

“How could my student not know this is PLAGIARISM?”

Why Students Might Be Confused about Plagiarism and What You Can Do to Help Them Avoid It

Almost nothing is more distressing for faculty reading their students' writing than spotting an instance of plagiarism. Echoing a word root that means "kidnapping," plagiarism certainly feels like a major crime, especially to academics whose publications are our pride and our legacy. While we're careful to cite anything we didn't write, for students, source acknowledgement is often a murky and confusing process that varies from the popular world to the academic one, from high school to college, from one discipline to another, and from one classroom to another. They are constantly learning new rules, relearning rules they misunderstood the first time, and adapting to increasingly complex writing tasks. It makes sense that they would sometimes make errors.

Here are some questions you might ask to decide whether students are deliberately plagiarizing or are still trying to figure out what needs to be cited and how.

Are your students *deliberately* plagiarizing?

- Did the student copy someone else's work and present it as his/her own?
- Did the student ask someone else to write the paper for him/her?
- Did the student purchase a paper or download one from the internet?
- Did the student "patch write," i.e., copy and paste passages from other sources without attribution?
- Did the student make up sources?

Plagiarism is cheating, and it should be reported to the Honor Committee.

Are your students making serious citation errors, which may stem from misunderstanding?

- Might uncited material have seemed like "common knowledge" to the student? (What is considered common knowledge may vary from field to field and even teacher to teacher.)
- Might a student have misunderstood whether a particular source needed citing? (Some faculty tell students that textbooks, handouts, or commonly used sources do *not* need citing.)
- Might citation problems reveal a student unsure of when to quote, and when and how to paraphrase? (Students in some disciplines are told that they do *not* need to quote phrasing that's five or fewer words, or add citations more than once per paragraph.)
- Is some source material incompletely, inaccurately or inconsistently documented, as might happen with poor note-taking, unfamiliarity with a new format, or carelessness?

Widespread serious citation errors can create a document that is effectively plagiarized, even if the student didn't intend that outcome. Faculty must judge whether to report such students for cheating. Sporadic citation errors may indicate a learning process. Faculty may choose to designate a significant grade penalty for such errors—as they might do for errors of fact or insufficient argumentation—without labeling such problems as cheating.

Whether deliberate or unintentional, you can help students avoid plagiarism by reducing the opportunity and temptation not to do their own work (plagiarism is often a last-minute decision):

- Discuss the definition of plagiarism in class. Include all variations depending on the field (e.g., citations, etc.).
- Include in your syllabus an explanation of plagiarism and your policies on plagiarized work.
- Ask students for a proposal for their research and/or to commit to a topic early on.
- Discuss with students what their original contribution should be and what it might look like: source-material choice? synthesis? analysis? proposals? separate from or integrated with source material?
- Break your assignment into parts: prospectus, drafts, annotated bibliography, thesis and rough outline.
- Give students clear guidelines for using, citing, and documenting sources. Ask students about their uncertainties and/or confusions about using sources.
- Spend time in class practicing how to paraphrase and document sources relevant to your field/assignment.
- Ask students for frequent updates on their research and research process.
- Require different kinds of sources (e.g. books, websites, articles, etc.).
- Make time in class for students to write about one or more of their sources and how the source helps them develop their argument.
- On the day the paper is due, ask students to write about their research and writing steps, the writing choices they made about structuring the paper, and how they chose which sources to use.