

# Sweetland

GAYLE MORRIS SWEETLAND WRITING CENTER

Special Edition  
March 2001  
Volume 4 Number 2

## *Strategies for Preventing Plagiarism*

Two recent trends in higher education have raised instructors' concerns about plagiarism: the prevalence of assignments involving collaboration, and students' ability to do their research online, where thousands of Internet documents are available at the click of a mouse.

The assignment of group projects in many departments and an emphasis on writing as a process benefiting from peer feedback are just two signs that student collaboration has become a primary means of learning. But there may be a fine line between sharing ideas to produce new knowledge and using others' ideas without attribution. As Henry Wilson points out in a 1999 collection of essays on plagiarism and intellectual property, both plagiarism and collaboration "describe writing processes involving more than one author, yet the former is regarded as disreputable or unethical while the latter is increasingly advocated as an effective pedagogical technique" (211). Academic statements on plagiarism usually describe it as "deception, exploitation, or outright theft," while most accounts of collaboration view it as an activity carried on in good faith and with the instructor's permission. Difficulties arise when the contributions of students to a group project are uneven and that disparity is masked in the final product, or when a student cites the source of a quotation but not the source of an idea provided by a peer tutor or classmate.

Certainly some plagiarism is unintentional: students undertaking research projects in high school may not have been given explicit guidelines about what kind of information they must cite, or how to attribute ideas—not just quotations—to sources. When they get to college, they may learn the hard way. Some students who have been educated in cultures where attribution of ideas to specific individuals is not seen as logical or necessary may be charged with intellectual fraud before they have mastered rules for attribution required by the individualist culture of the U.S. university. As Helen Fox explains the misunderstanding, "In a world where your thoughts, feelings, and experiences are inextricably connected to those of others, why would it be so important to sort out whose idea is whose?" (37).

The ease with which students can conduct research on the Internet has led to articles in the national press on new waves of plagiarism and to numerous websites that offer guidance in detecting writing downloaded from the Internet. While the

Sweetland Writing Center does not establish plagiarism policies—each unit of the University sets its own procedures for dealing with plagiarism—like most writing centers it has guidelines to ensure that peer writing tutors and Writing Workshop instructors avoid giving students unattributed help. Rather than editing or proofreading students' papers, tutors offer to discuss the meaning of and possible approaches to writing assignments, and then help writers make appropriate choices as they develop their papers. We also refer students and instructors to departments that have published guidelines for students. John Kucich, the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English, has written to students taking courses in the department a memo describing seven forms of plagiarism and spelling out the consequences of intellectual dishonesty (it is available at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/undergraduate/plag.htm>).

From working with instructors on course design, Sweetland faculty are able to offer suggestions for creating a classroom environment of student honesty and respect for others' intellectual property—a plagiarism-free zone. What follows is a compilation of field-tested strategies for increasing the likelihood that students will produce their own work in your course.

**Put a statement about plagiarism on your syllabus.** If you have a website, you may link to Hatcher Library's online handout on plagiarism or adapt it for your purposes: <http://www.lib.umich.edu/libhome/rts/isupport.html>. You may also print out a copy for each student. The definition of plagiarism given there—using "another person's ideas or expressions . . . without acknowledging the source"—is quoted from the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

**Explain what constitutes plagiarism in your course in the instructions for each assignment**, particularly if students are assigned some group work. For example, a biology assignment reads, "You are free to discuss your ideas with others in the course, but cooperatively written papers will not be accepted."

**Review citation styles in your discipline and provide students with a handout reviewing conventions for citing and attributing.** The library has developed handouts summarizing the guidelines

for APA and MLA citation and giving references to style manuals in the sciences; they are posted at <http://www.lib.umich.edu/libhome/rts/isupport.html>. You can print out the PDF files and reproduce them for students; if you have a course website you can link them to your syllabus. Remember that undergraduates may be taking a course in your discipline for the first time, and they may not know when it's appropriate to cite a study by the authors' last names, when page numbers are required in parenthetical citations, or how much quotation is common in the field.

#### **Remind students of the purposes of writing assignments.**

Instructors assign writing not just to test students' knowledge and provide the basis for evaluation, but to aid their learning of course material. Prof. Eric Rabkin's syllabus for English 313 lists as goals for writing assignments to prepare students for class, to make them better readers and writers, and to enable each to contribute to the education of others. "In order to achieve those aims," he writes, "you must do original work." Rabkin implies what effective teachers know: that learning is a process, not a product. This principle requires students to have as their goal an education, not simply a degree.

**Collect enough informal writing to know students' styles and voices.** This means assigning low-stakes writing—writing that doesn't have to be graded or even responded to—regularly throughout the term. Examples include **requiring drafts of each stage** of a research project, **asking for a progress report** midway through a paper or project, **and requesting a self-evaluative paragraph** to accompany a paper being turned in. Each of these assignments emphasizes the process of learning, not the end product, and puts responsibility for critique on the student writer. Students' self-critique will be more useful if you have shared your grading criteria or implied them in the assignment. You want student writers to be able to evaluate their progress toward specific goals, even before the deadline.

**Ask students to submit a field note or research note as soon as they have identified likely sources.** This provides the opportunity to practice summarizing and evaluating sources and attributing them in correct form—and for you to review these procedures, if necessary.

**Require drafts of the paper well before the due date.** You can simply keep them, or, if you make comments and return drafts, require students to turn them in with the final version. Students are not only less likely to plagiarize (it takes work to invent a draft of a paper they have borrowed or found on the Internet), but their writing is likely to improve.

**At the class meeting before the due date, ask students to write their research paper from memory.** They may not be able to remember the details, or be able to attribute ideas to their sources in every case, but they should be able to state the main ideas, characterize the evidence or support they included, and acknowledge counterarguments. Even if it's only a few pages long, they

will have written an outline of their paper, and it is sure to be written in their own voice, not in the voices of their sources. Furthermore, their ability to summarize the gist of their argument shows that it is their own. Some student writers change the structure of a paper after performing this exercise, for the way they write from memory may suggest a better way to organize their findings and evidence than did their draft, written when they were close to their sources.

#### **Consider assigning a research paper in a two-part sequence.**

The first assignment can be a review of what has been said on the subject, and thus take the form of a "mini" literature review. Or you can ask students to demonstrate their motivation and interest in the research question by relating it to something in their previous experience, or to a phenomenon or trend they have observed firsthand. For example, a writer may have become interested in the genome project from having observed a friend or relative with an inherited disease. The first part of the assignment becomes the introduction to the research reported on in the second half; that is, it raises a question of interest to a particular audience. The sequence makes intentional plagiarism unlikely because it reveals the student's interest in the project. It also gives the instructor an example of the student's writing when sources are not yet involved; and being required to have a motive for pursuing a particular topic may produce a more lively voice in the research paper proper. If the topic choice was limited to selecting a particular text, such as a play or film, so that a full introduction isn't warranted, have students write a letter to you explaining why they chose the example they did.

**Train students to acknowledge help they have had in writing a paper.** In an essay in a recent *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Connie Sirolis points out that we may hold students to a different standard than we do ourselves. "For example, a student who has another person look over his paper and then incorporates that person's suggestions at various points in the paper without giving credit may be said to have plagiarized. But a published author can do the same, briefly mention the person in his acknowledgments, and publish the work without fear of being accused of plagiarism" (3). Shouldn't we tell students about the convention of the acknowledgments footnote and show them how to give credit to the peer collaborators who gave them advice? Students should not fear the consequences of collaborating any more than do their instructors.

### **Works Cited**

- Fox, Helen. *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.
- Sirolis, Connie B. "Emerging from Plagiarism's Shadow." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 24.4 (Dec. 1999): 1-6.
- Wilson, Henry L. "When Collaboration Becomes Plagiarism." *Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World*. Ed. Lise Buranen and Alice M. Roy. Albany: SUNY, 1999. 211-18.