

Plagiarism in the Internet Age

Rebecca Moore Howard and Laura J. Davies

Using sources with integrity is complex. The solution is teaching skills, not vilifying the Internet.

Many teachers see plagiarism as a simple, black-and-white issue. Teachers often bring up the topic at the beginning of a research paper unit, discuss it in one classroom period, and never say the word *plagiarism* again unless students are caught copying, when this term is dragged out once more to accuse and punish the guilty. Teachers warn students not to copy—or else—and present them with citation guides and the trinity of techniques to write using others' research without plagiarizing: quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing. The onus then falls on the students, who are expected to use these techniques well, assuming that they know how to do so.

In an age when students gravitate to online sources for research—and when tremendous amounts of both reputable and questionable information are available online—many have come to regard the Internet itself as a culprit in students' plagiarism. Some teachers go so far as to forbid students from researching online, in the mistaken assumption that if students are working from hard-copy sources only, the problem will disappear.

We believe that an approach far different from either warnings and punishment or attempts to curtail online research is warranted. Teachers who wish to prevent plagiarism should devote extensive instruction to the component tasks of writing from sources. This instruction should focus on the supposedly simple technique of summarizing sources, which is in truth not simple. Many students are far from competent at summarizing an argument—and students who cannot summarize are the students most likely to plagiarize.

Our argument may seem innocuous, but it profoundly contradicts widely shared attitudes. Most approaches to confronting plagiarism start from the premise that it is something to prevent simply by imparting information and "getting tough." A didactic children's book and accompanying instructor's manual that we saw recently exemplified this premise. The book told the tale of a young student who unknowingly plagiarizes by copying information from an online source into her report on the American Revolution. The teacher in this tale uses the incident to teach students that using others' words without attribution is a serious crime. He then emphasizes to students the importance of citation and source integration techniques and enlists the school librarian to model how to cite outside works used in a piece of writing.

Instructional materials like these imply that teachers can stop inappropriate use of sources through three strategies: (1) teaching students from early grades the nuts and bolts of crediting all sources they use; (2) designing plagiarism-proof assignments that spell out how works should be cited and that include personal reflection and alternative final projects like creating a brochure; and (3) communicating to students that you're laying down the law on plagiarism ("I'll be on the lookout for this in your papers, you know").

However, good writing from sources involves more than competent citation of sources. It is a complicated activity, made even more complex by easy access to a seemingly limitless number of online sources. Any worthwhile guide to preventing plagiarism should

- Discuss intellectual property and what it means to "own" a text.
- Discuss how to evaluate both online and print-based sources (for example, comparing the quality and reliability of a Web site created by an amateur with the reliability of a peer-reviewed scholarly article).
- Guide students through the hard work of engaging with and understanding their sources, so students don't conclude that creating a technically perfect bibliography is enough.
- Acknowledge that teaching students how to write from sources involves more than telling students that copying is a crime and handing them a pile of source citation cards.

Students don't need threats; students need pedagogy. That pedagogy should both teach source-reading skills and take into consideration our increasingly wired world. And it should communicate that plagiarism is wrong in terms of what society values about schools and learning, not just in terms of arbitrary rules.

The Blame-the-Internet Game

Many commentators point to easy accessibility of a plethora of information on the Web as a chief cause of student plagiarism. Researcher Sue Carter Simmons (1999) quickly dispels that myth: Students have been systematically plagiarizing since at least the 19th century. Doris Dant's 1986 survey of high school students, conducted well before the Internet became a cultural phenomenon, confirms this finding: Eighty percent of the high school students Dant surveyed reported having "copied some to most of their reports,"

although 94 percent said they had received instruction in attribution of sources. The Internet is at most a complication in a long-standing dynamic.

However, certain features of online research may affect how plagiarism creeps into writing, and it's little wonder that educators are alarmed by the potential of the Internet to encourage unlawful copying. The Internet offers a host of downloadable text for nefarious cheaters and desperate procrastinators alike. And because text can be easily appropriated through cutting and pasting, it is easy for well-intentioned students to overlook the boundaries between what they themselves have produced and what they have slid from one screen (their Internet browser) to another (their word-processed document). As the writer leaps ahead, brainstorming creatively while reading various online sources, he or she may not pause to insert quotation marks and citations, fully intending to do that later. And "later" never comes.

Little wonder, too, that educators are turning to a combination of severe punishments for infractions and automated plagiarism-detecting services such as [Turnitin.com](https://www.turnitin.com) to discourage inappropriate copying from online temptations. But trying to legislate the wired world simply won't work.

What *Will* Work

Start with Values.

Teachers need to focus attention on the entire set of activities involved in using outside sources in writing. Review with students the values and precepts that are still valid in the era of literacy 2.0. One of these precepts is that through formal education, people learn skills they can apply elsewhere—but taking shortcuts lessens such learning.

Educators should also communicate why writing is important. Through writing, people learn, communicate with one another, and discover and establish their own authority and identity. Even students who feel comfortable with collaboration and uneasy with individual authorship need to realize that acknowledged collaboration—such as a coauthored article like this one—is very different from unacknowledged use of another person's work. The line between the two is not always bright, but it does exist.

These values and precepts are at risk when student writers plagiarize. A student who plagiarizes is undermining his or her community's ethics, jeopardizing his or her authority, and erasing his or her identity. That student is missing an opportunity to become a better researcher and writer and is probably not learning whatever the assignment was designed to teach.

Guide Students in Online Research.

Many of us must first learn methods of online research ourselves. We know the principles of good research, but we may not be experienced in applying those principles to an online environment, and we can't assume that students are, either.

How much unattributed copying from online sources, for example, derives from poor source selection? If students don't know how to find good sources online, they will enter a search term in Google and look only at the first few sources that come up. Consulting only general sources, and therefore going no deeper than a general understanding of the topic, students "can't think of any other way to say it," so they copy.

Teachers should also address how to use Wikipedia as a source rather than banning it. Even if it's forbidden as a source, many students will consult Wikipedia because it provides a starting point for research on an unfamiliar topic. Students who don't know how to dig deeper have their hands tied because they can't cite a significant source of their research—and then they are busted for plagiarizing from Wikipedia. It may be more useful to assign a research project for which you tell students to begin with Wikipedia but then guide them in how to find more varied, deeper sources of information using library databases such as EBSCO, LexisNexis, or ProQuest to verify Wikipedia's claims. You can make this project entertaining by beginning with a Wikipedia entry you have chosen for its flaws or incorrect information. For example, according to the *New York Times*, actor/director Clint Eastwood, a happy omnivore, was shocked to discover that the Wikipedia entry on him said he followed a vegan diet (Headlam, 2008).

Teach Summarizing.

K–16 teachers must spend more time teaching students how to read critically and how to write about their sources. Rodrigue, Serviss, and Howard (2007) studied papers written by 18 college sophomores in a required research writing course, reading not only the 18 papers but also all the sources cited in them. The researchers discovered that all the papers included some mishandling of sources—absence of citation, absence of quotation marks, paraphrases too close to the source language—and some mishandling was extensive. More significant, they found that none of the 18 papers contained any *summary* of the overall argument of a source. Many student writers paraphrased adequately, restating a passage in their own language in approximately the same number of words, but none of them used fresh language to condense, by at least 50 percent, a passage from a source text of a paragraph or more in length. When these student writers did use a longer passage, they did so by copying the entire paragraph, with or without citation.

These sophomores at a well-regarded college worked at the sentence level only, selecting and replicating isolated sentences and weaving them into their arguments. This puts the writer at great risk of inappropriate copying. A writer who works only at the sentence level must always quote or paraphrase. The paraphrase will sometimes veer too closely to the language of the source, and quotations may accumulate in such quantity that the writer feels the need to conceal some of them, for fear the paper will sound too much like a tissue of quotations (which indeed it is).

Teachers often forget how difficult summarizing another writer's argument is. Miguel Roig (2001) demonstrated that even professors who are expert writers have difficulty summarizing texts on unfamiliar topics. How great, then, is the task confronting our students, who regularly read texts on unfamiliar topics? We could assign only easy, familiar texts, but that would bring the educational project to an abrupt halt. Our task is instead to teach students strategies for entering and participating in the challenging topics and texts that we assign them.

Such instruction might begin with techniques of paraphrase. Sue Shirley (2004) has developed a series of steps through which she takes college students. She begins by explaining that inserting synonyms is not paraphrasing. She then guides students in studying a passage and identifying its key words and main ideas that must be retained to paraphrase the passage. Shirley shows her students poor paraphrases of the passage for them to critique. Finally, she has them write their own paraphrase of a 50- to 100-word source passage that they themselves choose.

With well-practiced paraphrasing skills, students are ready to work on summarizing. Similar pedagogy can be used for this exercise. How long and challenging the source text is will depend on the level of students' education, but students should be guided through identifying key terms and major ideas, with the goal of being able not just to restate an idea but to understand a text so well that they can compress it by at least 50 percent.

These practices are essential to successful researched writing and are also excellent techniques for critical reading. If we fail to teach these skills, our students will always be in peril of plagiarism, notwithstanding all the pricey plagiarism-detecting software we employ and all the threats we make.

References

- Dant, D. (1986). Plagiarism in high school: A survey. *English Journal*, 75(2), 81–84.
- Headlam, B. (2008, December 14). The Films Are For Him. Got That? *The New York Times*, p. AR1.
- Rodrigue, T., Serviss, P., & Howard, R. (2007, November). *Plagiarism isn't the issue: Understanding students' source use*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, New York.
- Roig, M. (2001). Plagiarism and paraphrasing criteria of college and university professors. *Ethics and Behavior*, 11(3), 307–324.
- Shirley, S. (2004). The art of paraphrase. *Teaching English in the two-year college* 22(2), 186–189.
- Simmons, S. (1999). Competing notions of authorship: A historical look at students and textbooks on plagiarism and cheating. In L. Buranen & A. Roy (Eds.), *Perspectives on plagiarism and intellectual property in a postmodern world* (pp. 41–54). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.