

# Understanding and Preventing Plagiarism

By Joshua D. Landau

Recently, I was grading student papers from an upper level psychology course and as I made my way through the stack, one stood out from the rest. In contrast to most of the others, this paper was easy to read, made several important points, demonstrated analytical and creative thought, was free of misspellings and grammatical errors, and did an excellent job of analyzing a particularly complex area of psychology. The assignment met or exceeded all of my expectations for an undergraduate paper. I knew immediately that something was amiss.

After re-reading the paper several times, I considered the quality of the other written assignments that this particular student had submitted over the course of the semester. This paper was far superior to the student's previous work. Despite my initial suspicious reaction, I tried to give the student the benefit of the doubt. After all, students' writing could drastically improve in a short time span if they carefully follow good advice: create an outline (and use it), obtain assistance from writing tutors and other peers, meticulously edit the paper, and spend the entire semester thinking about and revising the paper. After I quickly dismissed the notion that this student had actually taken my advice, I did some research and discovered that this exemplary paper included several extended verbatim quotations lifted from a journal article. Thus, I had to inform the student that the paper contained a significant amount of plagiarism. At this point, I am sure many readers are thinking, "been there, done that."

## WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

Plagiarism occurs when people take credit for thoughts, words, images, musical passages, or ideas originally created by someone else. Although many people can recite some form of this definition, it is not clear how to use this information in the classroom. What exactly should you tell students about how much of someone else's work they can use before it qualifies as plagiarism? Is it three words in succession, four words, or five words? Unfortunately, most formal definitions of plagiarism are vague. For example, according to the APA style guide: "psychologists do not present substantial portions or elements of another's work or data as their own, even

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if the other work or data is cited occasionally" (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 395). Like most plagiarism definitions, this one has several shortcomings. For example, it does not provide any guidance about what plagiarism actually looks like. One also could argue about what constitutes "substantial portions." Additionally, like most plagiarism definitions, this one ignores critical distinctions between different types of plagiarism.

## THREE DIFFERENT REASONS FOR PLAGIARISM

**Intentional Theft** — There are several reasons why students might plagiarize intentionally. They might feel pressure to get good grades, but are not confident about their writing skills. Research also shows that students believe that many of their peers engage in plagiarism (Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). In order to compete, students may succumb to peer pressure and behave the way they believe their peers do. The stereotypical plagiarism case is the stressed-out student working late into the night towards an impending morning deadline, and hastily pasting together a document, fully aware that the information belongs to someone else. Likewise, students who buy an entire paper from the online paper-mills, or borrow a paper from friends and submit it as a product of their own work, are also guilty of this most egregious form of academic dishonesty.

Surveys indicate that somewhere between 25-30 percent of college undergraduates admit to some form of intentional plagiarism (e.g., McCabe & Trevino, 1996). Despite growing concerns that the Internet is a fertile breeding ground for increasing plagiarism, Scanlon and Neumann (2002) reported that students were equally likely to plagiarize from conventional sources (e.g., books, magazines, journal articles), as from the Internet.

**A Source Memory Error** — In contrast with intentionally motivated plagiarism, there is a volume of research suggesting that people can plagiarize *unintentionally*. This type of plagiarism can arise in the context of writing a paper when a student has completed the requisite background research and is attempting to write the paper. It is important to note that these students may have a decent understanding of plagiarism, and might even be actively trying not to plagiarize, but they do not have perfect memory for the sources of the information they are using. During the writing process, they might fluently generate a sentence, phrase, or idea that they perceive as their own, when in fact it is not. In this case,

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because students fail to carefully assess where the information originated (i.e., is that my phrase or did it come from one of my sources?), they inadvertently present someone else's thoughts as their own.

**Misapprehension** — When students are accused of plagiarism, many claim that they did not know they were doing something wrong. Although the cynical view is that these students are claiming ignorance in hopes of escaping without penalty, there is evidence suggesting that they may be telling the truth. Roig (1997) collected data from undergraduates indicating that they were largely unaware of how to properly paraphrase other people's work. In one study, Roig presented undergraduates with several different paraphrased versions of a paragraph and asked them to compare each paraphrasing to the original passage to determine if the authors received proper credit. All too often, the undergraduates claimed that passages that had undergone only superficial wording changes or lacked an appropriate citation were properly paraphrased.

**The Plagiarism Conundrum** — Clearly, plagiarism and other related forms of academic dishonesty are too common (e.g., McCabe, 1999). Although plagiarism can arise for very different reasons, the same problem exists regardless of the causal mechanism: a student has misappropriated someone else's ideas and a professor must determine the appropriate way to handle the matter. Most academic institutions do not distinguish between these different types of plagiarism; the same penalties apply to a student who purposely downloads an entire paper and the misguided student who commits an unintentional act of plagiarism.

### TEACHING TIPS FOR REDUCING PLAGIARISM

The techniques described below, used individually or in combination, should reduce the probability that students will engage in any of the three different types of plagiarism.

**Make plagiarism guidelines explicit** — students must understand what plagiarism is. It is unwise to assume that your students understand plagiarism, what it looks like, and how it occurs (Roig, 1997). As tempting as it might be to place a non-specific directive on the syllabus to avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, this is not an effective technique (Landau, Druen, & Arcuri, 2002). To

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avoid plagiarism students must first understand what it is. Therefore, it is important to spend part of a class defining, discussing and describing plagiarism in the overall context of the course. I typically try to have this discussion early in the semester to set the tone for the rest of the course. It is also a good idea to reinforce plagiarism avoidance using a brief reminder with each assignment.

During the initial plagiarism discussion, I explain to my students that plagiarism is a vague but punishable form of academic dishonesty. Because there are no universally accepted conventions (i.e., borrowing 2, 3, or 4 words in succession constitutes plagiarism), they will have to develop a variety of methods for avoiding plagiarism. I encourage them to concentrate on developing their own voice when describing psychological concepts and findings. One of the things that I look for when reading their work is that it is consistent with their overall writing style. If they are simply regurgitating what they read, that part of the paper will stand out. Instead of taking someone else's writing and changing a few select words, I explain that what they need to do is to incorporate the terms and ideas into their own knowledge base. Then, they can use their own words to describe the literature. I also make sure to emphasize that the finished product must be a product of their own hard work.

**Provide examples of plagiarism and non-plagiarism** — In any learning experience, providing relevant examples is an effective technique for helping students to understand underlying concepts. This tenet is especially true when it comes to plagiarism. Research indicates that students are best equipped to detect and avoid plagiarism when they have seen what it looks like (Landau et al., 2002). By showing them examples, they can begin to understand plagiarism and subsequently devise their own idiosyncratic strategies to avoid making this potentially costly error. This also is an excellent opportunity to discuss how to properly analyze, describe and integrate difficult psychological concepts.

You can also move beyond merely providing a description of plagiarism by giving students exemplars of how to present other peoples' ideas in a non-plagiaristic way. For instance, have students work in small groups or individually in class reading a brief journal article and then presenting the ideas.

**No quotes allowed** — One of the ideas that I emphasize in my classes is helping students to become better writers, and therefore I make sure that they do a lot of writing. However, I do not allow them to use direct quotes from the literature. This has two positive effects. First, I no longer read page-long block quotations that give me no indication of the student's understanding of the material that they quoted. Second, to meet this requirement, students have to carefully read and comprehend the information, decide which details are important, and then

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nities to enhance such activity also contributed to what struck me as an agreeable working environment.

Demands for accountability in all public sector areas in the early 80s and the influx of social scientists in recreation and leisure studies raised the profile for research and evaluation in that field. Managers of leisure services were compelled to demonstrate the social, psychological and economic "benefits" of their planning and programming, to both communities and to individuals, particularly those with disabilities or disadvantages.

The move to leisure studies led me to do forego a membership in the American Educational Research Association for one in the National Recreation and Park Association, but I maintained my membership in psychology organizations for awhile, ultimately becoming a founding member of APS, and established working relationships with faculty at UIUC who had an interest in achievement motivation. I collaborated with Martin Maehr on the subject of intrinsic motivation, achievement motivation, and aging, including editing and contributing chapters in the *Advances in Motivation and Achievement* series (JAI Press).

I found that my interest in motivation, expressive behavior, and developmental transitions was compatible with concerns of people in special education and recreation therapy who were working on the problem of school-to-work transitions for individuals with developmental disabilities. A federal grant in that area supported the beginnings of what has become a 20-year program of research on self-expression in relation to developmental transitions. Colleagues and I have given particular attention to the significance of leisure experience in adjusting to spinal cord injury. Some of this work has led me to an association with faculty in the psychology department here at UGA. Partly as a result, I was recently offered adjunct status with that department, thus bringing me full circle in one respect.

Working outside of mainstream academic psychology, I have found not only the opportunity to do psychological research and stay connected with the field, I have also found that there are a good number of scholars with training in academic psychology who are using it to address a wide variety of problems. In addition to leisure studies, which has had its share of those with training and advanced degrees in psychology, health promotion and behavior, sport psychology and exercise science. Exercise psychology, in particular, is a prominent program in Exercise Science with laboratory research on exercise adherence and the impact of exercise on emotion and cognition. While administrative responsibilities have taken me away from some of my own research interests, I have come to an even greater appreciation of the extent to which psychology is a preoccupying discipline for many in programs outside of traditional psychology departments and for the collaboration opportunities that are created as a result. ♦

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carefully piece together their own thoughts to share with the reader. In short, preventing students from using quotations makes them sensitive to using their own words and helps to increase their understanding of the literature because they cannot simply regurgitate large passages of text.

**Incorporate many written assignments** — Detecting plagiarism, which can feel like searching for a needle in a haystack, is much easier when you are familiar with a student's writing. One way to increase the likelihood of finding plagiarism is to require many writing assignments across the semester so you can become more familiar with each student's writing level. This way, if a student does plagiarize, then this material will stand out because you are used to how the student usually writes.

**Structure the writing process** — McKeachie (1999) suggests that professors treat writing as a process that develops through a series of stages, which makes it much more difficult for people to turn in papers prepared by someone else. The writing process can be divided into many developmental stages including idea/topic generation, collecting sources, making and revising outlines, preparing rough drafts, submitting the paper to peer review, etc. (cf., McBurney, 1996). If students have to complete all of these tasks as part of the course, they would have to make faux outlines and rough drafts to cover up their cheating. Additionally, if you use a peer review process, then students will undoubtedly receive criticisms that will require further revisions. In the end, students will probably realize the enormous amount of work required to cover up their plagiarism and might decide against buying or borrowing someone else's paper.

**Remind students to monitor the source of their information** — Avoiding unintentional plagiarism is complicated, but requiring people to carefully scrutinize the source of their ideas can reduce the likelihood that people will borrow from others (Marsh et al., 1997). Before students submit any of their written work, it is a good idea to (again) caution them about plagiarism by asking them to re-read the paper and provide a final check that they properly attributed information to its source. Although this check cannot completely rid every paper of plagiarism, it is likely that it will reduce the overall amount of unintentional plagiarism.

**Submit sources with each paper** — Whenever students submit a paper that includes a literature review, I require them to also include copies of their sources. Although students may not be thrilled about making extra photocopies or entrusting you with a library book, this is a good deterrent for people who might intentionally plagiarize. If they know that you will have their source material, then they might think twice about lifting entire passages.

**Create dynamic assignments** — Creating writing assignments that minimize the opportunities to plagiarize is another way to reduce plagiarism. This goal can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Have students read the same

articles and then ask them to analyze and integrate the articles. If they know that you have these articles and have read them, then they will be less likely to intentionally plagiarize the authors. More importantly, you can use this exercise to teach students proper paraphrasing techniques.

Another approach is to make students write in different styles or adopt a different perspective. Landau & Leynes (in press) demonstrated that if you require people to incorporate unusual information into their final product, they are less likely to plagiarize. Based on this experimental finding, I had my students read a psychological article and write an informal e-mail to one of their friends outside of psychology describing the results of the article. Because they had to describe the findings so their friend could understand it, they changed the types of phrases and sentences they would normally include in their summaries.

**Learn about Web-based plagiarism detection services** — Currently, there are a number of web-based services designed to help professors determine the overlap between student papers and other collected papers. With many of these services, a professor (or the institution) registers with the site for a fee. Students then submit their papers electronically and the professor then forwards the papers to the plagiarism website for comparison with a large database of existing papers. The professor then receives a descriptive report detailing the overlap between the student's paper and the information in the database. Although these web-based services are imperfect (e.g., they do not contain every paper, they cannot search all published material), students do not need to know this. Therefore, even if you are not computer-savvy, you could at least make it clear that you know about these plagiarism web sites, which might reduce some of the intentional cases of plagiarism.

**What are your options when you find plagiarism?** — Finding plagiarism, much like confronting a student who is cheating on an exam, is unpleasant. Earlier in my career, when I found plagiarism, I was conflicted about how to handle the situation. On the one hand, I could penalize students privately, assign them a failing grade for that assignment, and sternly admonish them against future transgressions. On the other hand, I could inform the department chair and other academic administrators that the student violated the academic honesty policy. Informing the administration usually results in a far more serious penalty and much more time spent dealing with a formal, bureaucratic process. At my current institution, the first act of plagiarism earns a failing grade in the course and a second a one-year suspension. Given that the penalty at the administrative level of most schools is similarly harsh, it is no surprise that many professors are not enthusiastic about formally pursuing suspected plagiarism. The formal definitions of plagiarism lack clarity and in most cases, the student denies any wrongdoing and this shifts the burden of proof to the faculty member.

The problem with handling the issue privately is that there

is no mechanism, other than word of mouth, for determining if the student has committed plagiarism before. If you decide to handle this matter privately, then you are simply passing this student on to the next professor to test their adeptness at detecting plagiarism. In my experience, it is best to weigh the evidence for each individual case. I try to examine the reason for the plagiarism (i.e., intentional or unintentional) and then decide how to proceed. However, the appropriate course of action is a personal decision that each teacher must make.

Since I use many of the techniques described above, I have created several obstructions that deter most students from plagiarizing. If the rare, stubborn student decides to plagiarize intentionally, I have increased my chances for detecting the misappropriation. Consequently, I will not feel much regret about failing the student because I did all that I could to stop the plagiarism before it happened.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is important for professors to acknowledge that not all of plagiarism is the same. Plagiarism can be an intentional act, can happen unintentionally, or it can arise from a lack of knowledge. My suggestion is to use some combination of the techniques described above to reduce the chances that you will be confronted with this problem in the future.

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