

Senate Faculty Committee on Academic Honesty

Division of Undergraduate Education

UC Irvine

TIPS FOR PROMOTING ACADEMIC HONESTY

Preventing Plagiarism in Student Writing

What is Plagiarism?

In instructional settings, plagiarism is a multifaceted and ethically complex problem. However, if any definition of plagiarism is to be helpful to administrators, faculty, and students, it needs to be as simple and direct as possible within the context for which it is intended.

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

This definition applies to texts published in print or on-line, to manuscripts, and to the work of other student writers.

Most current discussions of plagiarism fail to distinguish between:

1. submitting someone else's text as one's own or attempting to blur the line between one's own ideas or words and those borrowed from another source, and
2. carelessly or inadequately citing ideas and words borrowed from another source.

Such discussions conflate plagiarism with the misuse of sources.

Ethical writers make every effort to acknowledge sources fully and appropriately in accordance with the contexts and genres of their writing. A student who attempts (even if clumsily) to identify and credit his or her source, but who misuses a specific citation format or incorrectly uses quotation marks or other forms of identifying material taken from other sources, has not plagiarized. Instead, such a student should be considered to have failed to cite and document sources appropriately.

What Are the Causes of Plagiarism?

Students who are fully aware that their actions constitute plagiarism—for example, copying published information into a paper without source attribution for the purpose of claiming the information as their own, or turning in material written by another student—are guilty of academic misconduct. Although no excuse will lessen the breach of ethical conduct that such behavior represents, understanding why students plagiarize can help teachers to consider how to reduce the opportunities for plagiarism in their classrooms.

Students may fear failure or fear taking risks in their own work.

Students may have poor time-management skills or they may plan poorly for the time and effort required for research-based writing, and believe they have no choice but to plagiarize.

Students may view the course, the assignment, the conventions of academic documentation, or the consequences of cheating as unimportant.

When working collaboratively, students whose writing ability is significantly below average often feel compelled to mirror the higher level of writing ability exhibited by their peers. They do not want to be the "weak link" in the paper, especially when part of the assignment grade reflects the overall quality of the paper. In those instances the temptation to plagiarize can exist.

Students with below average writing or English language ability can be tempted to plagiarize simply because they are fearful of not passing the class, especially when the class is mandatory for graduation. Students who have achieved an excellent GPA in their chosen discipline but are poor writers can also be tempted to plagiarize in an effort to maintain their GPA standing.

Teachers may present students with assignments so generic or un-particularized that students may believe they are justified in looking for canned responses.

Instructors and institutions may fail to report cheating when it does occur, or may not enforce appropriate penalties.

Students are not guilty of plagiarism when they try in good faith to acknowledge others' work but fail to do so accurately or fully. These failures are largely the result of failures in prior teaching and learning: students lack the knowledge of and ability to use the conventions of authorial attribution. The following conditions and practices may result in texts that falsely appear to represent plagiarism as we have defined it:

Students may not know how to integrate the ideas of others and document the sources of those ideas appropriately in their texts.

Students will make mistakes as they learn how to integrate others' words or ideas into their own work because error is a natural part of learning.

Students may not know how to take careful and fully documented notes during their research.

Academicians and scholars may define plagiarism differently or more stringently than have instructors or administrators in students' earlier education or in other writing situations.

College instructors may assume that students have already learned appropriate academic conventions of research and documentation.

College instructors may not support students as they attempt to learn how to research and document sources; instead, instructors may assign writing that requires research and expect its appropriate documentation, yet fail to appreciate the difficulty of novice academic writers to execute these tasks successfully.

Students from other cultures may not be familiar with the conventions governing attribution and plagiarism in American colleges and universities.

In some settings, using other people's words or ideas as their own is an acceptable practice for writers of certain kinds of texts (for example, organizational documents), making the concepts of plagiarism and documentation less clear cut than academics often acknowledge and thereby confusing students who have not learned that the conventions of source attribution vary in different contexts.

The motivations behind plagiarism are plentiful but are most commonly attributed to a desire to pass the class, to match the higher writing ability of their peers, to avoid having to apply too much effort and time toward an assignment, or to maintain a decent GPA.

How Can You Prevent Plagiarism in Your Classes?

When assignments are highly generic and not class-specific, when there is no or inadequate instruction on plagiarism and appropriate source attribution, and when students are not led through the iterative processes of writing and revising, teachers often find themselves playing an adversarial role as “plagiarism police” instead of a coaching role as educators. 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.

1. Make your policies clear

It is a good idea to have UCI’s academic honesty policy on your syllabus; however, this neither ensures that students understand it nor that they will abide by it. If this issue is important to you, make understanding the policy a class activity.

In general, discussing the course syllabus on the first day of class will help students to better understand the scope of the course content, assignment requirements, class policies and your overall expectations for the class beyond what is written in the syllabus. The course introduction is an excellent opportunity to include a brief discussion of UCI’s academic honesty policy and how it specifically applies to your particular course assignments. Although the consequences of academic dishonesty should be mentioned, the overall tone of the discussion should be aimed at being helpful and informative rather than threatening or intimidating. Overall, promoting academic honesty should persist throughout the quarter, taking the opportunity to revisit the conventions used for proper attribution of source material.

Talk about the underlying implications of plagiarism. Remind students that the goal of research is to engage, through writing, in a purposeful, scholarly discussion of issues that are sometimes passed over in daily life. Understanding, augmenting, engaging in dialogue with, and challenging the work of others are part of becoming an effective citizen in a complex society. Plagiarism does not simply devalue the institution and the degree it offers; it hurts the inquirer, who has avoided thinking independently and has lost the opportunity to participate in broader social conversations.

2. Know your students’ abilities

Consider using an incoming course writing evaluation based on a course-related prompt. The writing evaluations can be used for three purposes: to verify that a student’s writing ability meets the course prerequisites, to establish a general baseline of a student’s writing ability as a reference for investigating possible instances of plagiarism, and to assess the distribution of writing ability for the class.

In cases where the writing evaluation shows a student to be below the prerequisite level of writing for the class, it may be prudent to advise the student to seek tutorial assistance in conjunction with the class or to postpone taking the class until sufficient tutorial assistance has been provided. Allowing students who fall significantly short of the prerequisite level of writing ability to continue in your class will often result in the student being discouraged or frustrated, especially when they repeatedly receive a low grade for their assignments.

Teaching academic honesty is not just about ethical behavior. It is also about teaching students how knowledge is produced and how important it is to give proper credit to those who have “thought before” us. Failing to give such credit is tantamount to intellectual theft.

3. Encourage effective time management

The temptation to cheat is greater when students are time-pressured.¹ Make sure that students are given deadlines for assignments well in advance. Also, consider giving them a time-line: for example, if a research paper is due ninth week, in week four or five require them to submit their topic and thesis statement; on week seven, require them to submit a first draft. Spending time in class or in discussion section analyzing the assignment itself sometimes gives students a better idea, not just of what is expected, but also how long the task might take. Encourage them often to come to you or to the TA when they are having problems with the assignment. Consider having students come to office hours in small groups to discuss their work. You can also refer them to time management sites such as M.I.T.'s website (<http://mit.edu/uaap/learning/teach/time/index.html>).

4. Avoid the use of recycled or formulaic assignments that may invite stock or plagiarized responses

Broad assignment topics are more likely to lead to plagiarism. For example, rather than suggesting that students write a paper about the Depression, ask them to investigate a specific sub-topic or set of sub-topics within the larger topic, perhaps ones tied to current events. Require them to then create an argument rather than just report information. Make them submit an arguable thesis mid-quarter for your approval. Change your assignments regularly, as well, to discourage them from passing along their papers to students in subsequent classes.

5. Engage students in the process of writing, which produces materials such as notes, drafts, and revisions that are difficult to plagiarize

One of the best ways to promote academic honesty is to have students write short assignments more often. This gives you an opportunity to become familiar with individual students' styles for comparative purposes. Consider requiring students to post notes to a course discussion board. Another excellent strategy is to require students to submit drafts of parts of their essay. (Having segments of a paper due at various times also will help them, you, and the TA with time management.) By providing more feedback earlier in the writing process, students are more likely to turn in better essays, and your job of grading will be somewhat easier if the writing is better.

Writing and responding to writing are time-consuming processes and there is no way around this. There are ways, however, to make grading student writing more efficient. The Teaching, Learning & Technology Center (TLTC) and the Campus Writing Coordinator can provide materials and workshops on some of these strategies.

6. Teach students how to use sources

To encourage proper attribution of sources, conduct an in-class lecture/discussion regarding the particular citation style chosen for the assignment so that students become more familiar with the citing conventions prescribed for your assignment. The in-class discussion will also provide students the opportunity to ask questions. When appropriate, discuss problems students may encounter in documenting and analyzing sources, and offer strategies for avoiding or solving those problems.

In addition, providing examples of an exemplary writing assignment (handouts or via projection) will help set a benchmark and demonstrate the form, format and quality of writing expected for the assignment.

Another way to teach ethical use of sources is to design a writing assignment where students are asked to summarize a selected reading related to their discipline. You can either pre-select the reading (or readings) for the class or require each student to provide a copy of the particular article they

¹ M.I.T. has a useful website with suggestions for students on how to work smarter: <http://web.mit.edu/uaap/learning/teach/integrity/importance.html>

summarized. Having to summarize an article will obligate students to present the summary in their own words, thereby limiting the opportunity to plagiarize. In general, any assignment in which students can practice citing sources in a way that is consistent with your discipline is a good prevention for plagiarism.

Specify the citation format you want them to use and if possible, provide a guide. Give them a realistic idea of how many sources they should cite, how long it should take to write an A paper, and give them examples to review. A grading rubric is also essential to helping students to address an assignment appropriately and effectively.

Ask your subject librarian to come to your class or to discussion sections to conduct a session on conducting research, and/or refer the students to the libraries' tutorials (<http://www.lib.uci.edu/how/tutorials/LibraryWorkshop/begin.html>). You can also send your TAs to the Teaching, Learning and Technology Center (TLTC) or to the Campus Writing Coordinator for assistance with learning how to help students to write better papers, create and use rubrics, and how to grade more effectively and efficiently.

7. Spend ample time teaching students how to paraphrase effectively.

Time spent teaching your students the limits and value of paraphrasing is time well-spent. Show students effectively paraphrasing and have them engage in identifying and creating accurate paraphrases. This is one of the areas of which they are the most unsure.

8. Explain the purpose and limits of collaboration

Just as there are tremendous benefits to class discussion, so are there benefits to collaborating when writing a paper.² Where collaboration ends and plagiarizing begins, however, is often difficult even for faculty to discern³. Learning to collaborate effectively and appropriately requires a skill set that is acquired through guided practice. Give your students early and frequent opportunities to work collaboratively throughout the quarter; provide them with definitions of the various tasks and roles they will assume as a part of a group. (Effective collaboration guidelines are available through the TLTC.) Clarify whether the work will receive a group grade or individual grade; if students will receive individual grades, have the group members hand in their final products together so that they will be easier to review and to compare to one another.

9. Explain disciplinary differences and similarities.

Students sometimes feel that what they learned about citation conventions in their Composition and English courses is wrong rather than just a reflection of disciplinary differences (e.g., MLA vs. APA style). Explain to them what the differences are and why they exist. They also sometimes feel that only their English teachers require multiple drafts of papers or correct spelling and grammar. The best way to disabuse them of these notions by emphasizing that successive drafts are the norm for most good writers and that correctness crosses disciplinary boundaries.

² Martin, Amy. Plagiarism and Collaboration: Suggestions for "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices" WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 28, Number 3, 2005.

³ See endnote #3, above. Also, for more about the benefits of collaboration, see: <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/benefits.html>

Identifying and Dealing with Plagiarism

If you use a device such as Turnitin.com, consider using it as a pedagogical tool to teach students how they've used sources rather than the "plagiarism police." Require students to upload drafts of their assignments and then review their own "originality report" at Turnitin. You might even ask them to write a short reflection about how they have used sources and what they learned from reviewing their originality reports at Turnitin.

In general, look for abrupt changes in a student's writing style, both within a particular assignment and between consecutive assignments. Abrupt changes in writing quality and style within an assignment are often indicators of plagiarism. Fostering individual improvement in a student's writing is certainly part of the pedagogical process; however, sudden or dramatic improvements in the overall quality of a student's writing from one assignment to the next can often indicate plagiarism. Checking the sources cited in the suspect text will often reveal the text strings copied verbatim from the source. Sometimes a student will copy three or four sentences from the source but then use quotation marks on part of that text to give the appearance that the source material was smoothly integrated into their own writing.

In all cases of blatant and widespread plagiarism, it is best to confront the student as soon as possible (after class or during office hours), making sure to keep the discussion private to avoid any undue embarrassment for the student. Allow the student ample opportunity to explain their situation or refute your evidence of plagiarism. Be kind but firm in your approach. Emphasize the importance of academic honesty and personal integrity. If a plagiarism detection tool was used (e.g., Turnitin.com), provide the analysis of the paper to the student as part of your evidence.

Above all, always document your findings and the resulting discussion with the student, and be sure to keep a copy of the plagiarized paper. A copy of your documented comments and assessments should also be provided to the student and your Associate Dean. Assignments containing clear evidence of blatant and widespread plagiarism should receive a grade of "F". However, you should never assign a low grade simply to punish the student. The grade should be commensurate with the degree of plagiarism detected. Depending on the circumstances, subsequent discussion and demeanor of the student, it may be permissible and/or useful to allow the student to rewrite the assignment.

PREVENTING DISHONESTY IN ASSIGNMENTS and TESTS

Many of the same guidelines for student writing apply to the creation and distribution of assignments and tests. Here are some additional suggestions:

- State your policies regarding assignments and tests in your syllabus and review them with your students. (This is a good first day activity in class or discussion section.) You may wish to include some of the policies cited below.
- Scan tests using Rapid return (<https://eee.uci.edu/about/history/recognition/2007-04-Sautter.pdf>). In addition to being able to quickly return graded assignments/tests electronically, the students' original work is documented so they can't change answers after the fact.
- Use multiple versions of test/homework assignments. Many textbooks provide question banks for homework and examinations that can be electronically scrambled to create multiple versions of a document.
- Check student picture IDs before they take an exam and give them an assigned seat.

- Prohibit the use of electronic devices during a test, bringing in food, or wearing hats.⁴
- If possible, disable internet access in the room.
- Require short answers rather than multiple choice responses.
- Have students explain concepts in addition to solving problem sets.
- If you have multiple TAs, have TAs grade all the answers to specific parts of the test. This will make it easier to spot probable cheating.
- Require students to give short, individual verbal presentations on their submitted projects and/or papers.

This document is an adaptation of the Council of Writing Program Administrators' website for promoting academic honesty (the original can be found at <http://wpacouncil.org/node/9>) and the UCI TLTC document entitled "Promoting Academic Honesty." To acquire any of resources referred to in this document, contact De Gallow in the TLTC at dgallow@uci.edu or call (949) 824-6189

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⁴ There have been instances of students writing answers on the inside of labels on water bottles and on the brim of baseball caps.