Combating Plagiarism

Suzanne F. Carey and Patricia Arnett Zeck
Suzanne F. Carey is an AP English and journalism instructor at Northwestern High School in Indiana and an adjunct English instructor at Indiana University-Kokomo. She received her undergraduate degree from Indiana University, her M.A. from Butler University, and her Ph.D. in secondary education English from the University of Illinois. She previously taught in Montana, Ohio, and Illinois, as well as in other schools in Indiana. She was the 2002 Kokomo Tribune Teacher of the Year.

Patricia Arnett Zeck has taught advanced biology, basic biology, beginning chemistry, and honors biology courses at Northwestern High School for 35 years. Her undergraduate degree in biology and chemistry, as well as her master's degree in ecology, are from Indiana State University. Zeck was the 2001 winner of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. She was named a Fulbright Memorial Fund Scholar to Japan for 2002 and received the Indiana Outstanding Biology Teacher Award in 2002.

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by
Suzanne F. Carey
and
Patricia Arnett Zeck

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Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty are significant problems. They are problems not only in schools, but also in newspaper reporting, movies, song writing, speechmaking, and grant writing. Though plagiarism has long been a problem in schools, it may be increasing as our technology makes it easier to retrieve all or part of a paper from a website or to "cut and paste" from several sources without proper credit.

Plagiarism is the use of another's work as one's own without giving credit and without having written permission from the author or artist to use his or her work. It includes not only copying another's work directly, but also paraphrasing another person's work without giving the original author credit. It not only is cheating, it also is a form of theft.

Plagiarism is a serious offense in the workplace, higher education, and secondary schools. Offenders may be fired from their jobs, expelled from college, or censured with loss of credit for the assignment or perhaps for the entire course at the high school and college levels. Although elementary and middle school students begin research with references, high school students are con-
sidered old enough and mature enough to avoid the problems of plagiarism or academic dishonesty and to be able to cite the references sufficiently to eliminate any question about the authenticity. Hence, many high schools and almost all universities have a specific plagiarism policy or a broader policy on academic dishonesty. At the professional level, the policy usually involves a dismissal from position or a lawsuit. Lawsuits also have been filed at the university level.

Plagiarism goes against every thread of fairness conscientious teachers have ever learned and taught their students. It is unfair to the honest student because his or her paper may get a lower grade than one that has been written by a professional. The honest student should not have to compete against that kind of writing.

The story of biology teacher Christine Pelton in Piper, Kansas, illustrates the problems that plagiarism can cause for schools. After warning students, in writing, about the nature of plagiarism, its unacceptability, and the penalties it would bring, Pelton found that 28 of 118 sophomores had plagiarized their essays for her class. When she gave those students a zero grade for that assignment, at first the principal and superintendent supported her. However, this stand meant that the students would fail the semester because the assignment counted for 50% of the term’s grade. Angry parents went to the school board, and the board advised the teacher to change the value of the grade to only 30% of the term’s grade so that the students would not fail the semester. When Pelton returned to the classroom, the students taunted her and announced that they did not
have to listen to her. She subsequently submitted her resignation (Greene 2002).

As teachers in one of our state’s top high schools, we had to deal with plagiarism far too often. Not only have we had to deal directly with plagiarizing students, but the parent and administrative conferences that ensued were draining and upsetting. To help solve this problem, we developed a plagiarism policy for the school that was designed both to punish the offenders and to help prevent plagiarism from occurring.

The basic tenets of the paper were incorporated into the school’s English curriculum, which was approved by the school board. In a short time the policy worked and the problem of plagiarism was almost eliminated in our high school. That policy is the foundation for this fastback.
Basic Types of Plagiarism

Academic dishonesty infects all levels of education and the professions. High school and college students aren't the only ones who are seduced by academic dishonesty. College professors, collegiate athletes, and professionals outside education have been accused of cheating in highly publicized cases. Historian and writer Stephen Ambrose made headlines in 2002 because of uncredited material in his latest book.

The most frequent kind of plagiarism at the high school level is the verbatim copying from a source without quotation marks or proper citation. For example, one of the authors asked a student to explain why 80% of his research paper was word for word from a book in the high school library. The 17-year-old student looked at his feet and muttered, "It was an accident."

Plagiarism does not happen by accident, but it has become much easier to accomplish with the Internet. Researchers at Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity interviewed 500 students in five New Jersey high schools and found that plagiarizing from Internet sources is rampant and that "at least half engage in this cut-and-paste plagiarism" (Thomas 2001, p. 3D). In ad-
dition, the study found that “high schoolers are much more likely than college students to use the Net to cheat, and computers have redefined younger kids’ concept of what constitutes cheating.” Of the students in this study, 15% to 20% “buy or download finished work” and report that their teachers are “clueless” (Thomas 2001, p. 3D).

Plagiarism in the form of inadequate paraphrasing, changing only one or two words and claiming it is not technically the same as the original, is a careless error that students make. Another form of plagiarism occurs when students “cut and paste” a paper from a number of sources, then cite each source and maintain that the paper is technically correct, though there is not a shred of original work in it. High school educators should work to prevent these forms of cheating.

The stakes in college are even higher than in high school. Consequences are usually more severe and may include expulsion from school, denial of degree, transcripts stamped with “academic dishonesty,” or denial of admission to graduate schools. Being aware of the major types of cheating may help prevent it.

One type of cheating at the college level involves one person writing the paper or taking the test for another student. For example, a highly publicized case of academic dishonesty involving numerous students and faculty members occurred at the University of Minnesota. In March 1999, just one day before the Minnesota men’s basketball team played their first game in the NCAA tournament, a former employee in the university’s academic counseling program stated that from 1993 to 1998
“with the knowledge and support of men’s coach Clem Haskins she had written some 400 papers, take-home tests and other assignments for 20 Gopher players” (Wertheim and Yaeger 1999, p. 92). The incident resulted in the university buying out the coach’s contract (“Judge” 2002), but the whole situation raises the sticky question of the extent of guilt on the part of an estimated 65 professors. Elayne Donahue, director of Minnesota’s academic counseling unit for athletics from 1983 to 1998, said, “There had to be faculty willing to accept those papers and not question how a poor student had suddenly mastered the art of writing. Without them, this situation would never have gotten so out of hand” (Wertheim and Yaeger 1999, p. 92).

Not all of the unethical uses of sources occur in research papers, nor even in a strictly academic setting. A Northwestern University student allegedly made up quotes for more than a dozen newspaper stories when he interned in California.

The school hasn’t challenged a report in the Daily Northwestern, the student newspaper, that [the student] was kicked out of an accelerated master’s program in journalism but will be allowed to graduate with a B.A. from the Medill [School of Journalism]. (Allen 2001, p. 3).

Because the research suggests an increase in both the amount of plagiarism and the ease with which it is done, it is extremely important that students understand the serious nature of the penalties that may be imposed. Cheating can be cause for a student’s transcript to be stamped with the phrase “academic dishonesty.” For
example, a student at Princeton cited the primary source she used in her paper only five times, though she had used the source verbatim or nearly verbatim 50 times. She was caught, she failed the course, and her admission was denied to all six law schools to which she applied. At Princeton University, plagiarism at that time resulted in a one-year suspension; and the diploma of the student was held for a year (Felsenthal 1985).

In the publish-or-perish environment of academia, even professors may resort to plagiarism. According to Marshall, a Polish engineer and numerous co-authors published “at least 30 biomedical research papers that repeat verbatim passages from other authors without giving credit” (1998, p. 473).

Two recent court cases brought by graduate students have raised the question of whether a professor can use a student’s idea as the basis for a grant proposal or a paper of his or her own. A Cornell University graduate student charged that a professor on her thesis committee used her ideas to obtain a research grant. When the student failed to get a satisfactory response from Cornell’s ombudsman, she sued. At Columbia University, a doctoral candidate in math charged that the former chair of the math department published the student’s work and claimed it as his own (Marshall 1999). In both cases, one or more faculty members from their own or another university sided with the students; but the universities supported the accused faculty (Marshall 1999).

Louis W. Roberts, director of the doctoral program in humanistic studies and chairman of the classics department at the State University of New York, Albany, re-
signed after accusations and consequent admission that
VIII, Latin Texts from the First Century B.C. to the Seven-
teenth Century A.D., from other summaries authored by
John L. Lamonte. It appears the university administra-
tion knew about the problem in January 2001; but ac-
cording to Paul Wallace, the editor of Roberts’ book,
“The response of the university was to deal with it [pla-
giarism] internally, as a personnel matter. The faculty
feels that a more direct response is required. . . .
Plagiarism is what we regard as the worst academic sin.
It undermines the intellectual activities of a university”
(Walsh 2002). Furthermore, Lamonte’s works were not
word-by-word translations, but were summaries.
Roberts misrepresented the work as direct translations
from Latin. He did cite Lamonte once but did not indi-
cate that he was taking the passages verbatim.

The following list is used to demonstrate the common
types of errors that students make. These examples are
drawn from academic institutions, organizations, and
textbooks on writing and research. The list reflects part
of Indiana University’s Code of Student Rights, Respon-

Wholesale Copying

1. Student presents the entire work or idea of another
without credit. Examples include copying song
lyrics, paintings, poems, essays, science experi-
ments, or any piece of literary writing.
2. Student presents passages of the work or idea of
another without credit.
a. Student uses verbatim language.
b. Student presents essence of passage without adequate paraphrasing or credit. Simply changing the word order, one or two words per sentence, or the verb tense is inadequate paraphrasing.

3. Student copies passage or paper from term-paper website.

4. Student pays for or receives work done by another and presents work as his own.

Selected Passages

1. Student does not paraphrase a given passage adequately. Examples include but are not limited to the following:
   a. Changes a few words, such as “this” for “that.”
   b. Copies book jacket or inside jacket flap
   c. Inverts the sentence order, such as “When the temperature decreased to five degrees Celsius, the *Daphnia* were nearly immobile” to “The *Daphnia* were nearly immobile when the temperature decreased to five degrees Celsius.”

2. Student uses a direct quote without quotation marks or credit.

3. Student invents a quote or material the source did not say. This problem is also known as fabrication of sources.

4. Student cites the passage but alters the meaning by leaving out critical words or phrases. Hence the partial quotation or paraphrase does not accurately reflect the passage or the author’s intent.
Citation Errors

Citation errors are often form errors and must be rectified. The following are errors that can and must be avoided lest penalties be attached:
1. If the source is not given immediately before or after a direct quote.
2. If a direct quote is not quoted verbatim.
3. If the direct quote never existed (fabrication of source).
4. If the partial quotation misrepresents the intent of the passage.
5. If the source never said the quote or material in the paraphrase. Recall the fabrication of source category of academic dishonesty.
6. If the source cited did not say the quotation or material on the page cited.
7. If the source cited did not say the quotation or material in the book or article cited.
8. If there were multiple authors for the book, and the student cites the editor instead.
9. If there were different authors for each chapter or article within the book or journal and the student cites wrong chapter or wrong article or author of a different chapter or article.

Depending upon the nature of the error, frequency of errors, and number of sources involved, penalties may range from simply correcting the error to the deduction of points to a grade of zero on the paper. For example, errors that are apparently typographical, as opposed to factual, will be corrected; fabrication of even one source
will be grounds for a zero score on the paper. It is better to “over-document” than to “under-document.”

**Internet Problems**

Because of the unrestricted and anonymous nature of the Internet, many of its sources should be considered dubious at best. Internet sources may not give the primary source or may not have been reviewed for accurate data.

Teachers should address the reliability of Internet sources prior to the assignment. In evaluating Internet sources, students should look both at dates and at the three-letter designation at the end of the Internet address. Internet users should recall that “.com” wants to sell something and might be biased. A source with “.edu” may not be a college or university; sometimes the page is constructed by a college student. Articles with “.gov,” “.mil,” and carefully checked “.edu” generally are better choices. Some of the “.org” from major groups may be a reliable data source for some facts.

Common types of errors from Internet resources include:

1. Student does not track down the original source of the article.
2. Author given at front of article is not the same one listed at end of article.
3. Trained editors may not have reviewed the Internet articles. Thus information may be wrong, or incorrect conclusions may have been drawn.
4. Student fails to read the whole article and cites only the first paragraph or two. Subsequent paragraphs
of the original article may indicate that the author has a contrasting point of view or, worse still, that he has used information from other sources, which the student may not have listed.

5. Source may be factually incorrect.

6. Some sources are "slanted" because they are trying to sell a product. Thus their information may be inaccurate.

The easiest way to avoid such problems is to use only the primary source in articles that have an established editorship. Never take a quote from a source without checking its validity.
Detection of Plagiarism

Even after careful preventative measures, a teacher may suspect that a paper is not the student’s own work. One of the most obvious clues is a perfect paper; most high school students doing their own work will have some errors. Another clue is a paper containing vocabulary well above the student’s normal level or a paper written in a style unlike other examples of the student’s work. Knowledge of the writing ability of the students is essential.

Obviously, if two or more papers have similar ideas or phrasing, they are suspect. Phrasing that would not be used by people in the student’s locale or references to experiences that are either impossible or not common to most student writers are also strong clues.

An additional clue is the use of a different format than the one assigned. For example, the use of correct APA citation by a student who has not learned APA format would be suspicious.

Julie Ryan (1998) suggests that the teacher note changes in context, footnotes that are missing where they should have been placed, and use of false references. She cited a paper allegedly on a security policy for a company in
Korea. Yet all the text references were to Massachusetts’ law. The paper had been plagiarized from the guidelines used by Harvard.

Ryan warns that when footnotes are in the wrong place in the sentence, the teacher should be suspicious. Using the footnote after a common thought and not after a technical one is a clue to fabrication. She further advises checking dates of technical material when the knowledge appears to be out-of-date.

The problem for the teacher is the amount of time it may take to substantiate a charge of plagiarism. One way to get a good idea of how much the student actually knows about the topic is to ask the student to give a speech about what he or she found in his or her research. Questions and discussion following the speech are often good indications of whether the student did the research, as opposed to simply downloading or cutting and pasting the paper. One of our colleagues simply schedules individual conferences with students when she returns research papers. If she suspects that parts of the paper are plagiarized, she will say to the student, “What would you like to tell me about your paper?” Not all culprits respond to this ploy, but several have. Some teachers use a follow-up writing assignment with such questions as “Which source was most helpful to you? Why?”

Ironically, although the computer has made it easy for students to obtain a complete paper or cut and paste from several sources, it also has made it easier to catch the plagiarists. Teachers can go to the same websites the students use and often can find the original paper very
quickly. The use of a “stringer,” a string of five or more words with a distinctive flair, such as “As part of his innovative paradigm, Chaucer created his pilgrims to represent virtually the entire gamut of fourteenth century society prior to its emergence from the restrictive cocoon of the Dark Ages,” often will produce the original on the Web in a very short time.

As the problem has increased, so have the number of resources that help teachers catch cheaters. Steve Gardiner (2001) lists sites where papers are available. Tyre (2001) gives five very helpful online resources, including www.plagiarized.com, which help teachers identify plagiarism in papers; and he also suggests follow-up strategies. Lathrop and Foss (2000) provide a wealth of resources for detecting cheating. In addition, some schools use subscription services that check students’ papers.
Prevention of Plagiarism

A discussion of plagiarism with the class prior to the research assignment is essential. Give each student a handout that explains what plagiarism is and what the penalty will be if a student commits it. This practice is not only helpful to the students but also prudent on the part of the teacher. Also, a teacher might want to note in the lesson plans when the discussion of plagiarism took place so that a student cannot later deny knowing about the policy on plagiarism.

The following lists of suggestions are excellent guides for students. The first is based on The Blair Handbook by T. Fulwiler and A. Hayakawa (2000).

1. All quoted material, even just a few words or a phrase, must be in quotation marks and documented.
2. All ideas and opinions taken from a source must be documented even if they are in the student’s own words.
3. Peripheral information, such as examples, anecdotes, stories, and jokes, also must be documented.
4. Save direct quotes for the most essential concepts or facts and paraphrase everything else.
5. Paraphrasing means both a change in sentence structure and word choice.
6. Organizational headings, captions, and unique phrases taken from sources must receive acknowledgment (p. 253).


1. In any paraphrase, the student writer must be careful to indicate when the borrowed material begins and ends.
2. In citing two or more sources for the same material, be very accurate in indicating which sections came from which source. Simply listing both at the end of a paragraph of blended information is grounds for academic dishonesty because both sources may not have said everything within the blended paragraph.
3. Be careful about assuming that an item is common knowledge. In advanced courses, the teacher may allow a little latitude; but in the beginning courses, the safest method is to document everything.

Following is a basic overview of activities to help teachers prevent academic dishonesty in the classroom.

**Start Early**

Preventive measures are infinitely preferable to punitive measures. Teachers should begin early to teach students how to research a topic and to write about it correctly. At the elementary school level, this method
means not accepting or, worse yet, encouraging reports that have been copied from an encyclopedia or any other source. Instead, ask students to read the source and then either tell the class a little bit about the topic or write a few sentences in their own words about the topic without having the source in front of them. They should be expected to explain where they found their information.

Provide Written Guide

One of the most important steps a teacher can take to prevent plagiarism is to provide each student with a written guide that explains the policies on plagiarism. It often is desirable to provide each student with three copies of the guide: one for the student’s notebook, one for home, and one for the parent and child to sign and return to the teacher to indicate receipt of the guidelines. Science teachers, for example, often use this strategy with safety contracts that students and parents must sign before the students may participate in labs.

There must be cooperation among administrators, school board members, and parents for the guide to be effective. Teachers should be sure that school administrators, including the department chair, principal, and superintendent, agree with the handout. It may be advisable to have the school board examine it to avoid any potential problems.

Teachers should allow students ample time to read the document on plagiarism and to ask questions. One area of discussion may be how teachers approach “common knowledge.” If teachers take the position that every source will be documented and virtually nothing
is common knowledge, then everything must be completely documented in assignments. If teachers maintain that ideas that the student finds in several sources then become “common knowledge,” then the student writer needs to clarify where interpretation begins and ends. Both approaches are valid provided that the student understands the requirements of the paper and the expectations of the teacher.

Students need to be taught how to paraphrase. Give them examples of paraphrasing that is done correctly and paraphrasing that is so close to the original source that it would be called plagiarism. Lester and Lester (2002) provide excellent examples of acceptable and unacceptable paraphrasing.

While most students will easily grasp the concepts, some might not. If there are students from other cultures in the class, they may need special instruction regarding footnoting and its importance. For example, until a recent edict, both professors and students at Peking University thought that plagiarism and cheating were acceptable practices. Professor Wang Mingming was accused of plagiarizing 100,000 words, which represented one third of his new book on anthropology. He said that “anthropology was so new to China that he ‘had to fill this void by importing from the West’.” Chinese academics cannot agree on whether he is guilty of violating the new guidelines put forth for the faculty (Xueqin 2002, pp. A45-46).

**Structure Assignments Carefully**

Teachers may help prevent plagiarism by structuring assignments carefully. One way is to give the same
assignment and the same reference materials to all the students in the class. For example, after reading The Pearl by Steinbeck, students might be given five Steinbeck short stories and five critical evaluations of Steinbeck and asked to write a documented paper about the importance of setting in Steinbeck's work. A variation is to ask students to read three short stories by three different authors and to develop an idea for a paper from their reading. For example, students might write on the tragic flaw of pride in the main characters in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," and Cather's "Paul's Case." A highly specific topic makes it difficult, though not impossible, for students to download a paper from the Internet. Also, the more familiar the teacher is with the material, the less likely it is that students can plagiarize successfully.

Check Sources

One important step in combating plagiarism is to monitor students' sources. During the time students are collecting references, the teacher has an excellent opportunity to guide students to quality materials in the media center or on the Internet. If the assignment is given early in the semester, a teacher can ask for a précis of each source, a review of the literature, an annotated bibliography, or progress reports during the research process. All of these provide both a way to check sources and an opportunity to guide the writing of each student.

Another method is to require students to have note cards or highlighted copies of the passage in the source
to indicate the quoted or paraphrased material. Note cards may be turned in on the “installment plan” so that checking sources is easier for the teacher and so that subsequent submissions do not repeat previous errors. It is better to help a student rectify problems at this point than to fail the student on the entire paper. Students will get used to your helpfulness and may bring doubtful material for you to check before they submit the note card.

Teachers should require a variety of sources and request copies of all sources used. Websites and full printouts must be turned in, as well as title pages of books and full magazine or journal articles. This is best done with the rough draft, and the references should be arranged in the same order as they are listed in the paper. This method adds about 15 minutes of checking per paper for the rough draft, but little or no extra time for the final paper. However, the few extra minutes are worth the effort. Most teachers would rather spend the extra time with their students’ papers than deal with the student conferences, parent meetings, administrative dialogues, and personal anguish that result from plagiarized papers. In addition, requiring students to turn in copies of all the sources they use is the only way to check the accuracy of their documentation.

Be sure to look at the dates of the references; they could help determine recycled works. If dates are five years old or older, suspect a sibling or parental paper that has been reincarnated. A classic case occurred when an insect collection was turned in to a teacher who required all students to have one. She marked the errors
and returned the collection to the student with a low grade. The parent came storming to school to inquire about the errors, which the teacher explained. The parent, who was still upset, blurted out that when another instructor graded the collection in the past, it received an A. As it turns out, the family froze the collection and subsequently pulled it out for each child in the family.
Suggested Penalties

Each teacher should check his or her own school for guidelines for dealing with plagiarism. The school should have a policy for dealing with this problem. Following is the policy on plagiarism from Northwestern High School in Indiana. This policy was printed in the 2003-2004 edition of that school’s student handbook (pp. 17-18).

1. One facet of academic cheating is plagiarism. Plagiarism is the use of words or ideas of another with the intent of representing them as one’s own. Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to, students copying from book jackets, encyclopedias, Internet, computer programs, computer online services, other library sources, papers of other students for reports, compositions, speeches, research papers, or paraphrasing the ideas of others without giving the proper documentation.

2. If a student plagiarizes a paper, he or she will receive a zero on the paper. If a student allows his paper to be used by another person without designation of co-authorship, both students will receive a zero on their papers.

3. A student who alters or destroys all or part of the work of another and then resubmits the part or whole as
his own or keeps the originator from submitting his own work, shall be guilty of plagiarism or destruction of personal property and subject to both a "zero grade" and disciplinary actions of willful destruction of property.

4. Because plagiarism is intellectually dishonest and therefore a form of stealing, it is an extremely serious offense and will result in a failing grade for the assignment/test in question. The teacher will write a student discipline referral for any cheating or plagiarism offense. The second reported cheating or plagiarism offense during the school year will result in a failing grade for the assignment or test in question and an assignment to Saturday school. The third and any subsequent reported cheating or plagiarism offense for the school year will result in removal from the class, assignment to study hall, loss of credit, and final grade of "W."

It is important for administrators and teachers to inform both the students and their parents of the seriousness of plagiarism and the actions the school will take if a student should commit that offense.
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Fax: (812) 339-0018
E-mail: headquarters@pdkintl.org
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