in plagiarized work because they have not yet fully learned how to avoid it or, unfortunately, have actually been taught to write incorrectly.

Even if a student has learned the rules, careless note taking, revising, and proofreading can result in a plagiarized essay. For example, if in taking notes from a book or article students fail to note that a passage is a direct quotation, when they incorporate those notes into their essay, they will be plagiarizing. Overlooking missing quotation marks or footnotes when proofreading can occur also.

As more programs encourage students to work together on class projects or research reports, the chances for plagiarism increase. Upper-level courses across the curriculum frequently ask students to collaborate on assignments, to gather information together, to discuss their ideas with each other, to read and criticize each other’s work, or to jointly write a paper or report. In such classes, students often find it difficult to determine the difference between acceptable collaboration and plagiarism.

When confronting the issues of plagiarism, we cannot lose sight of our students in the context of their own communities. While we are invoking one set of values—the academy’s—to try to dissuade students from plagiarizing work, another set of values—their peer community’s—is exerting tremendous pressure, as well. According to Gerry Brookes (1989:35):

The values that govern acts of plagiarism are continuous with values and feelings students display in their living, such as, the value of friendship or of getting ahead, loyalty to the interests of a group, fear of shame at performing inadequately, distrust of faculty, obligations to work and play.

Students often face situations where these value systems come into conflict. A student’s girlfriend asks him to let her turn in his paper for her English class; a student’s friend is having family problems, has to make several trips home, cannot concentrate on school work, and wants her to write his sociology paper for him; a student realizes he can be accepted into a fraternity if he makes his work available to his brothers. Although these situations certainly do not justify plagiarism, we need to recognize that such conflicts in values and loyalties frequently occur.

What Can We Do to Help Students?

Because plagiarism is a complex problem, we need to approach it with patience, understanding, and a variety of pedagogical options. Fortunately, we can take a number of steps.

Define and discuss plagiarism thoroughly. Instructors in every field who assign essays ought to distribute to their students a printed statement defining plagiarism from that discipline’s perspective, offering examples and
outlining the penalties that will result from intentional plagiarism. Plagiarized work in a biology class may look and sound very different from that in a music composition course. Students in every class need to know clearly which acts that discipline considers to be plagiaristic. Also, instructors need to discuss the issue more than just once a term. Teachers should certainly explain their plagiarism policy at the beginning of the course, but they also should return to it later when assigning essays. Such instruction will be more meaningful for students while they are actually working on a writing project.

Discuss hypothetical cases. Gerry Brookes (1989) suggests that to help students better appreciate the various forms that plagiarism can assume, we can discuss hypothetical scenarios of writers encountering problems as they compose essays. The students have to decide if the writer in each case is guilty of plagiarism; then they discuss what the writer should have done differently. For example, suppose a student asks his roommate to review the rough draft of his paper. His friend suggests several changes in wording that the writer uses in the final draft of his paper without acknowledgment. Is that plagiarism? Or suppose a student, when working on a research paper, goes to her father for help. He provides her with specific information that she includes in her essay without attributing the source. Is she guilty of plagiarism? Discussing cases that pose problems involving plagiarism specific to the discipline under study can help students better understand the issue and avoid errors.

Revise plagiarized passages. Instructors give students a source text to read, then ask them to study passages from several papers based on that material. With each passage, the students need to determine whether the writer plagiarized the source text and, if so, how the passage can be fixed. When appropriate, the students must supply needed documentation, or punctuation, or re-write the entire passage to eliminate the problem.

Teach proper note-taking skills. As students begin to write their own essays, we can help them avoid many problems by teaching them how to take notes and to indicate direct questions in their text.

Review the conventions of quoting and documenting material. We may forget that the conventions on documenting material often baffle our students, and these conventions change from discipline to discipline. When we assign essays, we need to clearly explain the rules of our discipline. We cannot assume that our students have these skills or that this information will be covered in composition classes. Unless we teach them the rules in our disciplines and consistently remind them of these standards, our students will likely learn them through trial and error, which almost always results in some unintentional plagiarism.

Require multi-drafts of essays. Asking students to turn in with their final drafts any rough drafts and revisions of their essay serves several purposes. First, it reinforces the idea that writing is a multi-step process and that revision can result in better final drafts. Second, requiring multi-drafts of an essay helps dissuade students from buying or borrowing papers. Certainly, some students may fake a rough draft of an essay they purchased, but for many writers such a necessity may prove to make plagiarism more trouble than it is worth.

Require students to submit copies of documented material. I have found this requirement effective in helping students avoid plagiarism. Whenever they document a passage in their paper from some printed source, I ask them to turn in with their final draft a photocopy of the page in the source text that contains that information. Knowing that I will have direct access to the source texts they are using encourages students to be extremely cautious in quoting and documenting material. As I read the students' papers, I can spot check passages against the source text. If a check of one or two passages turns up any problems, I can check the entire paper. Finally, requiring the photocopies also discourages students from turning in someone else's essay. If the essay is not their own, they will still have to gather all the necessary photocopies, sometimes from source texts our library does not hold. I do not give the student's paper a grade until he or she turns in the necessary photocopies.

Provide proper proofreading guidelines. Once students finish writing their essays, we need to remind them to proofread for the types of errors that frequently result in unintentional plagiarism: missing quotation marks, missing or inaccurate documentation, etc. Simply providing students with a checklist to follow when proofreading their essays may help them avoid problems. Students can also be encouraged to exchange drafts of their work in class and proofread each other's essays.

Offer proper collaboration guidelines. If we use collaborative learning techniques, we need to offer students clear guidelines about evaluation. What do we expect each student to contribute to the project? What acts constitute appropriate and inappropriate collaboration? Again, these guidelines will vary with disciplines. Using hypothetical cases to discuss such questions could be especially effective.

Offer response appropriate to the type of error. Given the various forms that plagiarism can assume in our students' work, our responses to their errors should be appropriate to their degree of seriousness. We should certainly respond differently to a student who failed to put quotation marks around one sentence in an essay than we would to a student who turned in his roommate's paper. Most institutions have clearly defined disciplinary proceedings for students who flagrantly plagiarize work; however, our response to less-serious and unintentional instances of plagiarism can help students avoid the problem. Identifying the error and requiring the writer to correct it probably teaches the student more about avoiding the problem than simply failing the essay.

Have patience. Finally, we need to remember that for most students the conventions of academic acknowledgment and documentation prove difficult to understand and master. Al-
though some students try to pass their classes by plagiarizing work, most of our students approach their courses with sincerity and integrity. Helping them learn the scholarly conventions is a job we all share and one that requires the same patience and understanding that we use when teaching any other academic skill.

With time, and an informed strategy, we can decrease the plagiarism in our classes. Most students are well intentioned; they want to learn how to compose essays properly. Too often, though, we do not adequately teach our students how to identify and avoid plagiarism; we offer admonitions rather than instruction, threats rather than help. Changing our attitudes toward plagiarism and the instruction we offer is an important first step in helping students avoid the problem.

 Works Cited


