

Plagiarism: What It Is and What to Do about It

Plagiarism appears to be a growing problem on college campuses. This handout offers basic help for understanding plagiarism, why it occurs, and what to do when we as teachers uncover student plagiarism.

What Is Plagiarism?

The official SSU policy states as follows:

Plagiarism is the act of obtaining or attempting to obtain credit for academic work by representing the work of another as one's own without the necessary and appropriate acknowledgment. More specifically, plagiarism is:

- a. The act of incorporating ideas, words or sentences, paragraphs, or parts thereof without appropriate acknowledgement and representing the product as one's own work; and
- b. The act of representing another's intellectual work such as musical composition, computer program, photographs, painting, drawing, sculpture, or research or the like as one's own.

Composition scholar Rebecca Moore Howard, studying student writing and the challenges students face in writing, distinguishes among three different kinds of plagiarism: **cheating**, in which writers deliberately steal the entirety of others' work; **Non-attribution**, in which writers either deliberately or accidentally fail to distinguish between their own work and others' within specific portions of text; and **patchwriting**, in which writers (again, either accidental or deliberately) quote or transcribe a source text *approximately*, changing some of it but retaining the sense and much of the text. In a scholarly milieu (but not necessarily in other milieus), none of these kinds of plagiarism is "OK"; however, they may stem from different causes, more or less nefarious or accidental.

Why Do Writers Plagiarize?

One might think of three different "origins" of plagiarism:

- **deliberate plagiarism** is of course the same thing as overt cheating: writers sometimes present someone else's work as their own, because of either a desire to avoid work, a lack of faith in their writing abilities, or a desperation born of past failure;
- **nondeliberate plagiarism due to faulty writing processes**: writers who are too time-stressed, too "scattered" in their approach, too unsystematic in their research may plagiarize accidentally;
- **nondeliberate plagiarism due to honest misunderstandings about how to "weave others' voices" into one's own text**: the weaving together of voices in a writer's text is a very difficult aspect of writing, and student writers may plagiarize through making simple and honest mistakes.

The advent of the internet age is, of course, making both deliberate and nondeliberate plagiarism vastly easier to commit. Today students can download whole papers from websites catering to deliberate cheaters; entire source texts like articles and even books can be downloaded for free; passages can simply be cut and pasted from internet sources directly into a writer's paper. For deliberate plagiarizers, these developments are of course a boon; and for inexperienced, learning writers, these developments pose a very real danger, perhaps leading them to plagiarize accidentally.

How Can Teachers Prevent Student Plagiarism?

Teachers can prevent a large majority of instances of both deliberate and nondeliberate plagiarism through good teaching. See the SSU Writing Center's handout on "Preventing Student Plagiarism" for many specific suggestions.

How Can Teachers Uncover Student Plagiarism?

If teachers suspect that a student has plagiarized a paper, they can “test” the paper in a number of different ways.

- **Ask the student.** Sit down with the student and say something like, “In reading this paper, I detect a really puzzling mixture of different styles. Can you tell me about your process of writing the paper?” Or: “I see some specific data here which *feels* to me like it ought to be cited. Tell me where you got X piece of information.” Or: “The quality of the writing in this paper is really different (better, worse) than in your previous papers. How would you explain that?” The student may confess spontaneously. At least, you’ll learn some things about the student and his or her attitude toward writing.
- **Hunt for the source.** This is the old method, still required sometimes. Printed sources must be tracked down; internet sources can very easily be accessed and checked. Here’s how to do it free of charge:

Access the internet and begin a “Google” advanced search (at http://www.google.com/advanced_search). Then simply type a sentence or phrase into the box marked “With the exact phrase.” Searching will fairly easily uncover any readily available internet source exact-matches.

- **Send the paper to Turnitin.com.** SSU is a subscriber to a professional plagiarism-detecting service (at <http://www.turnitin.com>). To use this service, professors can send papers to these services and receive reports detailing incidents of plagiarism.

What Can and/or Should Teachers Do When They Uncover Student Plagiarism?

The “official advice” of the SSU Writing Center is that teachers should approach each instance of plagiarism separately and sensitively, seeking the underlying reasons for the plagiarism and acting accordingly. Here’s a step-by-step overview of a course of action a teacher might take:

1. Meet with the student in person. Name the offense and show where the problems are and the evidence you have to support your charge. Ask a general question to get the student to respond to the accusation: “Can you tell me what went on here and why you might have submitted work of this nature?”
2. Listen to the student’s explanation and make a judgment, either on the spot or later, about whether the plagiarism was deliberate or nondeliberate, about the student’s deservedness of mercy, about issues of fairness to other students, and so forth.
3. At this point, you could decide simply to require the student to rewrite the paper. Such a course of action would be appropriate early in a term; when the student is simply confused about proper use of sources; and/or when you feel you might have been unclear in your own expectations.
4. If you believe the student deserves punishment for plagiarism, you could
 - determine steps toward an “informal resolution,” in which you determine what penalties the student should pay or further work he or she should be required to do; use the “Cheating and Plagiarism Record of Informal Resolution” form and submit it to the University Student Discipline Office *whether or not you are imposing sanctions*;
 - refer the student to the University Student Discipline Office for formal sanctions, including academic probation, failing grades on the paper and or in the course, or suspension or expulsion; use the “Cheating and Plagiarism Complaint Form” and submit it to the University Student Discipline Office

The University Student Discipline Office is very helpful in assisting faculty members dealing with these challenges. Call x42838 with questions or for consultation.

Work Cited

Howard, Rebecca Moore. “Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty.” *College English* 57 (1995): pp. 788-806.