

Top Ten Reasons Students Plagiarize & What You Can Do About It

(with apologies to David Letterman)

by

Michelle Navarre Cleary
DePaul University

10. They are lazy.

While every teacher has entertaining stories about students who hand in papers that still have other students' names on them, these cases are relatively rare. Most students do not plagiarize intentionally. In fact, in a study of SNL students, many mentioned that they were worried about unintentionally plagiarizing. Sam said she was in a "panic about plagiarism." Aubrey, who had notebooks full of her creative writing, believed she was not good at research papers because "I was really scared about plagiarizing." However, for those students who are looking for the easy way out of your assignment, the best way to keep them from plagiarizing is to make doing so too much work.

What you can do:

- Let students know what the consequences of plagiarizing will be. Students are less likely to plagiarize deliberately if they perceive the cost of getting caught as too high. Make sure to have a clear statement in your syllabus and let students know that you use Turn-It-In, Google or some other method of checking up on their sources.
- Make it so hard to plagiarize that they might just as well as have written the paper. You can do this by requiring documentation of their writing process. You might ask students to hand in some combination of the following: a paper proposal, an outline, an annotated bibliography, multiple drafts, a copy of one or more of their sources, a reflection piece on their writing process. *Requesting these items does not mean you necessarily have a whole lot more work to do.* You can use peer response exercise or in-class work for quick reviews of many of these items. If you ask for multiple drafts, only check for a few things on each draft (for example, just for main idea and basic structure on the first draft or just for citation format on a second draft). Besides preventing plagiarism, collecting these documents can help you assess student learning and, when necessary, intervene before the bitter end.
- Make it hard to plagiarize by designing assignments around specific, focused questions or issues. Avoid "hot button" national issues like abortion and general paper topics like character in Hemingway. There are so many papers on the Internet on such topics, that the temptation may be too great.
- Students are less likely to plagiarize if they feel connected to a school through bonding with fellow students and teachers, through small classes and through

fresh assignments that require original thought rather than the rehashing of old debates (Ashworth and Bannister).

9. They panic.

Some students will deliberately plagiarize when they feel themselves backed into a corner in a high-pressure situation with a low-risk of being caught. Often, this behavior is a result of poor time-management and organization skills. It frequently happens when students are new to the kind of work they are being asked to do, because they are less likely to know how to organize themselves, may have unrealistic expectations about what they can do, and are less invested in the process. As a result, you might expect this behavior not only in incoming students, but also when students are first asked to step up to a new level of work such as their first extended, research project.

What you can do:

- Help students learn how to pace themselves and organize their work, especially if the task you have given them is complex, and they are novices. This can be done by warning them of common process problems at the start, by assigning intermediate steps, by conducting an ongoing discussion of their process (Blackboard discussion groups are good for this and do not take class time), and by modeling your process.
- Explicitly discuss with students why the assignment is important in the context of the class and of their learning. Tell them what transferable skills and knowledge they will gain from doing this assignment.
- Finally, as in number 10, make the risks and consequences of being caught clear.

8. They lack confidence.

Because they have not been in school for a while and sometimes because of prior negative school experiences, adult students can lack confidence in their ability to do academic work. Academic jargon, like MLA and APA, can seem like a foreign language to new students. When we use it without thinking, they tend to hear confirmation that they do not belong. In addition, the specialized language and typical conventions of a particular field, things that have become second nature to us, can be baffling for students. Even students who are confident about their ideas may be tempted to borrow an author's words because the author "says it better than I can." While SNL student Sophia did not plagiarize, she exemplifies this thinking when she explains why she used only direct quotes from authors to speak for her: "so many times I'll read things and go, 'oh, that sounds really, that's just how I feel.' . . . you can't plagiarize, as we know, so I'm just like, 'oh somebody had said that,' . . . I hate to say easier, but its more cautious to do that." Sophia repeated the words of academics that best matched her feelings, but in doing so she did not give herself a chance to develop her own ideas or her voice.

What you can do:

- Explicitly discuss the conventions and jargon of your field with your students. Help students see how they are already experts in the conventions of many fields, for example movie reviews or cooking directions, and equate learning academic jargon with the learning they have already done to master these other areas.
- Have students write their ideas down before, during and after research. The student who has put down their guesses about what they will find and who has written a response immediately after reading a source will be less likely to act as a passive collector of information.

7. They are giving you the facts, the truth or the answer – static knowledge that belongs to everyone.

Some students think the purpose of research is to get to the truth of a matter (Lipson and Reindl 8). They view the truth as fixed and as a sort of common knowledge (Lipson and Reindl 8). Experts are just those you go to for the truth, much like you go to a dictionary to look up the correct spelling of a word. These experts do not need to be cited any more than the dictionary should be each time you get a spelling from it. These students are likely to plagiarize by taking ideas and arguments from a source (Lipson and Reindl 9).

Similarly, some students see themselves according to the empty vessel model – they have come to school to be educated by the experts. Their job as researchers is to collect the ideas, quotes and evidence of these experts about some topic or issue. Their papers are a patchwork quilt of quotations, summaries and paraphrases from sources, sometimes, but not always, knitted together with student-authored transitions. Since they see themselves as knowing nothing about the topic, they do not see how anyone might expect their paper to be about their own ideas. These are the students who, after you explain a plagiarism policy, say, “So you want me to cite every sentence?” They are most likely to plagiarize by failing to cite paraphrases and summaries, although they do cite direct quotes (Lipson and Reindl 8, Ashworth and Bannister). For example, an SNL student who counseled teenage mothers and had been one herself turned in a paper on teenage pregnancy that was almost entirely pasted together from online sources. When asked why she did not use her own experience or express her well-developed opinions, she replied that she thought she could only use the words of “experts.”

Both the truth seekers and the empty vessel students may not fully absorb plagiarism warnings, because they do not think such warnings apply to them. They know they do not plagiarize because to do so would be dishonest and lazy. They do not consider themselves dishonest and have worked hard to gather their sources. They are proud of the work they have done.

What you can do:

- Have a discussion about the nature of knowledge, learning and research.
- Require students to generate a hypothesis before they begin researching. Situate research as the attempt to test and refine their hypothesis.

- Show students examples of student papers with un-cited summaries and paraphrases and require them to identify and correct the problem.
- When a paper is handed in, scan it quickly. If the student only cited direct quotes, he or she may be neglecting summaries and paraphrases.

6. They have difficulty integrating source material into their own exposition or argument.

Writing an effective summary, crafting a paraphrase that is not plagiarism, and knowing how to introduce quotes is not easy. This is particularly true if students are simultaneously in the process of figuring out what they think and of learning how to formulate their argument according to the conventions of a particular field. Like the students in number 7, these students are likely to summarize or paraphrase without appropriately citing their sources.

What you can do:

- Teach students to put their source material out of sight when they write their summaries, so that they are not tempted by the lovely words of the author.
- Discourage paraphrase as much as possible since it can very easily lead to the bleeding of the author's words and phrases into the student's language.
- Look for papers in which the citations only come at the end of paragraphs. This is a sure sign that the student thinks that the citation in the last sentence covers all borrowing from the source anywhere in the paragraph.

5. They do not understand why sources are so important and what all the fuss is about.

Some students feel that their experience is enough to support their claims. Others see collecting sources as an add-on chore. These students will ask, "If the source says the same thing I'm saying, do I have to cite it?" or "Do I need to cite my own ideas if I find that someone else has thought them?" These students do not see themselves as members of a scholarly community that is collectively building knowledge, but as either islands of self-contained knowledge or as outsiders who are merely trying to get through this ordeal (Ashworth and Bannister). In addition, all of the conventions about how to cite seem fussy to students and secondary to the process of learning (Ashworth and Bannister). Their annoyance with these conventions is heightened when they discover that citation rules can sometimes be contradictory or incomplete. In addition, some teachers have not required that they cite sources while some teachers who do require citations have not kept up with the many recent changes in both APA and MLA citation styles. As a result, students encounter citation rules that seem to change from class to class.

What you can do:

- Explicitly discuss with students the goals of their research.

- Stress their membership in a community of scholars to which they are also contributing as well as borrowing knowledge (Ashworth and Bannister).
- Acknowledge up front that citation styles, especially for internet sources, are in flux.
- Help students learn how to extrapolate from the examples presented in style manuals to craft citations for unusual sources.

4. They are sloppy.

Like professional historians such as Doris Kearns Goodwin, some students can be sloppy in their note taking, leaving them confused about what is and is not from a source. This confusion can get muddled not just on paper, but also in their own minds. For example, a student last quarter told me that when she really is involved in a project her brain just picks up word verbatim so that a week or two later she is not sure whose words they are. She is not alone. A study of English university students reported that “It was considered [by the students] highly feasible for a phrase or sentence from a text to lodge in one’s subconscious and be reproduced word-for-word in an assignment” (Ashworth and Bannister).

What you can do:

- Teach students strategies for organizing their notes.
- Insist that they include citations in all drafts. Students often will say they will put the citations in later, but then they forget where they go. Tell them they can work on the formatting of the citations in later drafts, but all drafts must be cited.

3. They do not understand that they need citations not just for direct quotes, but also for facts, figures and ideas from a source.

I know you have told them, but see numbers seven and six above for why this might happen and what you can do to prevent and recognize it. These students are not trying to slip something by you. If they were, they would not have gone to all the effort of including citations for the work they are using. Very often, students do not understand that citations cannot just be at the end of a paragraph in which they have used a source, but need to come after each sentence with source information.

What you can do:

- Make sure that every source in the Works Cited corresponds to a citation in the text. If there are more sources in the Works Cited than in the text, ask about where the source appears in the text.
- See also the suggestions for numbers seven and six above.

2. They are learning.

Some composition scholars argue that students who abuse paraphrasing by simply inverting word order or changing word forms are just trying to digest new material (Howard). They claim that this practice, which they call “patchwriting,” fits in the long tradition of learning to write by imitation and copying (Howard). Novice writers, working with unfamiliar material, use “patchwriting” as a way to begin processing and absorbing new material (Howard).

What you can do:

- Consider patch written papers as early drafts.
- Discuss with students the need to better digest the material. Work with them on summarizing rather than paraphrasing.
- Provide students with additional resources and ways to learn the material.

1. They are used to a collaborative model of knowledge production.

Students coming from different cultures, the business world and even our own collaborative-learning classrooms can find the idea that they are suddenly supposed to sift their own thoughts and ideas from those of others confusing (Price). Where does one draw the line around one’s own ideas? Does one need to acknowledge parental influence on the development of one’s thinking? What about the suggestion of a peer to add an example to a paper? What if the peer suggests a specific example? What if a peer shows you this example as he or she wrote it in a journal?

Almost every composition scholar writing on plagiarism will point out that it is largely, though not entirely, a modern construct arising with romantic individualism and capitalist notions of private property (Bowden, Howard, Woodmansee and Jaszi, Price). This construct, resting as it does on a view of the author as a singular, discrete creative force, has been profoundly challenged by literary and pedagogical theories that stress the mediated, socially constructed nature of knowledge (Bowden, Howard, Woodmansee and Jaszi, Price). In the words of DePaul’s own Darsie Bowden: “Plagiarism is perhaps one of the foremost and richest of postmodern dilemmas.”

For adult students in particular, the collaborative writing practices of the workplace can result in an approach to writing as what Michael Michaud calls “assemblage”: “when I asked participants to share artifacts from the workplace sphere, I saw many assemblages—essentially, documents built from other documents: boilerplate forms that were patched together from previous iterations, reports that included large chunks of text that came from other reports, letters that contained stock paragraphs, and manuals that contained information taken directly from company websites. From my participants, I learned what research on professional communication has already shown—that assemblages are ubiquitous in contemporary workplaces” (Michaud 251-252). Michaud goes on to argue that for adult students who have struggled with writing assemblage has become a survival strategy and so “may be a difficult habit to break . . . a kind of crutch, allowing students to avoid confronting long-standing difficulties with more extensive forms of writing. For other adult students with less troubled histories, assemblage may

have become such a regular part of their workplace composing routines, and PowerPoint such a ubiquitous presence in their professional lives, that they are long since out of practice with the more traditional kinds of writing that they will need to produce in order to succeed in school” (Michaud 255).

What you can do:

- Discuss gray area cases with students.
- Discuss and interrogate with students the values embedded in our practices of citing sources.
- Foreground for and discuss with students the context specific nature of what does and does not count as plagiarism (Price). For example, compare what would be common knowledge about whales in a comparative anatomy class with what would be common knowledge in a literature class reading *Moby Dick*.

Works Cited

Ashworth, Peter, and Philip Bannister. “Guilty in Whose Eyes? University Students’ Perceptions of Cheating and Plagiarism in Academic Work and Assessment.” *Studies in Higher Education*. 22 (1997): 187-204. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCOhost. DePaul University Libraries, Chicago, IL. 18 December 2005.

Bowden, Darsie. “Coming to Terms: Plagiarism.” *English Journal*. 85.4 (1996): 82-85. *ProQuest Education Journals*. ProQuest. DePaul University Libraries, Chicago, IL. 18 December 2005.

Howard, Rebecca Moore. “Plagiarisms, authorships, and the academic death penalty.” *College English*. 57 (1995): 788-807. *ProQuest Education Journals*. ProQuest. DePaul University Libraries, Chicago, IL. 18 December 2005.

Lipson, Abigail and Sheila M. Reindl. “The Responsible Plagiarist: Understanding Students Who Misuse Sources.” *About Campus*. July-August 2003. 7-14.

Michaud, Michael J. "The 'Reverse Commute': Adult Students and the Transition from Professional to Academic Literacy." *Teaching English in the Two Year College* 38.3 (2011): 244-57.

Price, Margaret. “Beyond ‘Gotcha’: Situating Plagiarism in Policy and Pedagogy.” *College Composition and Communication*. 54:1 (2002): 88-116. *ProQuest Education Journals*. ProQuest. DePaul University Libraries, Chicago, IL. 11 January 2006.

Woodmansee, Martha, and Peter Jaszi. “The Law of Texts: Copyright in the Academy.” *College English*. 57 (1995): 769-788. *ProQuest Education Journals*. ProQuest. DePaul University Libraries, Chicago, IL. 18 December 2005.