

Plagiarism

What is it really? And what to do about it ...

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One of the more amusing stories from this past year goes something like this: “My niece was visiting us last summer, and my daughter, very excited about her writing program, sat down with her cousin to show her how to take an Aesop’s fable, make a key word outline, and then rewrite it, changing the characters and adding in dress-ups from her style checklist. Somewhat shocked, her cousin seriously informed her, ‘You can’t do that—it’s plagiarism!’”

Similarly, a teacher, after having sat through the introduction to our TWSS seminar, was surprised to find that our program doesn’t introduce creative writing (i.e. the blank paper experience) until Unit 7, which we suggest should be taught later in the syllabus, probably six or seven months into the school year. Popping up her hand, she asked somewhat indignantly, “So they don’t do any real writing until April?”

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These two stories typify a major difference in thinking between our imitation-based method and the make-it-all-up-yourself approach often utilized by classroom teachers. However, these same teachers, when asking students to write reports, stress heavily to the students, “Do not copy from the book—put it in your own words.” Unfortunately for the students, the explanation of exactly how to “put it in your own words” is often vague or entirely neglected. I can clearly remember being in sixth grade, trying to move a fact from the encyclopedia to my report, and thinking to myself, “This really isn’t fair—the encyclopedia already used all the good words; how am I going to do better than it?” So first of all, let us consider a definition of plagiarism. According to the Oxford American, it is “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own.” Synonyms include “infringement of copyright, piracy, theft, stealing, informal cribbing.” A quick Google search on “avoiding plagiarism” yields a plethora of university website pages containing helpful advice for academic writing, documentation, citation, etc.; however, most of us are teaching students below that level, so we need a balanced way to discuss the issue with younger students as well.

While some teachers look at our syllabus and exclaim, “This method solves the problem of plagiarism” (due to the grammatical gymnastics required by our dress-up and sentence opener checklists), others have accused our system of promoting it. Therefore, in an attempt to clarify our thinking on this subject, let us divide plagiarism into three types: Literal, Academic, and Commercial. Literal plagiarism is the copying of “too many” words from someone else’s prose, be that an encyclopedia, web page, or other article. Academic plagiarism would be presenting someone else’s thesis, analysis, or unique thought without giving credit to the author of the idea. Commercial plagiarism would be doing either of the above and profiting monetarily from it.

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Unfortunately, even these definitions require interpretations—how many is “too many” (Four in a row? Five? Six? Twelve?) And which “facts” are, in fact, facts and not a thesis? For example, if one writes that Lincoln waged war against the Southern states primarily for economic reasons rather than to free slaves, is that a fact, someone else’s opinion, or a thesis that can be promoted as one’s own? Certainly there have been several books promoting that idea, so one person can’t really own it, but do you have to give someone else credit for the idea? As you can see, it’s going to be a messy issue no matter how you tackle it. Add to that the problem that younger students (and sometimes even older ones) don’t have the maturity and experience to differentiate a “general knowledge” fact (which wouldn’t need documentation) from an author’s analysis or opinion about something (which would require a citation); it becomes even harder to help students know what to do with the information they’ve collected.

But let’s back up a little. Is rewriting an Aesop’s fable, or a myth, or a Bible story, or a fairy tale actually plagiarism? If it were, then many respected authors, from Ambrose Bierce to Nathaniel Hawthorne, would be guilty. Surely our youngsters rewriting “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” into “The Girl Who Cried Lion” or “The Soldier Who Cried Enemy Attack” are no more guilty of plagiarism than Hawthorne was when he wrote *Tanglewood Tales for Boys and Girls*, now considered a classic. In fact, retelling a fable or myth was one of the first activities in the *Progymnasmata*, an ancient set of classical rhetoric exercises. So, clearly, we are on the solid ground of long precedent. However, any parent or teacher uncomfortable with a student putting their name under their version of “The Hare and the Tortoise,” can always suggest a byline of “Retold by ...” or a subheading: “With Apologies to Aesop ...”



Now, let's get to the real problem of students who take notes from books and need to decide whether to use a citation. The best thing to do is to use a sort of flow chart of questions:

1. Are more than half the words in this statement taken directly from the source? If yes, then try to rewrite the sentence using a different grammatical pattern, finding synonyms and alternate phrasings. Another option would be to copy the statement verbatim and use either quotation marks (if less than four lines long) or an inset quotation (if four or more lines of text) and a footnote or endnote. If the answer is no, then there should be no problem.
2. Is this statement a commonly known and readily available fact, or is it likely the opinion of the author? If it can be found in multiple sources (and is not referenced by one or more of the writers themselves), then it may be considered general knowledge. Wilson Mizner acerbically noted: "Copy from one, it's plagiarism; copy from two, it's research." Though this idea may be dangerously simplistic, there is an element of truth to these words. However, if the statement does not seem to be a commonly known and readily available fact, then it is safer to assume that it may be the author's own idea, and a citation is in order. This can be done either by quoting directly as in the case above, or by paraphrasing without using quotations and adding a footnote with either the bibliographic reference or a note of explanation.

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Clearly there will always be a gray area here. If in a research paper a student includes the statement, “Explosives were used to cause the implosion of World Trade Center Building Number Seven,” is this an opinion or a fact? Such an idea can certainly be found in more than one published source, and there is no substantial evidence that the building collapsed because of fire; however, such a statement, even if well documented, goes against the commonly held belief or general knowledge of most Americans, and should therefore be referenced. Sometimes whether or not such a statement should include a citation may even depend on who is reading it—teachers’ views may vary, and the student would be wise to try and “read” the teacher, or even ask them their preference. Differentiating fact from opinion is difficult for everyone, not just children. In today’s academic environment, most serious students will tend to err on the side of excessive citation, since the problem of plagiarism in schools is rampant.

Computers, websites, and email have made it much easier for high school and college students to trade, buy, and sell their papers, much to the frustration of teachers and professors. To fight this, schools often subscribe to online services and software that will filter student papers against a database of known papers and flag those with probable plagiarism. One school stated that papers with a 60% word repeat are suspect. Though it is frustrating that so many students are willing to cheat in this way, we can prepare our students to avoid potential pitfalls by skillfully using the stylistic techniques to rewrite facts that are considered general knowledge and by using proper citation for direct quotes and paraphrasing for the proprietary ideas of others.



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Our need to address the problem of plagiarism will grow as the student advances into the high school and university environment, but there is no absolute way to do this. Certainly we don't want to frighten young students with the great "sin" of copying until it is appropriate to do so and their discernment is developed enough that they can ask the right questions about their writing. Oddly, we've heard many stories of IEW students who, after mastering our structure and style ideas, turned in an excellent and original paper to a teacher unfamiliar with our approach and were accused of plagiarism because it just seemed "too well-written." (Although, that's a good problem to have.)

Fortunately, we know that our methods work; students who have learned to write well with structure and style when young enter school with the skills, confidence, and discipline necessary to do their own writing, avoid the temptation to buy or steal papers, and learn the proper types and methods of citation when they need to. So let us keep our eye on that goal while being neither fearful nor ignorant of the problem of plagiarism.

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