

Much Ado about Plagiarism?

Experiences that are common begin to feel normal. Each semester plagiarism shows up in about ten percent of my student essays. Although I believe that getting rid of plagiarism requires vigilance, checking for it takes five to twenty minutes per essay. I want to deter plagiarism, but it's not easy and I can't prove that I've solved any problems long-term by simply catching it. My efforts might help to deter plagiarism, but I have found that *catching* cheaters is only part of the process of getting rid of plagiarism, but it isn't the only way.

For me, the first step is to ask my students to write a short sample the very first class. These samples are handy for checking competence, but they also provide a standard of comparison. That way, as the semester progresses, I can check when I see radically anomalous improvements in their writing. My second step is to require my students to send their documents attached to an email. Now, I have their documents in digital form. My third step is to closely and carefully check all of their listed sources and citations by copying and pasting their source information into Google. Fourth, I have changed my computer's display settings to make all of my documents appear gray. Besides being easier on my eyes, anything copied and pasted contrasts in bright white against the gray document. Stuff they typed themselves will be gray. Fifth, I discovered quite by accident that if I sweep my pointer across their essays line by line, my pointer changes when it finds embedded, but invisible hyperlinks. With a single click, those hyperlinks usually take me right to that plagiarized source. Sixth, I use a plagiarism finding software program. Again, I copy and paste their essays right into the software. These programs are great because they tell me exactly where the source(s) can be found. This software even

checks free essay exchanges and buy-your-essay sites. Seventh, I do a search for content-related articles by copying and pasting the student's information, especially suspect sections. Eighth, I double check the works cite pages to make sure that any borrowed sources I find in my online searches were listed by the student. I check and recheck my findings because I don't charge anyone with plagiarism unless I have the evidence to prove it. Most students won't deny it when you place the source materials right next to their essay. Sometimes, a student will say, "I forgot," or "I was confused about MLA citations."

Of course, some students *inadvertently* make it difficult to copy and paste their text into my plagiarism software. If they add line breaks or extra tabs and spaces, I have to laboriously correct all of these problems before checking the document for plagiarism. Most of the time, I fix these issues by taking the time to teach each student how to correctly do paragraphing and double spacing during teacher/student meetings. However, one student had figured out that I couldn't check for plagiarism until I fixed his essay which—despite the time it took—I did. Buried behind these formatting problems was obvious plagiarism.

Blatantly overconfident students are usually the easiest to catch. I love the ones who copy from Wikipedia, and then try to hide it by making the font uniform in size and color. When I view their essays on my computer, the text sharply contrasts in white against my gray background. Secondly, there are always hyperlinks that show up that they have missed. I find these, click on them and they take me right to their plagiarized sources on Wikipedia. One student literally lifted his entire essay from Wikipedia with no attempt to hide it. He also didn't cite Wikipedia on his web page.

Another student turned in a document that contained classified information. When I checked his sources, I was warned that I didn't have the proper military security clearance. When I saw him again, I asked the student, "Are you in the military?" "No," he said. "I ask because when I checked the sources in your essay, I noticed that a military clearance was required..." He knew where I was going, "My roommate is in the military and he wrote my essay for me."

Another student turned in an essay that was so radically different from his writing style that I was suspicious. When I saw him in class, I said, "I looked at all of your previous writing samples and this last essay is professional quality. It doesn't even look like your writing. Did you write this essay?" Without hesitation he confessed, "No actually my sister wrote it. But she gave me permission to use her writing, so that's not plagiarism." I had a difficult time persuading him that it really was plagiarism. Even the F on his essay didn't convince him, but no, he did not wish to set up a meeting with the department head to see whether or not he was right.

I also catch the ones who use the paid or essay-exchange websites. I have a list of these websites. Many of these paid or exchange-essay websites allow you to see a short sample of their catalog of documents so you can "shop" for the right essay to match the assignment. A lot of students will use these free samples. My plagiarism software roots through those samples and tells me right where to find them. One of my students actually listed one of these cheat sites as her source. I gave her credit for citing her source but warned her that these sites were designed to help students cheat.

I'm sure these efforts that I make are pretty ordinary among most teachers, but I do more than just "catch" plagiarizers. I am also proactively campaigning against plagiarism in my classes. While discussing the topic with students, I have found something interesting. Most students feel that plagiarism is more wrong than I previously assumed.

In fact, in studies of student attitudes, nearly 90% of students polled seem to feel that plagiarism was wrong (Scanlon and Neumann). Perhaps the inroad to solving the plagiarism problem is to use the social pressure from their peers' real core beliefs. Exposing the ten percent (or higher) who plagiarize to what their peers have to say about it could have a profound effect. If this minority of students were to realize that their peers were not as "soft" or morally ambiguous on plagiarism as they believe, they might not be so likely to cavalierly take the risk of cheating.

In 1988, I tutored a student who was returning to college after being kicked out for a period of five years for plagiarism. It wasn't an administrative decision to boot him out; it was a student judicial review board that chose this punishment. He lost scholarships, financial aid, and he was not allowed to return to any state-funded community college or university in Illinois.

At the beginning of each semester before I assign any papers, my first strategy is to have "the talk" with my students about plagiarism. To get them thinking about how they feel about plagiarism, I use a stripped-down Thurstone Crime Scale (first devised in 1927) to discuss their attitudes about plagiarism, and I create a simple comparison metric on the board writing crimes like murder and rape at the top and jaywalking and parking tickets at the bottom (Stone 1). In the middle, I place theft and fraud. I ask students where they would place plagiarism on my

crime scale. I always hope to segue into talking about moral ambiguity, but what I found in my small samplings was that they take plagiarism pretty seriously. They generally place it just below the middle, below theft and fraud. When asked about appropriate punishments for plagiarism, their punishments were pretty harsh, ranging from expulsion from the university to arrest and conviction.

Catching cheaters isn't the only way to deter plagiarism. I spend time talking to each class and ask them to quantify their attitudes about plagiarism so they can all hear the consensus opinion from their peers. Hearing from peers may influence their behavior more than some rule in a handbook, an edict from a professor or a statement in the syllabus. After my "talk" about plagiarism, I take the time to teach them how to cite their sources correctly. My goal is making sure they don't plagiarize their way through school. I have found that it is not a high priority among the experts. My assertion may be proven in that many writing text books put the *citing sources* and *plagiarism* chapters far later in the text. To change students' minds, plagiarism should be our highest priority.

Works Cited

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