GUIDE TO PLAGIARISM AND CYBER-PLAGIARISM

Last Updated: Aug 18, 2011 **Email Alerts**

Why Students Plagiarize

Plagiarism is a difficult concept to define because it encompasses a wide range of actions from merely writing incorrect citations to the wholesale theft of someone else's work or ideas. Also, the type of plagiarism -- deliberate or unintentional -- have an impact upon the perception of the offence for both faculty and students. The exact causes of plagiarism are complex, but worth examining.For printable handouts and writing tips, please click Handouts for Students.

Reasons For Plagiarizing

WRITING AND RESEARCH SKILLS

- **Lack of research skills** -- many undergraduate students do not know how to search the library catalogue, search databases for journal articles, or use other reference sources. Faculty can help students acquire these skills by working in conjunction with their library. The University of Alberta Libraries offer free instructional sessions called Navigating the Library. These sessions introduce students to the library and teach them how to search the library catalogue and databases. In addition, the libraries at the University of Alberta offer reference services on a daily basis as well as e-mail reference and chat reference.

- **Problems evaluating Internet sources** -- many students do not know how to critically evaluate Internet sources and this can impact on the research process and the student's writing. It is important to remember that there is no quality control on the Internet! Library research guides such as Critical Evaluation of Resources on the Internet are excellent resources for students. For a printable handout on what to look for when evaluating information found on the Web, please click Handouts for Students.

- **Confusion between plagiarism and paraphrasing** -- studies indicate that up to 60% of students cannot distinguish between paraphrased and plagiarized text (Roig 914). The problem is magnified when students need to paraphrase unfamiliar vocabulary and technical terms. A study published in *Psychological Reports* found that "students will use writing strategies that result in plagiarism when they face the task of paraphrasing advanced technical text for which they may lack the proper cognitive resources with which to process it" (Roig 979). The inability to distinguish between plagiarized text and paraphrased text, and incorrectly citing sources, are often the root causes of unintentional

plagiarism. For a printable handout on how to distinguish between plagiarism and paraphrasing, please click Handouts for Students.

- **Confusion about terminology** -- "Terminology is another problem that perplexes students and compounds their confusion and anxiety. Many do not understand the difference between a report and an essay, between exposition and argumentation, between a theme and a thesis . . . And 'analyse' and 'discuss' must surely rank at the top of the list of all-time confusing terms" (Robertson D4).

Instructions on assignments should be clear, concise, and easy to understand.

- **Careless notetaking** -- many students inadvertently plagiarize while doing preliminary research. During the notetaking phase paraphrased material and directly quoted material can easily be mixed up if students aren't careful. At a later date when students begin writing their essay they may no longer be able to distinguish what material is theirs and what material came from their sources. In addition, the student may have written incomplete or incorrect bibliographic information and cannot locate the source they quoted to ensure that they have not plagiarized.
To alleviate this problem some writers use only direct quotations while taking notes. This practice insures that the writer knows when to paraphrase and when to directly quote. Other methods of keeping track of direct quotes and paraphrased material include writing a "P" beside paraphrased material, plus the page number after every note taken, or placing quotation marks around everything copied word for word, even if it is only a phrase.

- **Confusion about how to properly cite sources** -- the lack of consistency among the different style guides compounds the problems that students experience when citing sources. A student can use up to four different style guides in a year, and each guide may give conflicting information.

In addition, online sources can be particularly difficult to cite. First, there is no consensus among the style guides about citing online sources. Second, URLs are unstable. It is possible that a Web site address can change overnight, or the URL may be long, complex, and confusing.

The University of Alberta Libraries has an online guide that explains how to cite electronic sources. Citation and Style Guides for Internet and Electronic Resources is available from the University of Alberta Libraries home page. Another helpful resource is the Research & Writing Guides link.

MISUNDERSTANDING KEY CONCEPTS

- **Misconception of** plagiarism -- students may erroneously assume that the act of plagiarism only involves written text. However the theft or lack of attribution for someone else's ideas is also plagiarism.

- **Misconception of** intellectual property**,** copyright**, and** public domain -- students may not be able to decipher what information is in the public domain, what materials and ideas are copyrighted, and what materials and ideas are the intellectual property of their creators and thus require proper attribution.

- **Misconception of** common knowledge -- students may not have the ability to distinguish what materials, facts, and ideas are considered common knowledge. For a printable handout explaining the concept of common knowledge, please click Handouts for Students.

- **Perception of online information as public knowledge** -- because some students perceive information found online as public knowledge, they do not realize that Internet resources must be referenced. Journal articles and books found in online databases often do not get properly cited for the same reason. Students need to know that information found online is the intellectual property of its creator and it requires proper attribution.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

- **Pressure from family, competition for scholarships and jobs** -- family members and personal expectations can place a great deal of pressure on students to maintain a certain grade point average regardless of what is learned. Often all that matters to students are grades when they are competing for scholarships, jobs, or entry into graduate school.
In addition, "Students may also not be as personally interested in their own education versus their career aspirations . . . Even students who are concerned about the learning part of their education may justify plagiarism based on the fear that others are already cheating, causing "unfair competition'"(Fain and Bates qtd. in Auer and Krupar).

For some students, learning may not be the point of an education. They are there to get the qualifications or the piece of paper. This mode of thinking can result in students justifying academic offences because they only need to finish this assignment, this class, or they need the grade.

- **Student ethics and relationship with the University** -- "Students lack a basic reference point for ethical academic behaviour. Too often learning and the evaluation of learning - namely grading - are considered one rather than two distinct processes. For some students, getting the grade becomes the goal, and they might see any behaviour as appropriate which results in good grades. Thus, lacking clear guidance

from faculty and confused about the goal of education, students do not know what constitutes academic dishonesty" (Peterson qtd. in Lathrop and Foss 115).

• **The commodification of knowledge and education** -- the move to business and market-models coupled with a consumer mentality can result in some students viewing their education as a commodity. There has been a shift from valuing education for the sake of learning to valuing education so that career aspirations can be fulfilled. As a result some students expect to pay their tuition and cruise through post-secondary education on their way to becoming a professional in their chosen field. Education can be viewed as the passport to a desired job rather than a learning experience.

INTERNAL FACTORS

• **Poor time management and organizational skills** -- undergraduate students often do not have the time management or organizational skills necessary to complete a large research paper. They can become overwhelmed by the large task and procrastinate.

To help alleviate the problem of procrastination faculty may ask students to hand in an outline of their paper a week before the paper is due.

CULTURAL FACTORS

• **Culturally based attitudes towards plagiarism** -- The idea that an author has "ownership" of language may be a ludicrous concept to students from different cultures. In some cultures, copying someone else's words or ideas is a high form of flattery. The notion that words can be "owned" is a facet of Western culture.

"Many non-Westerners have a very difficult time understanding that a person can "own" discourse. For many Asian students in composition classes, proper acknowledgement of the language and ideas of others is a very difficult concept to understand, much less master . . . Furthermore, in the West, . . . there is a strong connection between ownership and selfhood, with the implication that whatever one owns (language included) makes up one's personal identity" (Bowden 13).

This is not a justification for anyone handing in plagiarized work, but it is useful to remember that it may take more time and different approaches for some people to master proper attribution.