

Discouraging Plagiarism

What is Plagiarism?

According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) (2003), plagiarism occurs when a writer "deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common knowledge) material without acknowledging its source" (p. 1). Plagiarism is a serious, intentional act, to be distinguished from carelessly or inadequately incorporating or documenting sources.

What is Patchwriting?

Patchwriting means "restating a phrase, clause, or one or more sentences while staying close to the language or syntax of the source" (Jamieson & Howard, 2011). This is commonly done by copying a source's words and rearranging or replacing some of them. Some beginning writers learn to patchwrite before they learn how to effectively summarize or paraphrase sources. For this reason, patchwriting is best treated not as a deliberate deception on the student's part but rather as a transition toward ethical use of source material.

What Can Students Do to Steer Clear of Plagiarism?

The short answer? ***Read the source, understand the source, close the source, and write your own words.*** That sounds simple enough. But ethical treatment of sources requires time, practice, and habits that not all writers have developed before we meet them. Writers sometimes justify committing plagiarism if they 1) have limited experience in writing with sources, 2) have not effectively managed their time, 3) misunderstand the assignment, or 4) come from a culture in which plagiarism is not recognized as unethical. In the long run, though, whatever their reasons are for taking shortcuts, writers need to understand that the lasting benefits of genuine learning far outweigh the short-term ease of *playing* school. The following choices facilitate genuine learning:

1. Understand research and writing assignments as learning processes and opportunities for genuine inquiry and growth.
2. Learn to find, understand, and analyze relevant sources.
3. Make it clear when and how you use others' words or ideas in your writing.
4. Learn how writers in your discipline use and cite sources and define common knowledge.
5. Ask your instructor when you are unsure whether or how to cite a source.
6. Choose a topic early, and one you connect with personally.
7. Start your research soon, take notes, and pay attention to the words you see authors using in the text around their sources. (Price, 2002; WPA, 2003)

What Can Professors Do to Discourage Students from Committing Plagiarism?

Most students know that plagiarism is wrong. But few students can define the concept with much certainty. Since the advent of the Worldwide Web, the ways students think about authorship, research, and source attribution have evolved. Anymore, questions about plagiarism are less about right and wrong and more about what an author is, what constitutes "common knowledge" and what makes our ideas "original." Consider the following questions (adapted from Price, 2002) asked by students in discussions about plagiarism:

- What if you think of something and it turns out someone else already thought of it first?
- What if it's something you heard somewhere, but you can't remember where?
- Can a writer ever compose "original" material, free of anyone else's influence?
- What if you find the same idea in two books?
- Why does my professor tell me to cite everything that doesn't come from me when my sources don't do that?
- What's considered "common knowledge" in this subject?
- Why do all of my source articles use different format and citation rules?

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- How many copied words in a row are okay?
- Isn't it all right to use a source's words as long as you mix in your own?
- How much of my own ideas can I put in my paper?

Although the answers to some of these questions might seem universal, communication norms vary widely across academic fields. For example, writers in history and biology derive common knowledge in different ways and, therefore, use different criteria in deciding what information needs citation. Because of these differences in academic fields, and because students are more likely to internalize concepts that they can discuss in detail, it's a better idea to address these questions in individual classes.

Suggestions for Class Discussions and Policy Statements

Consider spending time in your classroom talking about plagiarism and the ways sources are ethically used in your academic field. Writing scholar Margaret Price (2002) makes the following suggestions regarding class discussions and policy statements that address plagiarism:

- "The most constructive way to approach teaching on plagiarism is to invite students into a dialogue about the subject, welcoming their perspectives on its complexities" (p. 106). "Such invitations should not be framed as the novice coming to the expert in order to be enlightened Instead, invitations to students to question and discuss plagiarism should be approached as part of their participation in a discourse community"* (p. 105). Students should understand that "their own questions and ideas . . . are an important part of the evolving understanding of plagiarism in the classroom" (p. 105).
- Written statements should make it clear that citation conventions "shift across time and locations" (p. 106). "Leave spaces-literal spaces-for students to fill in. The policy that I hand out includes blank lines placed at strategic intervals with prompts for students to write in ideas or questions" (p. 107).
- Discuss examples of successful citation, and give students chances to practice summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, and contextualizing source material (p. 108). These exercises show students that rather than a "quilt of loosely connected quotations" a research paper involves creation and interpretation as well as reportage" (p. 108).
- "Plagiarism, attribution, and authorship should be ongoing topics throughout the semester, to be revisited from many different angles. This would offer students various points from which to consider what plagiarism means" (p. 109).

*Writing scholar Anne Beaufort defines a discourse community as "a particular community of writers who dialogue across texts, argue, and build on each other's work" (2007, p. 18).

References

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- Council of Writing Program Administrators. (2003). Defining and avoiding plagiarism: The WPA statement on best practices. In *Council of Writing Program Administrators*. Retrieved from <http://wpacouncil.org/files/wpa-plagiarism-statement.pdf>
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