

Plagiarism Workshop
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There are three main aspects to plagiarism and teaching: **Prevention, Recognition, and Reaction.** Consistent approaches on each of these can help reduce the instances of plagiarism.

Prevention

- *Explain the Concept.* The History Department requires all syllabi to include a statement on plagiarism. On the first day of section you should go over this with students. You should seek two goals: to understand what they know about plagiarism and to provide them with an accurate definition. If you have a section with some history majors, ask them if they can provide a definition, and correct or supplement their response as needed. If you have a 100-level section, ask them what they think plagiarism is, and again correct or supplement that. Sad as it is to say, you should not assume your students know what plagiarism is. And even if they do, you still should provide some explanation – this becomes important in proving a case of misconduct by showing the university that the student knew of the policies and knew how you defined “plagiarism.”
- *Design Good Assignments.* If you have any input on how writing assignments are devised in your course, try to construct assignments that will limit plagiarism. If a prof has offered the same essay for several years in a row, try to get them to change it. Instead of having students write a straightforward essay on Anne Hutchinson’s trial, have them connect it to concepts specifically discussed in section or lecture – this makes it less likely that they can download a paper or cut and paste from Google, as you’re asking for something more focused and specific, which the online sites may not address. Another good approach is to have them focus on specific aspects of a text, again something that isn’t likely to be found on Google. Preventing them from using outside sources or web sources is another useful way to make a good assignment.
- *Avoid Bad Assignments.* If you are assigning a research paper in a 100 level course, you’re asking for trouble. Students do not often have the skills to do this effectively, and an open-ended research assignment is an invitation to plagiarism at that level. However, there are ways to make it work better. The key is to have students turn in bits of work over the course of the term. Have them submit a topic, with sources, in the first few weeks of the term. That way you’ve already got them identifying good sources and on a path away from cutting and pasting or downloading something. A few weeks later have them turn in a rough draft – that makes them produce something that is likely to be their own work, and if you suspect plagiarism, you have a chance to head it off before the final draft.
- *Emphasize the importance of planning ahead.* Plagiarism is a crime of opportunity and desperation – usually a student sitting there the night before a paper is due panics because they’ve only got 3 of the 5 pages done and no clue how to finish it. They hit Google, find something that looks good, thinks “shoot, the TA will never catch this,” they paste it, and now they’re almost to that glorious 5th page. If students have planned ahead, though, this becomes less of an issue. Have students bring a thesis statement to section the week before an essay is due – aside from the obvious pedagogical value of such an exercise, it also gets students thinking ahead and early about their project, hopefully reducing their desperation...

The Lead TA Website has links to more advice and examples of how to craft good writing assignments.

Recognition

Unfortunately, prevention can only do so much. Some students, for whatever reason, will still commit plagiarism. So how do you detect it?

- *Common forms.* The most common forms of plagiarism are where an essay includes phrases or paragraphs cut and pasted from an internet site. Some essays are totally comprised of cut-and-paste. Less common are essays downloaded in their entirety from the web, although these surely do exist, thanks to various websites.
- *What counts?* One common defense against charges of plagiarism by even academic and popular historians is that they simply didn't cite properly or accurately, mixed up their notes, etc. And with undergrads this has a point – not all of them know how to properly cite. If there's a quote in there from a text that they read for the essay and it's not in quotes, then by many definitions that is plagiarism. But does that count as misconduct? Is that something you wish to turn them in for? Use your judgment. If they're not putting quotes or giving citations for a primary source text that they were to use to write the essay, it's probably more of an error than an act of cheating, so it's probably best to mark them down for it and point to them their need to cite completely and accurately. If they've cut and pasted something from an outside source they weren't told or allowed to use, though, especially a website, that seems more clearly a case of cheating.
- *Obvious cases.* These are the ones that are so obviously plagiarized that you almost – but not quite – feel sorry for the student. Common signs include different font size, odd text formatting, inclusions of parenthetical citations that don't make sense, etc. We think of student plagiarists as slick con artists, but there have been a lot of cases where the cut-and-paste is very clear.
- *Not so obvious cases.* Still, the vast majority of plagiarists will be caught by a TA who reads a sentence or a phrase and goes, “huh. That doesn't sound like this student's writing style. That analysis or sentence structure is more complex than they usually use.” You have a nagging feeling that this wasn't their work, even though nothing about the essay itself is a complete giveaway.
- *Google it.* Find a distinctive phrase and enter it into a search engine. If you get a lot of hits, put the phrase in quotes. This can usually lead you to the source of a cut-and-paste job, providing you with the necessary evidence to prove plagiarism and academic misconduct. However, you may not find what you are looking for, especially as more and more online paper mills hide their content behind a subscription wall.

Reaction

Are you sure? If you are not certain that a student has committed an act of plagiarism, if you cannot prove it with evidence, you really should not make an accusation or confrontation with them about it. Aside from the procedural and ethical problems inherent in making an accusation based on uncertainty, it can also damage your teaching effectiveness by poisoning your relationship with your students.

In a situation where you cannot prove plagiarism, your goal is to get the student to improve their writing. Most likely this is a symptom of a deeper problem with the student's writing skills; you suspect plagiarism because they erred somewhere. What was the error? Possible problems and errors include:

- *Incomplete or nonexistent citations.* This can also include problems with properly quoting a source. In this situation your goal is to explain to the student why it is important for historians to properly cite their

sources (to give credit to another author, or to guide a reader to the author's sources to assess their argument) and provide accurate quotations.

- *Essay is poorly organized.* If you notice a significant change in tone or language or analytical skill that makes you suspect plagiarism, the underlying problem may be that the student has poorly organized their thoughts and is grasping for ways to throw in something that sounds good. An essay that flows smoothly with a logical progression of evidence and analysis is not usually one that is going to set off your alarm bells. Help the student understand good methods of historical argumentation and essay construction.

If you suspect but cannot prove plagiarism, and want to address these issues, one effective method is to write comments on the paper and instead of giving a grade, write “see me” and schedule a time to meet with the student to discuss their paper. Your primary purpose is to discuss with them the problems you uncovered and point them to improvements, but you can also use the meeting to address your concerns – ask them about a passage you find suspicious, but don’t explain that you are “suspicious” about it – instead tell them that a phrase in question is one that you don’t understand – why did the student include it? What was their motivation? Obviously you are a TA and not an interrogator, this is not *j'accuse*, but even if they don’t “confess” you are still providing effective teaching by explaining to them why a certain passage is flawed and how they can improve their writing skills through better organization and articulation of their thoughts.

You are sure. If you have evidence that this is a case of plagiarism – you found the paper on Google, for example – then you must decide how you wish to proceed.

As a TA you need to coordinate with the course instructor. Some instructors may be reluctant to throw the book at the student. I believe you should hold your ground and insist that the student be reported to the Committee on Academic Conduct (CAC).

Some TAs have found it effective to speak to their students about what they found, playing a “good cop, bad cop” at the same time. Be firm with the student that this is a mistake, and tell them that you are going to refer it to the CAC – but also provide them with some hope that their entire career is not ruined. Help them understand how to write better papers, how to plan their writing, how to devote enough time to their writing. These things will make them better writers and provide them with something constructive to take from the experience.

Even if a student is profusely apologetic, reporting them is still a good idea for two reasons. The first is that it shows the student that there is a real consequence to academic misconduct. If it is their first offense chances are very slim they will be expelled. Instead, and this leads to the second reason, it would become a part of their academic file and if the student were to commit plagiarism again, then the penalties would become much more serious. Reporting them, then, creates a very real reason for them to never commit plagiarism again.

If you do report them, your first stop should be this relevant portion of the Faculty Resource on Grading (FROG): <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/issue1/inforprt.htm>

It lays out the steps involved in reporting a case of misconduct. Central to this is a file you submit to the CAC that describes the situation. This includes a letter of charges, written statements from witnesses (if there are any), copies of communications with the student not just about the case of misconduct but also about definitions of plagiarism given to a class on the first day (for example), and documents in evidence, such as the essay the student submitted and the source from which the student plagiarized. You should not assign a grade to the student, for that assignment or for the course, until the CAC has issued its decision.

If you choose to report it – and you should – you are bound to follow these university policies. And you are bound to respect the CAC's decision, even if you think they've been too lenient.