

FACULTY TIPS ON PREVENTING PLAGIARISM

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Contents

1. [Introduction: Defining Plagiarism](#)
2. [Reasons Students Plagiarize](#)
3. [Assignment Design](#)
4. [Detecting Plagiarism](#)
5. [Summary of Faculty Strategies and Responsibilities](#)
6. [Additional Resources](#)

Introduction: Defining Plagiarism

While defining plagiarism is notoriously difficult, it is important from the outset to distinguish plagiarism from mere inadequate documentation. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) defines plagiarism as follows:

In an institutional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source. ("Defining")

The WPA definition is careful to note the *deliberate* nature of plagiarism--a poorly documented paper is not necessarily plagiarized. The WPA goes on to argue that the student who honestly attempts, however poorly, to direct a reader towards his sources cannot be accurately described as plagiarizing. This definition will help us distinguish students who need instruction from those who are behaving dishonestly.

While many students who merit punishment for dishonesty will also need instruction, not all who need instruction merit punishment.

For example, consider a student who turns in a paper with no quotations or in-text citations, but with a full bibliography at the end. A Turnitin report will mark many passages similar to published sources as uncited. The presence of the bibliography, however, suggests there was no intent to deceive, so while might rightly fail the paper for not properly incorporating and citing sources, it would nevertheless be improper to accuse the student of dishonesty without further evidence of willful deceit. In short, grading criteria should not be equated with measures of ethical behavior.

Granted, this distinction between intention to mislead and inadequate knowledge makes our jobs as teachers more difficult. Still, such difficulty does not release us from our burden of treating students fairly and fulfilling our pedagogical mission.

Reasons Students Plagiarize

There are many kinds of plagiarism, and many reasons students employ them. Simplistic definitions of plagiarism, while attractive, are not adequate to understand students' motives for plagiarism. At the same time, the difficulty of defining plagiarism contributes to its widespread acceptance, at various levels, among students.

The line between seeking help and engaging in academic dishonesty is not always clear, and some forms of academic dishonesty seem more egregious than others. For instance, whereas submitting a paper purchased from an online papermill is clearly dishonest, reading someone else's writing on a subject "for inspiration," as students often say, can be innocent, if misguided. We encourage students to go to the Writing Center or even to have others proofread papers for them before turning them in, but would object if they hired a professional copy editor. We often encourage students to work collaboratively with lab partners or in study groups, but then insist on originality in their thinking.

If we follow the WPA and restrict the term "plagiarism" to cases in which students either consciously set out to deceive or adopt an unethically dismissive attitude towards learning the conventions of citation and attribution, what can we say motivates plagiarism? "Laziness" is commonly voiced as the explanation, but this is not a helpful diagnosis. While some students are serial plagiarizers, most decide to plagiarize only occasionally, on some assignments but not others.

Some Reasons Students Plagiarize

LACK OF INTEREST

Students may believe an assignment to be busywork, or that the teacher does not read their essays carefully or with honest interest; they are therefore unwilling to work if their effort will not be recognized.

LACK OF INVESTMENT

Students may see some classes as more relevant to their education than others, or may not be fully invested in the ideal of intellectual inquiry. Students may not see the connection between the assignment and their learning or career goals.

FEAR OF FAILURE

Students may have strong pressures on them to earn high grades, especially those with scholarships that require maintaining a minimum GPA. Lack of confidence leads them to rely on others.

LACK OF ABILITIES

Students may be unprepared to tackle a given assignment but too embarrassed to seek help.

POOR TIME MANAGEMENT

Students may lack good study habits, or may not realize how long a project will take to complete, and therefore procrastinate ruinously. Rather than ask for an extension (or faced with a teacher who accepts no late papers), students opt to cheat.

NO FEAR OF CONSEQUENCES

Students may simply not care about getting caught, or in an amoral cost-benefit analysis, believe the benefits outweigh the risks. Some simply like beating the system.

While many students do plagiarize, it is easy to forget that the vast majority do not. Some otherwise honest and motivated students write papers that are inadequately documented or that otherwise fail to signal the words or ideas of someone else because they do not know the conventions of academic writing, or are still in the process of learning them. English 107 introduces students to college writing but is not a comprehensive course in the research methods and conventions of all disciplines. Even students in upper-division courses are still mastering their academic writing. Learning new skills and becoming comfortable within foreign conventions will always lead to mistakes; such mistakes should not be considered motivated acts of dishonesty, but rather predictable errors of practice.

Luckily, the same good pedagogical practices that help mitigate the various motives for plagiarism also help those students honestly trying to learn how to integrate sources well.

Assignment Design

The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) has urged caution in employing plagiarism detection services such as Turnitin, arguing that “their availability should never be used to justify the avoidance of responsible teaching methods” (“Defining”). In other words, Turnitin tells us which students are not properly incorporating and citing sources, but our aim should be reduce the number of such students through improved instruction, not through fear of surveillance.

Students learn the basics of documentation and incorporation in English 107 (The Art and Craft of Writing), but we all must build on this introductory instruction, explicitly teaching our students the particular conventions of our disciplines, including such things as what makes for a quality resource, what counts as “common knowledge” and what does not, and what roles primary and secondary sources play in the kinds of writing projects we assign. The social sciences, for example, routinely require a “review of the literature” near the beginning of papers, while the humanities do not. Lab reports have a specific format and diction that is intricately tied to the rigors of the scientific method. In APA style one cites by date because finding the most recent research is more important here than in the disciplines that traditionally employ MLA style.

Further, we must also make out own idiosyncrasies known: do students need to cite information from their assigned textbooks? From our lectures?

The best way to teach effective and ethical research methods is to build them into our assignments. We in fact have a responsibility to do so; otherwise, we risk becoming merely “plagiarism police,” not educators. As the WPA notes,

Just as students must live up to their responsibility to behave ethically and honestly as learners, teachers must recognize that they can encourage or discourage plagiarism not just by policy and admonition, but also in the way they structure assignments and in the processes they use to help students define and gain interest in topics developed for papers and projects. (“Defining”)

Assignments that help students avoid plagiarism also tend to result in better papers because students become more invested in their work and simply learn more, for all the reasons discussed in the previous section. A few simple principles can revolutionize a teacher’s assignments.

Three Principles for Assignment Design

- 1. Create assignments that require students to explore ideas in depth and develop arguments.**
- 2. Require a series of small assignments that ask students to perform specific tasks that will lead them towards completion of a larger project.**
- 3. Anticipate common student pitfalls, and provide low-stakes opportunities for students to attempt to overcome them.**

1. Create assignments that require students to explore ideas in depth and develop arguments

As noted in “Reasons Students Plagiarize,” students who feel assignments are make-work or simply hoops to be jumped are often unmotivated to invest much time or energy in them. Similarly, an assignment that asks students simply to rehearse a standard position or the conventional wisdom on a topic is not a stimulating activity nor does it produce compelling reading. The argument that “they must do it to get credit in the course” simply reinforces the utilitarian attitude towards assignments. But students who honestly believe they are investigating something worthwhile work harder on expressing their ideas clearly and within accepted academic parameters because they are invested in their work.

2. Require a series of small assignments that ask students to perform specific tasks that will lead them towards completion of a larger project

This is called “scaffolding” assignments or creating a “progressive” assignment. The idea is to break a large project into its component parts, to spread those parts out over a number of weeks, then require students to turn in their work at each step of the way. A generic example of a 5-week project might look like the following.

Sample Five-Step Progressive Assignment

- Week 1** Students read an overview of a topic, then write and turn in a one paragraph “researchable question” that emerges from their reading.
- Week 2** Students compile a working bibliography (correctly formatted) of possible sources of information on their research question.
- Week 3** Students write summaries of three of their sources that offer different points of view or kinds of evidence for their research question.
- Week 4** Students write a letter to a friend in which they engage their friend’s interest in their research question, referencing their sources of information, explaining where those sources came from, and making their own claim about the topic.
- Week 5** Students write their papers, using the letter as a kind of first draft.

The individual steps need not be graded, but they must be required and turned in or else students will not do them. (Missed steps could result in a lowered grade on the final project.) Each step represents something the student would need to do anyway--deciding on a question, finding sources, reading and understanding the sources, developing an argument, integrating sources into a written exploration directed to an audience--but by isolating the tasks we give students less opportunity or motive to plagiarize.

3. Anticipate common student pitfalls, and provide low-stakes opportunities for students to attempt to overcome them

The steps in a progressive assignment also give ill-prepared students low-stakes opportunities to try things, and fail, without the worry of being graded. A student faced with submitting a sub-par project worth 35% of the final grade might turn to plagiarism, but that same student might be willing to try his hand at a non-credit assignment, even if he is not sure how to do it well. As a result, the student may write reductive or misleading summaries, may create shallow bibliographies, may write a solipsistic letter, and so on, but because these failures will have occurred with no grade implications, they can function as pure learning opportunities. Students will be receptive to advice on how to improve this part of their assignments as they work towards that final high-stakes project.

Further, such assignments can help us help students avoid the common pitfalls in writing complex papers. For instance, often a student turns in a research paper that is nothing but an assemblage of quotations and summaries of other people's points of view rather than a coherent argument of the student's own. This is predictable, since students must in fact summarize the ideas of others (either on paper or mentally) before they can synthesize them and incorporate them in sophisticated ways into their own thinking and writing. A step in the process that requires students to summarize allows them to perform this action for themselves before moving on to analysis, even if the teacher does not want extensive summary in the essay. If we provide a time at which the students *must* summarize, we can then explain more clearly how the final paper will differ from such bare summary, thus helping the student avoid this common pitfall.

These three principles will not prevent all plagiarism, of course, but they do address a number of the common reasons students plagiarize, while also helping us better instruct those students who have no intention of plagiarizing but who nonetheless need help learning to engage the research process with confidence and skill.

Detecting Plagiarism

The following are signs that a student has either plagiarized or has improperly cited sources. We might use these signs as indicators that we should submit the paper to Turnitin, or that we might want to have a conversation with the student, or both. As in the Turnitin reports themselves, these signs are not in themselves evidence of dishonesty or unethical behavior; teachers must always exercise judgment.

Signs the student did not write the paper (which are, ironically, also signs that a student is improving as a writer or is showing initiative):

- A sudden improvement or change in writing ability or style in the paper as a whole
- A paper that does not directly address the assignment
- Evidence drawn from books or other resources not assigned in class

Signs the paper is an assemblage of others' material (some of which are also signs that the student needs instruction in constructing arguments or in incorporating sources smoothly):

- Sudden shifts in subject matter
- Sudden shifts in writing ability or style between paragraphs
- More than one citation method used in the paper
- Incoherent lines of argument
- Sudden changes in fonts or font sizes between paragraphs
- Page number citations only at the ends of whole paragraphs

Signs that language is being lifted without attribution (some of which are also signs that the student needs instruction in incorporating sources smoothly and correctly):

- Sudden shifts in writing ability or style within paragraphs or even sentences
- Sudden changes in fonts or font sizes within paragraphs
- Multiple names of authorities or sources mentioned in the text, but no quotations.
- Long bibliographies, but no quotations.

Summary of Faculty Strategies and Responsibilities

- Spell out plagiarism policies on syllabi, including any intended use of Turnitin.
- Discuss policies in class, especially in terms of the University's pedagogical mission of intellectual inquiry.
- Reiterate policies whenever giving written assignments.
- Write assignments that require step-by-step processes, that require students to document each step of their processes, and that encourage true intellectual inquiry.
- Instruct students in the methods and conventions of your discipline, and of your class. (Keep in mind that English 107 introduces college writing, but is not a comprehensive course in the research methods and conventions of all disciplines.)
- Refer students to [A Writer's Reference](#) and the Writing Center for additional help.
- When evaluating students work, distinguish between plagiarism and improper citation techniques (i.e., between dishonesty and ignorance).
- Report all cases of plagiarism in accordance with our Code of Academic Honesty.

Additional Resources

Students who you suspect need help in writing papers but whom you cannot work with yourself can be referred to the Writing Center: Earle Hall, lower level (extension 3296). A referral form can be found on the Writing Center website (http://students.adelphi.edu/writingcenter/wc_referral.pdf).

The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) has compiled its research and suggestions for understanding and preventing plagiarism: “[Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices](http://wpacouncil.org/node/9)” (<http://wpacouncil.org/node/9>).

The University of Alberta has compiled an extensive website of material on plagiarism and pedagogical approach to prevention: <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/plagiarism/>.

An excerpt from *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis is available from UC Berkeley: <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/prevent.html>.

Please also see [Academic Integrity at Adelphi](http://academics.adelphi.edu/academicintegrity) (<http://academics.adelphi.edu/academicintegrity>).

For any help designing assignments or in working on students on their wiring, please contact Michael Matto, Director of Writing Programs, as extension 3294, or matto@adelphi.edu.