

## **Better Know a Plagiarist; or, The Genres of Academic Dishonesty**

By Colleen Cusick

*Plagiarism is bad.* Students at Queens College have assuredly heard this at some point before they arrive in our classrooms. But some kinds of plagiarism appear less severe to students than others, and many kinds are not easily understood as plagiarism without explicit instruction. Further, different errors in borrowing, citation, and attribution might elicit different responses from instructors depending on whether the plagiarist activity appears to stem from ignorance or inattention, calculation or misunderstanding.

Delineating the different ways in which students plagiarize and varying motives for plagiarism can help concerned instructors address the challenge in productive ways that both instruct students in the norms of academic writing and discourage dishonesty as an academic practice.

### **COMMON PLAGIARISM TYPES<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Accidental Plagiarism**

The term “academic dishonesty” belies the fact that it is the act of using someone else’s writing without attribution that constitutes plagiarism, not the explicit intent to deceive. Sloppy note taking and inadequate research methods can lead to inadvertently mistaking an argument, insight, or turn of phrase taken from a student’s reading for an original contribution of his or her own.

Students need to be taught research and citation skills early on and these lessons need to be reinforced in each of their courses. A simple lesson in the conventions of MLA or another appropriate citation style is a good beginning, but ideally instructors will both model and provide opportunities for students to practice rigorous note-taking as they begin their careers as researchers. For example, instructors may:

- Oversee research “scavenger hunts” in the library or online that depend upon accurate note taking for success.
- Collect and grade (or peer-review) notes from a library session
- Model his or her own note-taking methods from a current research project.

Building a habit of scrupulous citation will not only minimize accidental plagiarism, but will also help foster students’ appreciation of the conversation of academic writing and their ability to contribute an original voice.

#### **Mosaic Plagiarism**

Students who rely heavily on quotations rather than original analysis in their writing often stumble into mosaic plagiarism, or “patch writing,” as a means of minimizing the

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: “The Common Types of Plagiarism.” *Office of the Dean of Student Affairs*. Bowdoin College, n.d. Web. 10 May 2014.

appearance of total reliance on others' work. Forms of mosaic plagiarism include: unattributed paraphrase of concepts derived from other texts, verbatim phrases dropped without citation into different contexts, and "rewritten" portions of text that (even if they cite an original source) retain too much of the original's meaning and sentence structure or simply substitute synonyms for key words.

Students must understand that it is just as important that they attribute concepts, arguments, and ideas to their originators as it is to quote directly transferred text. This kind of plagiarism could be most fruitfully explained with direct examples presented in class, so students can examine the difference between acceptable (attributed) paraphrase and inadequately differentiated patch writing.

### **Self Plagiarism**

Submitting coursework from prior semesters (in whole or in part) to a subsequent class as though it were new, or submitting the same essay simultaneously to two separate classes both constitute self plagiarism. Of course, like all scholars, students may originate ideas in an earlier stage of their academic career and wish to elaborate on or develop them in a more advanced way later. However, if they plan to rework previous writing into a new assignment for a different course they must receive permission from all the professors who have or will see this work in order to remain academically honest.

Self plagiarism is likely an unfamiliar concept to most students, who may stumble into it unknowingly, and should thus be explained explicitly in any lessons or course sessions devoted to citation and plagiarism.

### **Direct Plagiarism**

The most obvious to detect and simplest to explain, a directly plagiarized essay is a word-for-word copy of another person's writing. Direct plagiarism may appear as:

#### *Contract Cheating*

- An essay written in whole or in part by a student's friend, family member, or colleague
- An essay purchased from an online paper-provider

#### *Theft*

- An essay featuring directly transcribed paragraphs, sentences, or sections from one or more books, articles, or websites.

Instructors with clear proof of direct plagiarism (obtained through search engine results or a program like Turnitin.com) should follow the policies of their department and institution in addressing the matter.

Situations involving students receiving "help" from their acquaintances that have crossed the line into unattributed authorship can be more difficult to ascertain, usually only detectable in contrast with a student's previous writing. In this instance, an instructor may

request to see the student's prewriting (prior drafts and research notes) at a conference. The proportion of the essay that consists of plagiarized material can guide instructors to the most appropriate stance to take towards a student's academic dishonesty: a purchased essay is a deliberate act of deception, while a single plagiarized paragraph in an otherwise properly cited essay could owe to inattention. Both situations should be addressed, but an instructor may wish to adopt slightly different approaches to students when dealing with each.