

On Plagiarism

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1. Purpose

To respond to some common questions about the phenomenon, raise some concerns about current trends, and serve as a starting point for program-wide discussion.

With more and more students going to college, but relatively fewer students properly prepared for college-level work,¹ we should expect to see increasing numbers of students who are highly ambitious, under-prepared, and hence highly stressed. A possible, unfortunate side effect of these trends could be an increase in the number of plagiarism cases we see each term.

Instructors and TAs in our program have lately expressed some concerns about how to deal with such issues – what sorts of punishments are suitable, what to do when suspicious about a paper, how to deter students from plagiarizing in the first place, and so on. These sorts of issues are often topics of watercooler conversation and casual shop talk, but there is little formal guidance at present, and the issues are important ones.

The primary goal of this document is to provide some guidance – or, at least, food-for-thought – for instructors concerned about plagiarism, and to provide a starting point for a program-level discussion of the ways instructors deal with the issue. The document does not lay out any official policies, though it does describe a few that are already in place at the university.

2. Introduction

Notes on frequency. Description of a common cheater's scenario. An argument for not always failing dishonest writers outright, and steering toward education instead.

A [recent study](#) suggests 24% of students are regular or likely cheaters, and another 29% weren't sure when surveyed whether they'd cheat in the near the future. They were, it seems, at least partially open to it. To get an idea of how many *honest* students I have, I've done some informal experiments in my classes: In one, I gave them a really picky question on a take-home, "closed-book" test, just to see who'd look it up. (I gave everyone credit on the "unfair" question later.) Result: About a fifth of the students missed the question or used an option I'd put on the test to protest a question they thought was unfair. The

¹ The two phenomena just described might actually be the same thing, viewed from different angles. Consider: If Humble High School keeps its quality of instruction exactly even over ten years, but over the same period the number of Humble graduates who apply to universities doubles, it'll look to the college-level instructors like Humble's quality of education has really slipped, but all that's really happened is that Humble's C students are now going to university, whereas ten years earlier, they didn't.

other four-fifths of the class got the answer right. Some of those were probably lucky guesses, rather than cheats, but not many of them. So, basically, it looks like at least one in five students is reliably honest, even when cheating might seem justified and impossible to prove. That is, to me, fairly cheerful news.

About the half or so of our students who might sometimes cheat, something else needs to be said at the outset: Few students set out initially with a plan to plagiarize. Very few will submit papers that are *wholly* dishonest. Yet a staggering number engage in small-scale plagiarism – a sentence here, a paragraph there, little of it planned in advance. Sometimes these stealings are accidental, or the result of confusion about the rules; other times, they are deliberate but last-minute strategies. Either way, students most often make these poor judgment calls as a response to a crisis encountered sometime during the writing process. The typical case of plagiarism is best described, then, as an act of desperation by someone who has, through poor habits and/or procrastination, landed in a tough spot with little time and few options for help.

Here is a fairly typical scenario: A student with weak library skills finds his subject tough to research, and changes topics at the last minute to something that seems to have sources easily available through Google, which he finds faster to use than the library databases. Then, trapped between a late start time on the new topic and an 8 a.m. deadline the next morning, he finds himself trying to paraphrase sentences he might not even be sure he understands, and eventually arrives at the expediency of copying some of them. (Because, like most students, he writes sequentially, these stolen lines appear quite often toward the end of his paper, which is when he was most likely to succumb to the pressure of the clock.) If you've required him to use library sources, he might then – as dawn breaks – doctor his works cited list, picking several texts out of SCOTTY that seem like they might be relevant to the topic, and then pretending these were the sources for his paper. The paper he turns in two hours later is, then, something that is partly original, partly plagiarized, with text that appears to be paraphrasing scholarly sources, when in actuality it is copying popular Web pages.

This is the most common road to dishonest work, and it is one reason why many of our usual assumptions about the meaning of *plagiarism* need fine-tuning. What I have just described is shockingly common, as anyone who has hauled a stack of student papers to the library for source checking will discover. It is also, of course, dishonest, even if the student cites the actual sources instead of feigned ones.

More importantly, it is a response to a crisis brought about by poor habits and skills. And this is why we must care about plagiarism as teachers, and not just as gate-keepers. If we know about those starting weaknesses, we can work on those skills with the student in office hours to help the student better avoid

future ethical crises. I would argue that in *most* cases, this approach – identifying and then re-teaching plagiarists – is better in the long run than simply failing them in the class or trying to deter them through cleverly designed assignments, because it is the only approach that addresses both the ethical lapse and the skills weaknesses responsible for the case. While an argument can be made – and will be, below – that we should file cases with Student Judicial Affairs in all such instances (both as a deterrent and for tracking purposes), and we might well give students zeroes on those assignments, beyond those actions there is often a need for education, so that should often be our next step.

3. Degrees of Transgression

Most instances of dishonesty are found in sentences and paragraphs, not whole papers. The problem of “light” plagiarism. Why we should report even minor cases.

The above description of plagiarism reveals a dilemma: Frequently, Safe Assignments or our own detective work will often identify just *a single sentence* or so as plagiarized.

That doesn't, of course, mean that's all that's wrong with the paper. Safe Assignments is imprecise – it often finds one sentence, but misses three others in the same source, and it doesn't scour every source, as much as we'd like our students to think it does. So it's possible that the paper with “just one sentence” really has far more significant problems. But it's also possible the student just slipped up once, and the sentence is an anomaly. The two cases are very different, but they'll often look quite similar through a program like Safe Assignments, and we don't always have time to play detective.

Hence our problem: How can we tell the difference? There are some ways to try to find out, which I'll discuss in a later section, but they take time and are nevertheless imperfect.² Frankly, though, we're not obligated to figure out *how much* was plagiarized – it's the student's obligation to avoid such situations, and ours to report them when we see them, lest the behavior become a regular pattern. The best policy is

² The best of these, in my experience, is to call the student in for a consultation, tell him or her that you found at least one sentence, but keep to yourself *which* sentence. Instead, ask the student to fix the paper – to find and fix any plagiarism in it. Tell the student you'll be checking the revision to see if the problems you found have been corrected. If the sentence is an anomaly, this is fairly easy for a diligent student to do, and the student will find the same sentence you found. On the other hand, if the student fixes four or five problems but never finds the sentence you yourself found (as one of mine recently did), then the student has demonstrated that the problems run deeper than just one sentence. Or if the student throws quotation marks around random sentences that aren't in actuality contained in the sources she cited (as a different student did last quarter), that's also a sign of deeper problems. Most students are able to identify and talk about their own sentences. When they cannot, you are quite reasonable to assume that the lines between original and stolen material are blurry throughout.

to file all such cases with Student Judicial Affairs at a minimum, regardless of what you decide to do regarding grades. (Note: Dr. Briggs has indicated a desire to turn in all cases, even the small ones.)

This does not mean we should not be merciful in other ways. Based on the small scale of a case, you might recommend that SJA simply give the student a warning (the office usually follows our advice), or give the student the option to revise the paper (possibly at penalty). However, until paperwork is filed, most students with plagiarism issues have them because they look at our citation and quotation demands as – and there is no gentle way to say this – unenforceable and largely meaningless rituals. Filing the paperwork shows they are enforceable rituals, and gives them a new and critical meaning. It gives students a solid reason to start paying more heed to our lessons on sourcing and documentation, and is a critical step in ensuring they learn what they need to learn. When they start doing better research, taking better notes, planning their time better, paraphrasing better, and citing more accurately, they'll have far less reason to cheat. But before most of them will attempt to learn these skills, the cheating roads need to be closed to them, and the best way to do that is to create a track record for them with the SJA office.

4. Types of Dishonesty

Familiar types, and some less-discussed behaviors: fabrication of sources, false citations, masquerading quotes, pseudophrasing.

We all know that some students buy papers from the Internet, that several will borrow papers from fraternity or sorority files, that some of them will simply turn in a Wikipedia article with their names on them (and sometimes the Wikipedia section headers, as well), and that still others will turn in a paper for your class despite having originally penned it for another course. When we talk about plagiarism, these are the easiest cases to find, the most clearly “wrong,” and the most commonly discussed.

But, as I've already indicated, there are many other dishonest acts, perhaps even more common than those above, and we might not be paying enough attention to them. What follows is a taxonomy of the sorts of dishonesty you might encounter in a writing class, what sorts of requirements tend to trigger them, how difficult they are to catch, how difficult they are to deter, and what the common signs of them might be.

Recycling – By *recycling*, I refer to the submission to you of a paper written originally for another class, or for another purpose, without obtaining your permission to do so. I once had a student recycle her university admissions essay, turning it in again in my 1A class, for instance. Students often claim that they thought they could do this: “It’s my paper – I can’t plagiarize *myself*, can I?” I find that this protest

starts to disintegrate upon discussion, however, as I ask whether they do this all the time, then. (Because if they really think it's okay, why not?) They almost always say this was the only time. So, I ask, "Why haven't you done this more often, if you thought it was okay?" And, pressed on this, they'll often admit at they weren't really sure whether it was okay. In truth, most of them at least *suspect* it's unacceptable, even if they haven't actually read the rules. Their decision not to ask you whether it was okay was a calculated gamble; if you detected it, they lost. That said, this specific behavior is clearly prohibited in the campus [Definitions of Academic Dishonesty](#), which it's their responsibility to know, not yours to clarify. This category seems to be increasing in size, in proportion to the other types of dishonesty, though the overall number of cases being filed each year seems to be fairly level.

Paper-Trading – Bob turns in a paper that was originally written by his buddy Susan, or that was collecting dust in his fraternity's paper file. This one's pretty clearly dishonest, and usually cut-and-dried, once detected. Compared to the other types, it's relatively rare: I catch perhaps one case a quarter. Maybe. Things to look for: Clearly out-of-date information (my wife once received a paper in 2004 that referred to the "current President, Bill Clinton" – a nice tip-off), name/SID mismatches (as they sometimes change one but not the other), electronic copies with "Date created" entries well before the start of the quarter. These clues aside, Safe Assignments is usually your best friend on such cases.

Paste Papers – Some students will make life very easy for you, because they made it too easy on themselves. They'll simply cut-and-paste a Web page or Wikipedia article into their paper. Sometimes they're even nice enough to leave the Web-page links and HTML tags in there. That said, I don't see very many of these slam-dunk cases – maybe one a quarter.

Pseudophrasing – This is my term for taking someone else's wording, tweaking it (by substituting some synonyms, and other minor adjustments to the original) so that it is no longer a quote, but is illegal as a paraphrase. Many students think this is acceptable. Sometimes they put a citation after their "paraphrase," but in many cases, the reason they tweaked it in the first place is that they *also* believe they don't need to bother with those pesky in-text citations unless they use quotation marks. So they'll pseudophrase through an entire paper, never using in-text citations.

You can expect several students in each class to do this regularly – when you look at their papers, pretty much anytime you see a "paraphrase" and a citation, it's actually a pseudophrase. If you tell them it is not acceptable, they become puzzled, because they're pretty sure they can't just put quotation marks around the text – if presented as a quote, it would be dishonest, too. They'll often ask you which is right for a

given sentence: quotes, or no quotes? Of course, both are wrong, because the sentence itself is the problem, not its punctuation.

In my experience, telling students that this is not acceptable for a paraphrase does little to change their behavior. Moreover, giving such papers non-passing grades only seems to affect behavior if the student in question can revise the paper until the quotes are properly handled. Non-passing grades that are set-in-stone do little: The students will commit the same errors in the next paper, and simply hope you don't notice. In short, this has become an ingrained habit for them – it's how they write. The more nervous they become about a paper, the more likely they are to rely on it, because they see it as their safest option. Until you file paperwork with SJA, this is likely to remain their attitude. Once paperwork is filed, pseudophrasing is no longer their safest option. If you couple this with drills or revisions that require them to do things properly, they'll slowly become more comfortable with the alternatives you've been pitching all along, and tend to adopt them because now they have little choice in the matter.

False Citations and Masquerading Quotes – When your student cites Smith for a quote or paraphrase, it's quite possible that the student has never even read Smith. A rather shocking percentage of these attributions are dishonest, *particularly if you have a "scholarly" or library source requirement for your assignment*. This is one of the largest categories of academic dishonesty I'm seeing, though admittedly there are several subcategories here: Some students will simply make up the quote (and sometimes the source, too). Some students will never use library sources, even if you've required it (and even if you escort them there). They'll just look up sources in SCOTTY and cite them, as though they'd read them, even though all of their information is from Wikipedia. They might even (and, sadly, often do) steal lines from one source while citing another, so that it looks like a paraphrase of Smith when really it's a plagiarism of Jones, who does not appear at all in the works cited list. Some students get here through clumsiness and weak will rather than flat-out dishonesty: They find great, juicy quotes, but later have no idea where they got them, because they took poor notes. So they play eenie-meanie-miney-moe with their works cited list, and guess. Sometimes they remember which book, but returned the book to the library, and can't recall the page numbers, so again, they guess wildly.

This brings us to some tricks for how to detect these issues. The best way, of course, is to check the paper's sources against the originals, possibly during a trip to the library. But this takes oodles of time, and we don't have that many oodles. However, you don't have to check *every* paper, or even every citation. Some papers will call attention to themselves, and then you can simply check those out:

- When students make up page numbers for books they haven't read (or guess at page numbers for books they have returned), their favorite guess is page 1. Of course, very few books have anything quotable on page 1, with the main text starting on page 5 or thereabouts. If you see "page 1" for a source that's listed as a book, you might want to keep digging. Usually, there are more significant problems.
- When students list anthologies or collected essays in their works cited listing as though they are single-author texts, we might be tempted to think they just mistook the editor for the author, but quite often, they haven't looked at the book at all, and so don't realize what it is. Faced with the actual book, they might have asked you how to cite a chapter or essay within it (as many honest students will, in fact, do).
- Papers with masquerading quotes in them also tend to rely heavily on books found through Google – on sites like Amazon – so they aren't in SCOTTY or in our library. As much as we'd like to believe our students go out and buy books that aren't carried in our library, they generally don't – and very, very few of them will ever bother with Interlibrary Loan. (I say "very few," but honestly can't name more than one undergraduate student I've ever seen who's done that.) In short, if your student cites a book and SCOTTY doesn't show it exists in our library, further digging is probably warranted.
- Trust your inner-ear. When students use masquerading quotes, they're often taking material from general-information sources like Wikipedia or About.com or WebMD. It's introductory, basic stuff, in plain language. However, when they pretend it's from a source found in our library, they often attribute it to scholarly books – books that are quite unlikely to contain those sorts of sentences. Example: I had a student earlier this year who provided a great deal of basic, general information on alcoholism for his concept essay – things like definitions of *alcoholism* – and for all of this information, he cited some rather arcane, scholarly books with intimidating titles. The apparent mismatch led me to the library, where I checked his paper against the sources he claimed to have consulted. Every single quote in the paper was a masquerading quote – from some other source, but not from the books he was citing. He later admitted he had never looked at the books. (Note: I never found the original source for those quotes. But I didn't need to do so. All I needed to show was that all of his citations were dishonest.)

Source Fabrication – When your student cites Smith, it's possible *that Smith doesn't even exist*.

Occasionally, a student will flat-out make up a source. This is termed *fabrication* by the SJA office.

Usually, the fabrication is connected to plagiarism – it's a strategy designed to make it more difficult for you to check the student's sentences against an original. Or, at least, that's the plan. In actuality, though,

you can nail these pretty easily: Check the Library of Congress. If it's a book, and it's not there, the student is in trouble. If it's a Web page, and you can't bring it up, you can always go to [WhoIs](#) to find out who owns the site and whether it really exists. Safe Assignments is also helpful, as it will sometimes identify one source for a line of text, while your student cites another – when you see this, it's a good idea to double-check the source that the student cited. Sometimes the line appears there as well, but if it doesn't, you have a likely case of dishonesty.

Doctored Quotes – Sometimes Smith said the opposite of what his quote appears to say. His opinion has morphed because someone has doctored his wording. This is relatively common, for a simple reason. It's important to remember that when most of our students do research, they don't envision the process as a voyage of discovery. Instead, it's a shopping list: They already know what they want to say, and they're looking for sources that will say it for them or provide the numbers they need. (I'm not saying this is a good thing, or that we encourage this in any way. But even when we try to combat this, the habit dies hard.) When the sources they find keep telling them *something else*, they keep looking. Eventually, they start to run short on time. They've found sources, but the sources don't say what their paper says. So they change the quotes to match their thesis, in a last-ditch effort to provide some support for their paper before turning it in. The usual tip-off for me, when it comes to this sort of issue, is the presence of poor grammar within the quotes. Sometimes, the errors are present in the original; sometimes they're accidents or transcription errors; but sometimes they're fingerprints of the surgeon who butchered the original message. Sometimes Safe Assignments clues me in, by giving a 75% rating to a sentence that the student put in quotation marks – it's a good idea to look for these. A final but important tip-off is often that the sources end up saying things one just can't imagine the authors really saying. This sort of practice counts as academic dishonesty, and is a more important issue than it is often treated as.

Interference/Sabotage – Given the opportunity, some students suspected of academic dishonesty will start to erase what evidence they can find, by deleting discussion board posts, providing instructors with additional materials that falsely represent what occurred, hiding library books, and so forth. I have not yet seen a student who plagiarized Wikipedia go back and successfully change the Wikipedia page so that it no longer appears to be the source of the stolen material, but I would not be surprised if this has in fact been attempted and the editors at Wikipedia “reverted” the file to its previous state. Before confronting a student about a possible case of dishonesty, it's a good idea to back up files, save copies of Web pages to your hard drive, lock discussion board posts so they can no longer be modified, and the like. If the student engages in sabotage and you catch it, however, know that this is also covered in the student conduct code,

and on the academic referral form. Even if all the other evidence is gone, you can file a case based on the interference.

5. Limits of Common Strategies

Why Safe Assignments and “unique” assignments aren’t always sufficient.

Many instructors rely on deterrence to combat plagiarism, using a combination of Safe Assignments and convoluted assignment prompts that cannot easily be answered by existing papers. But both approaches have short-comings and blind-spots.

Safe Assignments is erratic, capable of identifying some sentences as plagiarized while missing whole chunks of text taken from the very same sources. Moreover, Safe Assignments only patrols a limited swath of the Internet and its own database of stored papers – it does not look at any of the books or library databases that we encourage our students to use. Yet plagiarism of such resources is common.

Yes, I realize students often seem unwilling to use those advanced sources, and all too eager to use Google, but that impression isn’t entirely correct. In truth, a surprising number of students will look at our databases and books, like what they see there, *but take poor notes*. When they go to write their papers, they no longer recall what their sources were, and can’t locate them again very easily. Often, they can’t recall which parts of their notes are paraphrases of what the source said, and which are direct quotation, because they didn’t mark them. How many students at this point will bother the instructor, asking for help retracing a great-but-lost source? I get maybe one such student a quarter. Maybe. The vast majority of them, however, won’t ask for help at this point – since it’s 3 a.m. the night before the paper is due, and they don’t have your cell phone number – so they fake it, using whole sentences and paragraphs from their notes and printouts, but leaving out the citations, or citing some other source they *can* find.

When you see the paper, it looks like they’ve done an okay job of quoting and citing Wikipedia, and you grumble to yourself about their love affair with that source (and maybe their deliberate snubbing of your instructions not to use it), but, in fact, they *did* use JSTOR (or Lexis-Nexis). They’ve just hidden the fact, because their notes were terrible, and the only sources they could find *when they got around to doing citations* (at the end of the writing process, unless you assigned an annotated bibliography earlier) were the Wikipedia and Google sort. They know they’ll lose points for using Wikipedia, but they’re okay with that, so long as they aren’t nailed for plagiarizing from JSTOR. And Safe Assignments, the topic of this

discussion, won't search most of our databases, so the plagiarism is likely to go undetected unless you go around checking the author's sources.

Safe Assignments might have some value as a deterrent – when you ask students to click on those Safe Assignment links, and they're warned their papers will be checked, it's a bit intimidating. But that is at least partly offset by the fact that cagey plagiarists now know that their work is being checked, and that means they can start to take countermeasures. You and I might hope that they'll rely on the best countermeasure: honesty. But they don't necessarily do so. They can reduce their chances of getting caught by copying from databases, or from books, or by playing games with the Word document itself. (Here's one I've thought of, but have yet to see attempted: Turn the text of the paper into a picture file, like a JPEG, and then paste the picture of the text back into Word. Safe Assignments will come back with a zero percent report – because there isn't any text in the paper, just a picture of text – but it'll still print normally, and look like a paper.) The point here is that once students know you're using Safe Assignments, they can experiment with work-arounds. Some of those will work.

“Unique” prompts, meanwhile, have two weaknesses that make them less effective in dealing with plagiarism than we'd often like to believe. The first is that they do little to combat the most common kind of plagiarism: piecemeal, sentence-level copying. Sure, your assignment requiring students to evaluate an instructor-penned argument in which you compared *Hamlet* with [insert thing it has never, ever been compared to before], and to compare that evaluation with RockPaperShotgun.com's review of the game *Spore*, is weird enough that students aren't going to find a good response on EssaysDirect.com. But that doesn't mean they can't plagiarize a sentence or two from some JSTOR articles on feminist criticism. The second problem is that when we believe too readily that cheating isn't possible in our classes, we become less likely to identify and work with students who badly need help on note-taking, source-handling, and documentation.

6. Other Deterrents to Consider

Common awareness-based deterrents. The advantages of test questions. A neat trick in which you show your cards. Common process-based deterrents. In-class “executive summaries.” “Pocket vetoes.”

A [recent study](#) suggests teachers can reduce cheating significantly on tests simply by saying, on the day of the test, that students should do honest work and that cheating will be unacceptable. Apparently, it helps (to a statistically significant degree) just to have a fresh warning in mind. Of course, most of us don't rely much on in-class tests, and the researchers acknowledge that such a move likely has less of an

impact on take-home writing assignments, because there's more time for the warning to slip from the mind. Nevertheless, most of us take steps that build on this awareness principle in small ways, and in small ways, they probably matter:

- Plagiarism statements in syllabi (most of us have these; all of us should);
- Signed oaths at the start of the term (see the Appendix for one I have used);
- Cover sheets for each assignment, like the oath above, that proclaim the work to be honest, original work;
- Safe Assignments, which reminds students that their work will be checked for plagiarism while they're submitting the electronic document.

The problem with the first two options is that they are long-forgotten by the time students get around to writing papers – they end up being fine things to show SJA officials, to show that the students should have known better, but other than that, their impact is weaker than we'd hope. The cover sheets and Safe Assignment prompts do little to deter as well, mostly because students have already written their papers (or plagiarized them) by the time they see those reminders.

For this reason, I would add to the above list two other, less-common awareness-related countermeasures: test questions and in-class demonstrations.

Test and quiz questions: You might think that test questions about plagiarism would be easy for students to answer, and would result in grade inflation. In fact, a fair number of students will get these wrong, even for questions you'd think are pretty straightforward. You can then identify students with gross misunderstandings and try to save them from themselves, if you think they need the help. Test questions tend to work well as awareness-builders because they stay in the memory longer than our syllabi boilerplate does. In the meantime, the quiz questions do something else very valuable: If you keep them (or copies of them), and a student later cheats, you can go back to the quiz or test and see whether they *knew the rule* when tested on it. If they knew the rule in week 3 and broke it in week 4, you might have good cause to suspect that their transgression is deliberate, rather than accidental. (For me, that dividing line matters: I'll work with students as long as I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt, but as soon as I believe the dishonesty is deliberate, I veer toward the terminal F in the class for them.)

In-class demonstration: By this term, I mean that early on, I often lay most of my cards on the table. I talk openly about the kinds of plagiarism I see – *and how I catch most of it*. I throw some sample honest

and dishonest papers up on the overhead, and then walk through them sentence by sentence, pointing out the ones that don't have citations but ought to, opening up the sources cited in the paper to check whether they say what the paper claims they said, and so forth. (That last move, in particular, has a sobering effect on the room.) I identify inadequate paraphrases, and show what they look like when Safe Assignments spots them. I point out spots in which the quotes are inaccurate. I note places in which the essay clearly switches style. Yes, this all takes up class time. Yet the benefits of such a presentation are arguably worth it: 1) Students seem more likely to realize the subject is taken seriously; 2) students become aware that you *can* catch plagiarists, and that it's not too difficult most of the time; 3) students, when they start writing, start to imagine how you're going to read their papers; 4) finally, students discover, sometimes to their shock, that some of the things they might have thought were okay or borderline are actually treated by the university as serious transgressions. All of these realizations can serve you well as deterrents.

In addition to the above category of *awareness-oriented deterrents*, instructors also use a host of what I call *process-oriented deterrents*. The idea behind the process-oriented deterrent is to get students doing things in and outside of class that make plagiarism less likely or, at least, more risky. Some examples:

- In-class brainstorming/invention work, or in-class planning
- In-class rough drafts
- More frequent in-class writing assignments³
- Annotated bibliographies
- Attached copies/photocopies of all consulted sources

Another alternative: the “executive summary”: If you warn students ahead of time, having students write in-class, closed-note summaries of their papers right after they turn them in can also be an effective process-oriented deterrent, provided the summary has a significant grade impact tied to it. When students know that a third or half of their grade on a paper will be based on their own in-class summary, they have far more reason to get involved in their own paper, and become somewhat less inclined to borrow work blindly from others. (And if they don't know their papers very well, they tend to stand out a bit, and that makes the plagiarists a tad easier to identify.) In business writing classes, I call these in-class exercises “executive summaries,” and connect them with lessons on that genre, so the students seldom even realize it's an anti-plagiarism move. For a 1ABC or 1SC class, one could just as easily call them “abstracts” or

³ The business communications department at California State University, Fullerton requires that at least *half* of all writing assignments be written in-class, mostly to cut down on plagiarism by business students in the program. Ramping up the percentage of the final grade represented by in-class writing, in this manner, can tilt things back in favor of the more honest students in the room.

simply “summaries.” An alternative format is to have students give oral presentations based on their papers; again, this requires them to know what their paper says, and thus encourages them to have more of a hand in writing it.

A final deterrent – the “pocket veto”: It also helps to have well-publicized, clear grade policies concerning *assignments that don't follow instructions*. I call this the “**pocket veto**” policy: Basically, you tell students in your syllabus and in class that if you get a paper that doesn't really fit the assignment or doesn't quite follow the instructions, you'll simply give it a non-passing grade (say, no higher than a D+), regardless of its other merits. If a paper then comes in that doesn't fit the assignment, rather than do a lot of digging to find out whether the darned thing is plagiarized (as many of them will be, but undetectably), you can simply use your pocket veto. The student ends up with a non-passing grade on the assignment, and you don't have to play Sherlock Holmes. On the student's end, this acts as a deterrent, if it's talked about enough: The cost of having an assignment that doesn't fit the instructions becomes high enough that many of the types of plagiarism described above – which, by their nature, tend to produce assignments that goof at least one instruction – stop looking as attractive.

7. Crime-Busting Strategies

The uses and limits of “deception study.” A few signs to look for. Holding back evidence. Library trips. The Al Capone Principle.

Interviewing Students/Deception Studies: Despite the rising popularity of deception studies, particularly on the heels of FOX Network's show *Lie to Me* (starring Tim Roth), figuring out whether someone is lying to you is a tricky business. In general, your instincts will serve you better than a bunch of tips from Tim Roth will, because the sorts of easily memorized codes that people tend to think are tip-offs about lying *are only helpful sometimes*. Some liars will avoid eye contact, but so will shy people. Meanwhile, some liars will look you right in the eye, too – they've learned to do it. Similarly, when people slip up in tenses while telling a story, sometimes it's a tip-off that the story is fabricated. Sometimes, it just means they have problems with verb tenses. The best signs to look for, particularly for teachers of English, are ones you probably already notice:

- **Poor or selective memory** – *I don't really remember how I came up with that sentence. It was a week ago, and I was in a hurry.* When students say they don't remember things that most students or writers would remember, whatever suspicions you already have are probably on target. Ask an

honest student about a screwy sentence in her paper, and she'll be able to describe the trouble she had with it. Ask her about a goofed-up citation, and she'll tell you why she decided to cite that journal as a Web site, about her uncertainties when she did it, and about where she looked for help. In short, she'll remember pretty well what she was thinking at the time. When students seem not to remember what they were thinking when they made a writing decision, it's possible they didn't write it or are pretending not to remember so they don't have to provide any information that might backfire later. (In fact, a useful trick in opening up a discussion about a paper with a suspected plagiarist is simply to point to some element of the paper and ask the student to tell something about it. Clarity and specificity in the response should reassure you that maybe the student is honest. Murkiness and poor memory should encourage you to keep asking questions.)

- **Echoed questions** – Q: *Did you use WebMD?* A: *Did I use WebMD? No, I don't think I did.* Repeating questions is a common means of stalling, while the person answering tries to figure out what to say. Note that the above example also involves murky memory. (Keep in mind, some innocents do this just as a habit, as a kind of trained listening skill. This is a sign, not proof.)
- **Oaths** – *I swear to you, honestly, I am not that kind of person. I would never do that. I'm telling you the truth.* I started to notice this pattern before I ever read anything about it, and only ended up reading about it because I kept hearing these sorts of sentences, they bugged me, and so I eventually started looking in the deception study literature to see what is said about them. They're called oaths, and they correlate pretty highly with lying. What's going on is that the speakers are overcompensating. Honest people tend to think the truth will speak for itself, or be self-evident. It doesn't really occur to them to *say* that they're honest people, or to *tell* you that they're telling the truth. They'll just tell you the truth, and figure that'll do it. People who don't expect the truth to speak on their behalf tend to think they need to speak for themselves, so they tell you how honest they are. Yes, sometimes an honest person will say, "I'm an honest person." But if the speaker seems particularly *practiced* at saying these things, if the oaths just roll off her tongue, chances are it's a lying tongue, at least at the moment.
- **Broken contractions** – See the previous item, *oath*, for an example. (I'm quoting a student there, so that line is a good example for several signs.) Eliminating contractions is another overcompensation, similar to the oath, above. To sell you on their honesty, students will sometimes emphasize *not*, and this decision leads to them breaking up words that might normally be contracted. Honest speakers seldom think to do this, and will usually be more inclined toward contractions. Again, this is a common sign of lying, but not proof. If you hear it, keep digging.
- **Firing back with questions** – *Why would I do something like that? Why do you think I would be that stupid?* This example is from the same student I quoted in *oath*, above. These questions

followed the previous quote directly. Asking questions is less dangerous than making dishonest statements (because with questions, you don't have to worry about continuity), but they still have the benefit of deflecting accusations, so dishonest students like to do this. Honest students are usually too busy trying to set you right about the facts to bother asking questions.

- **Respect** – *I understand why you are concerned about this, sir.* Yes, surprising as it might seem, respect is a bad sign. Sure, sometimes it's someone who's learned to be respectful even when falsely accused of serious offenses, but most of the time, honest people respond to false accusations with anger. Weirdly inhuman levels of respect are generally another attempt to *look* honest, rather than to make factual statements that might be checked and confirmed.
- **Resumés** – *I'm a good student. Ask my former teachers. And you know all of my other papers in this class were honest – you didn't find anything wrong with any of them. Won't you take my previous record into consideration?* Most honest students, it must be repeated, will be too busy trying to convince you that you made a mistake about the current paper to say something like this, which, if you haven't noticed already, overlaps a little with the *oath* already described, and shares similar psychology. Moreover, honest students won't want to change the subject, even to other papers – they're too busy trying to explain why you're wrong. Dishonest students will, as in the example above, fairly frequently try to get you to talk about things other than the paper at hand: other papers, other students, other classes, personal issues. It's useful to rephrase this question: “You didn't catch me when I cheated in my previous papers, and neither have any of my other teachers. Why don't we base my grade on those?”

Withholding Evidence: It's sometimes useful in talking to students about suspicious papers not to let on at first how much you already know. Dishonest students will often assume that if you have any evidence against them, you'll act on it immediately, so if you don't open up with evidence – if you open with questions instead – they sometimes think you're just fishing, and bluff in reply. When they overstep, this can be useful: It can help you determine whether their violations are deliberate or accidental. Let's say you discover a single plagiarized or otherwise problematic line in a paper, and you'd like to know whether it's a goof or merely the tip of the dishonesty iceberg. If you meet with them and ask them questions like, “Is this really your sentence?”, the dishonest students will usually respond one of three ways:

1. “Yes, it is. Why would you think it wasn't?”
2. “I think so. Is there something wrong with it?”
3. “Well, I think so. I mean, I might have forgotten a citation or a quotation mark, or something technical like that. Is that what I did?”

In general, they'll open up with a firm or qualified affirmative, and end with a question designed to find out what you know. They'll also respond fairly quickly. If they're really bold, you'll catch them in a lie, and then have pretty good reason to believe they aren't accidental plagiarists. (Note: The third example sometimes means the student has in fact been sloppy, but *he knows he's sloppy*. That's why it's his first explanation for what happened. Chances are, he thinks documentation is trivial, and will continue to treat it that way as long as he can get away with it.)

Honest students, on the other hand, are more likely to look over the sentence carefully, and to say something like the statements below:

1. "Oh no! I missed that. No, that's from Smith. I can't believe I forgot to cite it. Oh crap!" (More profanity and self-disparagement is likely to follow.)
2. "No, I found that online somewhere. Is something wrong?" (Although this second example ends with a question, it's a different animal from the ones above: In most such cases, the student truly, honestly doesn't understand the rules on academic integrity, thought what she did was okay – which is why she is so up-front about it – and only after telling you it's from another source realizes there's probably a reason you're asking the question, and that it's probably not good news. When students cheerfully admit that they took a sentence from the Internet, it's because they don't realize yet that it's wrong. You should still, I'd argue, impose grade sanctions and file a Student Conduct case, but otherwise, try to be kind and instructive.)

Withholding evidence is particularly useful when you've found one problem, and Safe Assignments has found another. You can imply to the student that your evidence is more limited than it really is, and see what happens. Show the student the Safe Assignments printout, and ask if there are any other such sentences in the paper. An honest student who was simply sloppy is likely to reflect back and say, "Well, yeah. There might be." A dishonest student who thinks you're on a fishing expedition – and most will – often bluffs: "No, no. Honest, that was just a one-time mistake. I'm sure the rest of it is fine." Show him the next piece of paper, and repeat the question. If he becomes hostile or very quiet, he's mad about being snookered. The proper reaction for a student who really thought the rest of the paper was fine is horror.

Library Trips: Checking sources is, hands-down, the best way to look for plagiarism in a paper. But it's time-consuming. As a TA, I once checked every concept paper for a 1A class – I took the 23 papers to the library, and started checking sources to see whether they matched up. It was a discouraging experience. I no longer do anything so intensive, because I'm teaching more classes, and because my son wants to play catch sometimes. But I still do small-scale library checks from time to time – I aim for once a quarter,

often during finals week. I take a stack of 5-8 papers that made me suspicious earlier (usually I have electronic copies I can print out, or photocopies), and I start checking each citation against the actual sources. Sometimes I'm very reassured: "Hey, I passed a student who did honest work!" Other times I discover plagiarism, or misleading citations – Smith didn't say what the student said Smith said, nor did Jones say what he said she said – or source fabrication. Example: In one case, a paper on chaos theory, citing Susan Hawthorne's *The Butterfly Effect*, cited a real book, but it is a book on lesbian poetry, not on chaos theory. And it was in binding during the entire quarter that the student said he'd checked it out – I had to order it through ILL, myself. You don't have to check every source in every paper; just a few is enough. Oh, and telling students mid-term that you do this sometimes flushes out an anticipatory confession or two, if they believe you ("When you talked about plagiarism in class today, Mr. Scott, I realized that maybe I might have screwed up on the last paper...").

The Al Capone Principle: You don't need to find everything that's wrong with a paper to be justified in giving it a zero, to turn in a solid SJA case, or to help springboard a lesson for your student. If you find source fabrication or masquerading quotes or pseudophrasing, it might require hours of work to pin down the other details, and that isn't very efficient. If you've already established there are integrity issues, you're justified in taking action or submitting the case. Just as Al Capone could be put away for income tax evasion, your plagiarist can be put on academic probation for misleading citations in a paper, even if you never could never verify your suspicion that the cited statements were plagiarized from elsewhere.

This rule of thumb also applies to students who spin very good yarns about why their papers have significant plagiarism issues in them. Here's a common one (in fact, I just heard it last week): "Oh, I put all of the information in first, saved it, and then went back later to add in all of the citations and stuff. Microsoft Word must have lost those changes, and when I printed it out, I didn't notice." Dishonest students love the story of the one glitch that turned them into apparent plagiarists. I've talked to some lecturers and TAs who hear this sort of story, doubt it, but somehow feel obligated anyway either to verify it or catch the individual in a lie. That's a lot of energy for a little redundancy. The student can always offer the same explanation to the student conduct officials, who've heard it more than we have. All you technically have to do is note that the problem exists and refer the case. Is content in the paper plagiarized? If yes, you're done: Send it.

(An aside: If you're still wondering whether your student really was the victim of a glitch, I will make three points unsympathetic to his or her case: First, the student is technically responsible for academic integrity in rough drafts, too. Really. Student conduct officials will take cases dealing with rough drafts,

or electronic drafts sent to Safe Assignments that students later claim weren't "the right version," and they'll treat them just like final drafts in their decisions. Second, most of us tell our students to keep careful track of documentation as they go, so as to avoid *accidental plagiarism*, and we give these warnings because accidental plagiarism is to be avoided like a case of Ebola Zaire. If students haven't learned good documentation habits, a formal case about their accidental plagiarism might be needed to get them to take such habits more seriously in the future. Third, students should proofread their papers before submitting them – if only for this reason.)

8. Potential Issues

Calls from parents, and FERPA. Fellow instructors. Suicide threats.

Below are some curveballs that can be thrown at you, and some rules and guidance for how to deal with them.

Helicopter Parents: Teachers have a lot of fun snarking about "helicopter parents" (see [here](#)), and they're a real phenomenon: parents who are still hovering around their kids, protecting them, as though they weren't college-aged adults. I had a plagiarist last quarter whose lawyer father sent me a series of emails, for instance, and the first message was fairly antagonistic. How do you deal with such parents?

1. *DO NOT talk to them about junior's case.* That's a federal law. The student is treated as an adult (even if he or she is attending at the age of 16), and his or her privacy is protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ([FERPA](#)). This law applies, by the way, to other issues like grades – not just plagiarism. The student has to fill out university paperwork granting permission for school officials to release records or information to third parties (i.e., mom). To make things more complicated, each office, department, and program is governed by a different form, so even if mom is allowed to look at junior's grades because he's given her permission through [GROWL](#), he still has to fill out [Student Conduct's form](#) if he wants to give her clearance to look at his student conduct records.
2. *You may respond to the parents to inform them of FERPA's stipulations, and to refer the student's parents to the Director of the Writing Program. That's pretty much it.* The program director is permitted to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Helicopter about the details of the case, but you are not. If you refer the parents to him, you should give him a heads-up so he can talk intelligently about the case. Supply the Director of the Writing Program with all of the information on the

case. (FERPA makes allowance for communication to select school officials who need to know stuff to do their jobs.)

3. *Limit modes of communication to those you know for sure are controlled by the student. Don't send emails containing confidential student information to any off-campus email address. Don't send faxes related to the case to any fax numbers the student gives you.* You may communicate with the student directly, hand the student photocopies or printouts directly, or email the student's *on-campus* email account. You are not permitted to send an email about his grades or plagiarism to his Gmail or Hotmail account. (Yes, that's a rule. My recent helicopter kid kept emailing me from Gmail accounts, and I kept responding to her student email account. It was frustrating having to do it that way, but those are the rules. Why? Because the university has some faith that the student email account belongs to the student, but it cannot be so certain about SuperSexyPrincess69@hotmail.com. That might be someone else.)

Fellow Instructors and FERPA: FERPA applies also to conversations with other faculty. If you tell Dr. Smith that Suzie Jones wrote two plagiarized papers in your 1C class, you've violated the terms of that act. It's a pretty good bet that most of us have crossed this line at some point, or have ventured into gray areas. (I'll raise my hand here.) It's a good habit to break, though. You don't want to get sued, and that becomes a possibility. The two most tempting scenarios for spilling such dark secrets are, first, during shop-talk with other instructors about students and teaching, and second, when both you and the other instructor have a student in common, and one instructor knows plagiarism has been a past issue with that student. In the first situation, at the very minimum, you should make sure no "student identifiable information" is communicated – that is, don't say anything that can be connected to a specific student. The second situation is more difficult, and one I've only recently had to think about. I don't think I handled it well the first time, but here are some pointers I've come up with since then:

1. If you think an instructor needs to be alerted to the habits of a particular student, tell the Writing Program Director, not the instructor. Let him make that call.
2. If a student comes to you and complains about a case involving another instructor, and you're concerned, go to the Writing Program Director, not to the instructor. If you go to the instructor, you'll put her in a tough spot: If she responds to the student's story, even to correct huge distortions, she risks legal action later; if she says she can't talk about it, she leaves uncorrected an accusation that she's been unfair.
3. If another instructor comes to you to argue on behalf of a former student, refer him to the Writing Program Director. Don't give into the temptation to argue back.

Suicide Threats: It doesn't happen very often (for me, just once), but at some point a student you've confronted might threaten to kill herself. If this happens, you should contact Sarah Pemberton, who is the same person Student Conduct officials call when they hear suicide threats during their interviews with students:

Sarah Pemberton, Student Affairs Case Manager

(951) 827-9354

sarah.pemberton@ucr.edu

You should contact the Student Affairs Case Manager listed above, in addition to any other actions you take (walking the student to the Counseling Center, notifying the Director of the Writing Program, trying to keep the student away from sharp objects, etc.) ■

Appendix: Statement on Academic Integrity

First, read the definitions of academic dishonesty, located at http://senate.ucr.edu/agenda/041116/CEP_STUDENT_INTEGRITY_DEFINITIONS.pdf.

As one of the minimum requirements for this class, you must print out this form, handwrite the paragraph below, and then sign your name, followed by your student ID number and date. Return your form to me before you submit any outside-of-class written work (such as essays or homework) for evaluation, or you won't receive credit for it.

Paragraph to rewrite: "I have read the UCR official definitions of academic dishonesty. I understand that it is my responsibility to know and comply with university and academic standards of conduct. I know that it is a violation of those standards to represent someone else's ideas or even a small part of someone else's writing as though they were my own, to submit fictitious data, to cite fictitious sources, to provide misleading citations, or to submit the same work in two different classes. I understand that instructor might submit electronic copies of my work to databases that check for plagiarism, and agree that such checks constitute 'fair use' of the work I submit."

Name (printed) _____ Signature _____

Student ID _____

Date _____