

## Preventing Plagiarism in Student Writing

### What is plagiarism?

According to the Statement of Academic Responsibility in the UW Undergraduate Handbook (<http://depts.washington.edu/psywc/handouts/plagUW.html>), plagiarism is using another's words or ideas without proper citation. As a first step to deterring plagiarism, make it clear to your students what plagiarism *is*. Many students truly don't know.

### Identifying plagiarism

Suspected plagiarism usually arises from similarities in passages between papers, or between a paper and a source, or from notable shifts in writing styles (a discovery process made easier because students who plagiarize are typically not good writers). *Important: If you suspect plagiarism, do not accuse someone unless you have documentation from a printed source.* Here are some ways to document suspected plagiarism:

1. Look at research articles related to the assignment.
2. Do a keyword search on the Internet using a search engine like Yahoo or Google.
3. Use an "anti-plagiarism" web site. Web sites such as [schoolsucks.com](http://schoolsucks.com) abound, providing thousands of papers for students to plagiarize. But other web sites such as those below offer effective counter-strategies, usually for a fee:

[plagiarism.org](http://plagiarism.org) has tens of thousands of essays from various web sites, and identifies papers cobbled together from material from several sources. No charge for first-time use.

[IntegriGuard.com](http://IntegriGuard.com) offers access to similar services for \$5 a month.

[howoriginal.com](http://howoriginal.com) allows you to submit up to 1K of text, then applies the text to an Internet search. Free.

[Glatt Plagiarism Services \(plagiarism.com\)](http://GlattPlagiarismServices.com) offers a computer-assisted program to instruct students about what constitutes plagiarism and help them to identify unintentional borrowing. Teachers may also find it useful.

### Responding to plagiarism

After you identify plagiarized writing, next evaluate whether it was intentional (the student took credit for someone else's work) or unintentional (e.g., the student made a poor attempt to paraphrase). Your recourse ranges from a warning to a lowered grade on the assignment to reporting the plagiarism for more severe disciplinary action (see the UW Student Conduct Code, <http://www.washington.edu/students/handbook/conduct.html#030>).

No one would deny that the task of ferreting out and dealing with plagiarism is disagreeable and time-consuming. What are alternatives?

### Preventing plagiarism

If you assign the kind of paper that can be pulled off the web, that is what you will get. One way to reduce the incidence of plagiarism is to create assignments that make plagiarizing difficult. Such assignments may convince even seasoned plagiarizers that it would be easier to write the paper themselves. More importantly, plagiarism-proof assignments tend to be more satisfying for all students. Below are suggestions for writing assignments that minimize or eliminate the possibility of students using anyone's words or ideas but their own.

Give only assignments that you have time to evaluate. This guideline has two implications:

1. Students are much more likely to do original work if they believe that you will actually read and comment on their papers at the same level of detail you have asked of them. Students who receive a grade without feedback receive the message that their efforts were wasted.
2. As a general rule, assign shorter, less in-depth papers for larger classes and longer, more in-depth papers for smaller classes.

Suggestions for shorter assignments / larger classes

1. Assign in-class papers.

*Disadvantages:*

- The paper will be shallower than a research paper.
- Students may be able to copy each other (but see below).

*Advantages:*

- The thoughts expressed are likely to be the students' own, especially if you assign different topics so that seatmates must write about different things.
- In-class writing can engage students more actively by making them accountable to previous lectures and reading assignments.

*Example:* Give a short quiz on the assigned reading at the beginning of class. Whether you grade these quizzes is up to you.

2. Assign the same topic to everyone.

*Disadvantages:*

- For research papers, one topic makes it harder for everyone to get relevant literature unless you provide it yourself.
- Students may be able to copy each other (but see below).

*Advantage:* When everyone does the same assignment, it's easier to identify similarities between the writing of different students or between a student's paper and the primary source.

3. Have students read each other's drafts.

*Disadvantage:* May consume class time that is already dedicated to other uses.

*Advantages:*

- Students learn more about their writing when they work on drafts.
- Students receive feedback about their writing among themselves.
- Easy to do either manually (students exchange papers) or on-line. See for example Catalyst's Peer Review tools, [http://depts.washington.edu/catalyst/tools/peer\\_review.html](http://depts.washington.edu/catalyst/tools/peer_review.html) (requires UW login).

### Suggestions for longer papers / smaller classes

1. Give specific guidelines about the subject of the assignment to prevent open-ended searches that can tempt students to plagiarize.
2. Assign a paper as a process. This process can include a written proposal, written or oral progress reports, meetings with the instructor, a bibliography, and/or peer reviews. Require that the final draft include a portfolio of earlier written materials as a condition for grading the paper.
3. Supplement written work with oral assessment. Student should be able to respond, within reason, to queries that elaborate on their points. Oral assessment is time-consuming but it also offers another way to evaluate a student's understanding of a topic.

### Suggestions for take-home exams and group projects

1. As above, give specific guidelines about the subject of the assignment to prevent open-ended searches.
2. Specify how much consulting with other students is appropriate.

These suggestions are neither ironclad nor exhaustive, but they have been field-tested and found helpful. If you have further suggestions for successful strategies for minimizing plagiarism in your assignments, email us at [psywc@u.washington.edu](mailto:psywc@u.washington.edu).