

Educational tips on plagiarism prevention

The most important steps in preventing plagiarism are those taken to address its causes. The strategies in this section are intended as guidelines to help you:

- * become aware of the reasons plagiarism occurs
- * identify the different forms of plagiarism
- * integrate plagiarism prevention techniques into your courses

Why Students Plagiarize

There are many reasons students plagiarize. Sometimes deadlines come around more quickly than expected, sometimes assignments feel overwhelming, and sometimes the boundaries of plagiarism and research just get confused. But what situations are most likely to result in plagiarism? More importantly, how can they be avoided? Learning to identify the factors that make plagiarism an attractive alternative is the best way to stop it before it starts.

Intentional Plagiarism

Just like hacking into websites, plagiarizing papers can be something of a thrill in itself. For many students it becomes a question of ingenuity: "can I sneak a plagiarized paper past my professor?" But there is usually more behind intentional plagiarism than just the thrill of deception.

Searching vs. Researching

Today's students learn quickly that finding and manipulating data on the Internet is a valuable skill. With the wealth of information available online, the production of original analysis and interpretation may seem like "busy work" compared to finding the best or most obscure sources.

Teach your students that the real skills they need to learn are interpretation and analysis -- how to process the information they find. Tell them that anyone with some basic knowledge can find information on the internet -- it's what they do with that information that is important.

"But their words are better"

Some students might think, "Why sweat over producing an analysis that has already been done better, by someone who knows more?" Students may also be intimidated by the quality of work found online, thinking their own work cannot compare.

Tell your students that what interests you most is seeing how they understand the assigned topic, and how they develop their own style and voice. This might go a long way toward making them feel more comfortable with writing. Explain to them that you know writing is a learning process, and that you do not expect them to be as brilliant as experts who have devoted years to the subject. You may also want to let them know that their experiences and the context of your class give them a unique perspective that may give them a far more interesting angle on the issues than those of the "experts."

Making the Grade

Students are under enormous pressure from family, peers, and instructors to compete for scholarships, admissions, and, of course, places in the job market. They often see education as a rung in the ladder to success, and not an active process valuable in itself. Because of this, students tend to focus on the end results of their research, rather than the skills they learn in doing it.

Explain to your students that while they may be able to hide ignorance of particular facts or theories, research and writing skills make themselves very apparent to anyone evaluating them. In other words, your students' grades won't matter if they don't have the skills to show for them. Also, you may wish to emphasize improvement as a factor in grading, as this can encourage students to try developing their own abilities. This depends entirely upon your own pedagogical style, of course.

"Everyone else is doing it"

Students often justify plagiarism by pointing out that since their peers plagiarize, they must do the same to keep up. They feel faced with a choice: put in several hours of work and risk a mediocre grade with less time for other subjects, or do what their peers do and copy something good from the internet for an easy A with time to spare.

One of the only ways to deal with this is by catching those students who do plagiarize. It takes a great deal of the pressure off of those who want to work honestly but are afraid of falling behind their peers.

Poor Planning

Students are not always the best judges of how much time their assignments will take. They may not be aware of the extent of work involved in a research paper, or may simply be overwhelmed by the task and put it off until the last minute, leaving them with no time for original work of their own.

Scheduling stages of progress on their papers is a very effective way to deal with this. Having them submit bibliographies, outlines, thesis statements, or drafts on specified dates before the final draft is due will give them a good idea of the amount of work involved. It will also help them organize their time and make the task seem less overwhelming.

Unintentional Plagiarism

No honest student would walk out of a neighbors' house accidentally carrying their television. But even the most well-intentioned writers sometimes "appropriate" the work of others without proper authority. How does this happen?

Citation Confusion

Perhaps the most common reason for inadvertent plagiarism is simply an ignorance of the proper forms of citation.

Plagiarism vs. Paraphrasing

Many students have trouble knowing when they are paraphrasing and when they are plagiarizing. In an effort to make their work seem "more original" by "putting

things in their own words," students may often inadvertently plagiarize by changing the original too much or, sometimes, not enough.

Doing exercises in class where you hand out paraphrased and plagiarized passages in order to discuss the differences might be very helpful. Explain that your students must retain the essential ideas of the original, but significantly change the style and grammatical structure to fit in the context of their argument. You may also want to send your students to our What is Plagiarism? Page.

"I was just copying my notes"

Students often mix their own ideas and those of their sources when they take sloppy notes, creating confusion when they begin writing their papers.

It may be worthwhile to go over some note-taking methods with your students. Teaching them to document their sources using different colored pens and "post-it" tabs to mark pages, for example, will save time and keep references clear.

"I couldn't find the source"

Students are often sloppy about writing down the bibliographic information of their sources, leaving them unable to properly attribute information when it comes to writing the paper.

Explain how important it is to keep careful track of references during the note-taking stage. Students may be eager to focus entirely on the content of their research, and need to be told that how they handle their reference material is a significant part of the assignment. Having them turn in bibliographies before they turn in the paper itself will also encourage them to pay more attention to their sources.

"I thought we didn't have to quote facts"

Because the internet makes information so readily available, students may find it difficult to tell the difference between "common knowledge" they are free to use, and original ideas which are the intellectual property of others.

The easiest thing to do is teach your students the maxim "When in doubt, cite sources."

Confusion About Expectations

Students may not be aware of what proper research requires. They may think they are being asked simply to report critical commentary, or to "borrow" from a number of sources to show that they have "done their homework." In either case, it becomes a problem if what they turn in tends to be predominantly the work of others.

One of the most common sources of confusion is the ambiguity of terms such as "analyze" and "discuss." You should explain to your students that these words have specific meanings in academic discourse, and that they imply a degree of original thought that goes beyond mere "reporting." Emphasizing your interest in their own ideas will also help them understand what you expect from them.

Guidelines for Plagiarism Prevention

1. Explain What "Plagiarism" Means

Of course, most students will tell you they already know what plagiarism means. But do they really understand the difference between a legitimate paraphrase and a plagiarized one? Or between a proper citation and an improper one? Spending some time during the beginning of the course to explain plagiarism may go a long way toward preventing future problems. (We recommend using our handout defining plagiarism.)

You may also wish to distribute examples of plagiarism and legitimate citation, and then go over the differences together. This will clarify some of the common misconceptions about plagiarism and reduce the likelihood of "honest mistakes," while at the same time showing how serious you are about the issue.

2. Explain What's Wrong About Plagiarism

Without instruction, it may be hard for your students to understand the seriousness of plagiarism. Their response is often, "How can copying some words actually hurt anyone?" But the reality is that plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing another's intellectual property, and lying about it afterwards, claiming the paper as one's own. This undermines the principles of trust and respect that make education possible. But when they plagiarize, students hurt more than just their instructors and the person from whom they steal. They also hurt themselves, because they fail to acquire the research, analytic, and writing skills that they would have learned by doing the assignment honestly. Finally, plagiarism also victimizes those classmates who have legitimately earned their grades and degrees, and who will be competing with the plagiarizer for school admissions and jobs.

3. Make the Consequences Clear

Students often do not know just what they risk when they plagiarize. Begin your course by establishing a clear policy on plagiarism. Give very specific information about the penalties involved. You may want to create a specific policy for your courses in addition to your institution's general policy. Try telling your students, for example, that any case of plagiarism will result in immediate failure of the paper, and that a second instance will result in failure of the course and possibly expulsion, will doubtless make them think twice about it. Be sure to cite your policy on any research assignments as a reminder.

4. Start off with Clear Expectations

First, let your students know you expect them to produce thoughtful, original work. Students are often under the illusion that the goal of their assignments is to collect the best information possible. Explain to them that while good research is critical, you are even more interested in their ability to transform the information they find into an original and persuasive argument than in their ability to come up with the most or best sources. The skills they learn in working to further the ideas and arguments of others are a valuable part of what they will take away from their assignments. Knowing this may help them understand the value of original work.

You may also want to establish some rules in advance: Should your students collaborate? Will you require separate "works cited" pages and bibliographies? How many sources will they be required to consult? How many sources will they have to

include in their paper? Will online sources be sufficient, or would you like your students to find printed material as well? Starting off with clear guidelines will prevent most of the confusion that leads to unintentional plagiarism, and allow no excuses for the intentional kind.

5. Assign Specific Questions or Topics

Provide a list of topics or questions that you would like your students to address in their papers. The more particular the questions, the less likely that your students will find papers already written on them. If you worry that lists like this restrict your students' creative freedom, you might want to add an option that allows your students to develop their own topics in consultation with you or a teaching assistant.

6. Require Students to Submit Thesis Statements, Introductions, Outlines, or Drafts

One of the best ways to ensure that your students' work is original is to check it during the process of composition. Since rough drafts, etc., are not as readily available for copying as finished papers, the simple fact that they have to submit one will encourage most of your students to produce original work. It often takes more work to forge these materials than it does to produce them originally. Also, if you have time to comment on what they submit, you can monitor how they respond to your feedback and whether their papers show the flexibility of works-in-progress.

7. Have the Students Annotate Their Bibliography

Ask your students to summarize the content and usefulness of their sources in a few sentences. Be sure to tell them that copying library abstracts or blurbs from the backs of books is not permissible. Emphasize that the annotation has to be in their own voice and words, and should specifically discuss the relevance of the source to their research. This exercise should take no time at all for students who have done their work honestly. Plagiarizers, however, will find it considerably more difficult.

8. Assign Oral Presentations

Have your students answer questions about the process of researching and developing their ideas. This is also an excellent opportunity to ask them specific questions about their papers, and to bring up passages that seem suspicious. Questions like "This quotation here is a little unclear. Could you tell me a little more about the article from which you got it?" can be very effective in determining how much work the student did without offending or seeming suspicious.

9. Require Recent and Printed Sources

Most papers from online paper mills and other cheating databases are already several years old at best. Having your students integrate at least one contemporary source in their paper will keep your students up to date on the issues and help ensure legitimate research and work.

10. Assign a Paragraph on the Composition Process

If you do not have your students give oral presentations or turn in drafts during the composition process, you may want to have them submit a paragraph explaining how they arrived at their topic, how they began researching it, what criteria they used for evaluating their sources, and what they learned from the research project. This will give you an idea of how well they have comprehended the material and the degree of fluency they have in speaking about it.

11. Encourage Concision

Students often try to "fill space" by "borrowing" material once they have finished with their own ideas. Tell your students that it is very obvious when they "pad" their papers to fill up page requirements. Encourage them to be as concise as possible, focusing on the substance of their claims rather than the length of their writing. Make sure they know the trick to writing a long research paper lies in coming up with a thesis or argument which requires the assigned number of pages to develop, and not in drawing out the points they make or citing multiple sources to prove a single idea.

"Learning Center." Plagiarism.Org. 2008. iParadigms. 3 Nov 2008
<<http://www.plagiarism.org>>.