# Plagiarism or Paraphrase?
## Requiring Students to Learn the Difference

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I have become ever more convinced that our students need much stronger training to avoid the accidental plagiarism that could earn them a failing grade but too often goes unnoticed by faculty.

If students do not learn the proper acknowledgment of other authors' words and ideas in their own research projects, they are subtly yet gravely handicapped. This is not merely a question of academic form or niceties; it is a question of social and intellectual respect and honesty that extends beyond the research paper, into the classroom, and out through the world of broader human interaction as well. The issue is a moral one, one of teaching the citizens of the present and the future to be accurate and fair.

As different disciplines incorporate writing into their courses, the responsibility for the academic-moral training to help students avoid plagiarism falls upon more faculty, who must be not only skilled but doggedly committed. To train responsible student thinkers and writers we must explain our rationales clearly, provide intensive practice work, and follow through with careful supervision.

### 1. Rationales

Too often the rationales for proper acknowledgment, which seem so obvious to longtime members of the academic culture, have not been explained to students as they should be. We must explain very clearly not only when and how to cite but *why*. When told that *any* information which is not common knowledge—whether quote or paraphrase or summary—must be cited and that *any* changes from or additions to the research source must be documented *very* carefully, students often throw up





their hands in bewilderment. The issue is really one of simple fairness and accuracy, however, and we must make students realize this.

In class discussion most students naturally try to be fair to one another. They acknowledge a classmate's ideas by saying, "As Heather said. . ." or "I agree with. . . ." Even such a beginning as "Right, but. . ." is a kind of acknowledgment. Postmodernists may remind us that no idea is truly original or unique, but common sense indicates that often there indeed are at least *more* original thoughts to which we can trace certain notions. If we *can* trace or nod to this influence, we *must*; that is only fair.

Moreover, few students would misrepresent another's view willfully. Misunderstanding is one thing, yet purposeful misrepresentation is quite another. Anyone who did something so dishonest would be corrected indignantly not only by the original speaker but very likely by other students as well. Some theorists may remind us of the indeterminacy of language and the way words point less to objects in the real world than to other words. Experience and common sense, however, show that any time we use language—whether it is verbal or written, whether we are expressing or receiving—we do treat words as if they mean something. If we *can* understand someone else's words, in discussing that person's view we *must* represent it accurately; that is only fair.

Just as students in speaking acknowledge others' ideas and try to represent those ideas fairly and accurately, they must do so in writing. The mechanics of acknowledgment in written discourse are necessarily more formal than those in speaking, and we must require our students to go beyond mere acquaintance with these skills to mastery of them.

The accidental plagiarism which students may commit from lack of understanding is nothing like the purposeful plagiarism whose deceit is the very worst academic offense. Like that crime, however, it does reveal a lack of respect and care for another person's words or ideas. Treating others' words and ideas without





adequate care for truthfulness and accuracy simply cannot lead anywhere except to sloppy thinking.

Our words and ideas are ours, and another's are another's—it is as simple as that. We must help students recognize that this is true in the humanities, in the sciences, and in life beyond college as well.

### 2. Practice Work

Once the rationales have been discussed, students need good hands-on work in spotting and avoiding accidental plagiarism. Because few examples in textbooks press beyond the fairly obvious, faculty should create course-specific worksheets that address not only simple matters of direct quotes but also more complex matters: paraphrases or summaries that still incorporate a brief quote here and there, along with edited longer quotes.

A good handout should include a sample of college-level writing from which eight or ten examples of plagiarism are drawn. These examples of plagiarism, from the obvious to the very subtle, then can be fixed by the students with the appropriate quotation marks, ellipses, brackets, and parenthetical citations.

Most students do *try* to acknowledge their sources conscientiously, but paraphrases and summaries are much trickier than quotations. Even if students remember that a paraphrase or summary completely in their own words still needs a parenthetical citation—not for the words but for the ideas—they often forget that a phrase or sometimes even a specific word from the research source still needs quotation marks to distinguish it from their own words. Such students mistakenly assume—or, worse, have been taught—that simply rearranging an author's words or adding or subtracting a few words obviates the need for proper quotation marks. A good worksheet lets students compare a botched quote, paraphrase, or summary to the source so that they can work at incorporating and citing the material correctly.

Editing quotes is another activity that can lead to student plagiarism all too easily. Some instructors, of

course, simply tell their students always to quote directly, believing it is better to have students perform the simpler task correctly than to have them risk failure with the more complex skill. But this is counterproductive, almost a shirking of responsibility; students must be shown that there are times when it may be preferable—or even necessary—to shorten a quote by replacing less essential items with an ellipsis or to clarify a quote by adding information within brackets. So long as a quote is not distorted in the process, choosing from an author's words or commenting upon them is appropriate, but very specialized punctuation is necessary. A good handout will give examples of such editing done without proper punctuation so that students can work on using these editorial devices correctly.

A worksheet in class seems more effective than corrected examples in a textbook, for a worksheet demands active, creative engagement rather than passivity. Side-by-side errors and corrections in a handbook have their place as references for work at home, but to really convey the concepts and give students some skill in the processes, hands-on work, with faculty guidance, is necessary.

### 3. Supervision

The last step for faculty must be to follow through by checking students' work against their sources. Faculty *must* be able to detect the most subtle problems of acknowledgment, giving accurate grades and thus helping students refine their skills. While it may be easy enough to notice the accidental plagiarism of our average writers, the problems of our more skillful writers may be almost impossible to detect simply by reading their fluent, seemingly capable prose. This is especially true when students are using sources beyond the scope of our usual readings—which, of course, happens often. I have discovered that sometimes what had seemed to be an admirable paraphrase turns out to be an un- or under-documented quote: accidental plagiarism.

After years of reluctance, I now insist that students photocopy the relevant pages of their research and





highlight all material used, whether it is quoted or paraphrased or summarized. The cost to students in time and copying fees is minimal. However, while this step does require a little more work of me, it also has helped me discover errors which conscientious students otherwise apparently would have continued unknowingly. Students find errors in a worksheet more easily than they may find their own, but if students are to learn, faculty must put themselves in a position to call attention to every single "little" problem of accidental plagiarism.

When mistakes happen, copies of research sources help me identify and diagnose them. Conscientious students then fix such errors on a re-write or the next paper and work hard not to make them again.

Truly purposeful plagiarism deserves a failing grade not only on a paper but in the entire course; such clear dishonesty is rather rare, of course. Yet it is my firm conviction that a paper with even the subtler forms of *accidental* plagiarism should not receive a grade higher than a 1.5. In my classes, students are told that using a research source without *any* attribution will bring a paper a 0.0—always. Mistakenly documenting or failing to document editorial changes to a quote will drop a paper's grade to a 1.5 or lower—always.

This is not a pedantic, punitive stance but a straightforward, evaluative one which I encourage all faculty to consider. A 2.0 paper is by definition passing work; carelessness in dealing with one's sources simply cannot be considered passing.

In every field, we must catch any such problems early in our students' college careers, and we must help them learn to deal responsibly with others' words and ideas. We owe our students—and indeed our society—no less.

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