Plagiarism: A How-Not-To Guide for Students

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2 Copies (and Robberies)

How and Why Plagiarism Happens

“It’s like our history class yesterday,” Amanda says to me when I ask her class about cheating in our school. “We were in the library working on a quiz and the teacher walked out for a minute. We all immediately started talking about the answers even though she told us to be quiet before she left.”

“You all cheated?” I ask.

“Well, sort of. But it was an open-book quiz, so we were all going to get the same answers anyway. She even took the questions straight out of the book.”

Another student, Brittany, chimes in, “The questions were word for word from the book. We were just supposed to write down the next few sentences. It was dumb.”

“Does that mean you plagiarized?” I ask.

“Maybe,” Brittany answers. “I hadn’t thought about it that way. But, uh, if we plagiarized, then so did the teacher, because she copied the exact words from the book, too. And anyway, we all knew the source. What, were we supposed to do an MLA [Modern Language Association] citation after every answer?”

Amanda adds, “That’s the thing about our classes. We all know where the stuff’s coming from. It’s like when we copy stuff into a Power-Point, like you were talking about. I could always give you all the web pages, but who really cares? We’re just going to trash it the next day.”

“OK,” I say. “But do you think that when you and a teacher copy straight from the book, that might make some students think it’s OK to copy out of the book for other assignments?”

“Absolutely,” Amanda says. “I think that happens all the time.”

Brittany shrugs. “It’s still no big deal.”
YOU NEED TO KNOW: Understanding and Defining the Term Plagiarism

Many students think of plagiarism only as copying an entire essay and handing it in as one’s own, when in fact the term refers to appropriating any material—ideas, writings, images, or portions of those—and claiming to be the original creator.

The word itself is interesting; its most immediate root is the Latin word plagiarus, meaning “kidnapper,” but that word in turn comes from the older Latin word plagus, “net.” The metaphors here might resonate with students. What does it mean to kidnap someone’s ideas? How does the image of tossing a net over an object to capture it translate to capturing ideas from today’s online Net?

It’s also worth considering that plagiarism, which applies to questions of authorship, is slightly different from—though related to—forgeries (which involves questions of authenticity), copyright infringement (which deals with legal ownership), and the broad label cheating (which implies purposeful deception of any type).

It may seem like splitting hairs to worry too much about definitions—we all know what it means to plagiarize, right? Perhaps teachers feel that they do, but parents, administrators, students, and the broader community may look for, and find, loopholes. Take the example of an eighth-grade teacher whose students turned in work copied verbatim from an encyclopedia, as is related in an excerpt from Preventing Cheating and Plagiarism:

[The teacher] said they had plagiarized. Some of the kids’ parents appealed to the school’s Headmistress. Overruling the teacher, she decreed such copying was not plagiarism—at least not when done by 8th graders. (Clabaugh and Rozycki 2003)

It’s worthwhile, therefore, to check whether your school or your teachers include a written definition of plagiarism in a school handbook or course syllabi. And if you have any doubts at all about the process you’re using to complete your work, ask the teacher beforehand.
**TALKING POINT**

How would you respond to Amanda and Brittany? To what extent do you agree with Amanda that situations like the one she describes might help students rationalize plagiarism on other assignments? To what extent do you agree with Brittany that there are minor cases in which students don’t follow the rules and that in those instances, it’s “no big deal”?

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**Murky Waters: Plagiarism in Middle and High School**

If you’re anything like the students I teach, you’ve seen a lot of plagiarism, copying, and cheating while you’ve been in school. In fact, I can hear you now:

> Of course I’ve seen a lot of cheating. Cheating goes on all the time. You think I don’t know that?

Actually, I think you do know it. But I wonder how much you’ve really thought about plagiarism and what it means.

> So you’re saying if I read this book and think about cheating more, suddenly I won’t want to cheat anymore?

I’m not that optimistic, but I do believe most students don’t want to cheat—or plagiarize, in particular—just for the sake of cheating. I believe that the more you think about plagiarism and understand how and why you should avoid it, the more likely you are to do so.

> But I don’t plagiarize anyway! Why should I read this?

Of course you don’t plagiarize. You’re an angel.

> Darn right I am.

But there are other reasons to keep reading. It’s possible you’ve been tempted to plagiarize, and it’s possible you’ll run into difficult situations in the future, and it’s even possible you’ve already plagiarized without realizing it and just didn’t get caught. And it’s possible, too, that you might know others who plagiarize on purpose or by accident and that you’ll be the

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**Voices from the Classroom**

I’m always afraid that I’ll accidentally forget to cite something or have my quotation marks in the wrong place—not that any severe punishment will be exercised at my school, but that when I go to a college next year, it may not be seen as the mistake that it is because the teachers there won’t know me yet and may put the honest me in a pool of those “cheating kids.”

—Laura, age seventeen

Do you ever worry, like Laura, that an honest mistake might give your teachers the wrong impression of you? To what extent do you agree with Laura’s expectations that the consequences of plagiarism in college may differ from those in middle or high school?
voice of reason. And there’s more to this discussion than plagiarism—this is also a discussion about how and why you learn—but we have to start with the basics.

OK, fine, I’ll keep reading.

See how easy that was? I’m glad we had this talk.

And are you really going to make up conversations with yourself? Because this could get a little creepy . . .

You’ve got a point there.

But then, so do I. The point is this: You might have heard conversations like the one that begins this chapter. Whether or not you agree with Amanda or Brittany, you can see that in some situations, the difference between cheating and not cheating is clear. In others, however, the waters get murky.

Most books and articles about plagiarism—as well as many teachers with whom I’ve spoken—assume that students plagiarize for one of two reasons: either they don’t understand all of the rules (teachers call this unintentional plagiarism) or they’re not sufficiently scared of what will happen if they get caught, so they copy from another source (intentional plagiarism). First of all, I think that it’s not always quite so easy to distinguish intentional from unintentional plagiarism, and second of all, I think that even intentional plagiarism is often, though not always, more complicated than we give it credit for.

To begin, then, we need to distinguish types of plagiarism—how it happens—to make sure we’re on the same page. Then we can talk about why plagiarism occurs and, finally, strategies for avoiding it.

How Plagiarism Happens

Imagine that your best friend—let’s call him, oh, Samuel Clemens—asks you to read his essay for English class:

A father is suppose to wish the best for his children, but Pap seems to dislike the idea that his on is getting an education, becoming better that who he was. The new judge in town returns Huck to Pap because he privileges Pap’s “rights” over Huck’s welfare—just as slaves, because they were considered property, were regularly returned to their legal owners, no matter how badly these owners abused them. “You think you’re better’n your father, now, don’t you, because he can’t?” These examples teach us something about Huck and about society. Huck is at
the center of countless failures and breakdowns in the society around him, yet he maintains his characteristic resilience.1

You read Sam’s introductory paragraph, and then, knowing that he’s about as likely to use a phrase like “characteristic resilience” as he is to write in Sumerian, you look back up at his innocent, blinking eyes. Did he plagiarize? The typos in the first sentence and the odd use of privileges as a verb seem realistic enough, but you’re pretty certain good ole Sam hasn’t even read the book. The question is: If he did plagiarize, how?

**TALKING POINT**

You know, if you read the footnote for Sam’s paragraph, that it is plagiarized. We’ll worry about how it was plagiarized in a moment. First, take a moment to discuss what you’d do if you were actually placed in the situation I described earlier. Would you confront your friend with your suspicions about his work? Would you ignore the possible plagiarism? Explain and discuss your answers with your classmates and teacher.

*What’s on the Menu? The Types of Plagiarism*

Before we nail poor Sam for ripping off his opening paragraph, let me offer you a metaphor. It involves food, the Web, and plagiarism.

I love food, but sometimes even I have trouble sorting out what to eat and what to avoid at a potluck dinner. If you think about it, the Internet is a lot like one really big potluck. Nearly everyone in the world has brought a dish to the table. Some are delectable; others resemble the cornflake-topped eggplant casserole your wacky aunt used to produce at every family gathering; still others are practically poisonous or taste like school cafeteria food, no matter how lovely their appearance. The world of published words contains much nutritious and edible cuisine, but it can also be as hard to make a decision or to discern the ingredients in the library as it is with the online buffet table.

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1. Confession time: While I received a paragraph similar to this one in class, I substituted the original offending paragraph with one I cobbled together myself from online sources. It contains plagiarized material that I haven’t cited here just to make the point; all sources are identified and cited later in this chapter and are included in the Works Cited list at the end of the book.