

Supporting Academic Honesty in Lower-Division Courses

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At the beginning of a semester, students have the best of intentions about their courses. They aren't planning to take major shortcuts that involve plagiarism on papers or cheating on exams. By the end of a semester, however, some instructors report being discouraged by problems with plagiarism. Why do students stray from their good intentions? What can instructors do to help students maintain high ethical standards in their work?

Classrooms are not the only workplace where issues with plagiarism and cheating exist. Interesting high-profile cases occur every year, which sometimes result in the discrediting of respected writers, the resignation of university presidents, the firing of coaches, and the dismissal of faculty. Students take shortcuts in their writing for the same reason that the people in these high-profile cases do. They have competing responsibilities, and they are short on time. They lack time management skills. They may be novices with expectations that require them to rapidly develop expertise, but they may not have the requisite knowledge. Most likely, they fear the challenges of their reading and writing tasks, but they want to be regarded as high performers.

Instructors can make some relatively small changes in their courses or in their teaching that will help students engage in their academic assignments, manage their time, improve their reading and writing, and learn the differing disciplinary expectations. The payoffs will be evident in better all-around performance on assignments in addition to reduced plagiarism or cheating.

Take the time to teach your students how experts in your discipline read, write, and conduct research, or, alternatively, what your specific expectations are.

Students report that they rarely receive direct instruction in how to cite, paraphrase, and shape arguments that are based on the work of others. *If they have received instruction in one discipline, they cannot easily translate their learning to another one.* Your teaching, which can take place in ten-minute blocks spread throughout the semester, will be most useful when it illustrates your discipline's research culture or relates to assignments in your syllabus. Provide electronic or hard copy handouts of ways to write paragraphs that incorporate research, to paraphrase readings, to use quotations. If you use PowerPoint slides for lectures, point out when you cite others, when you quote, when you paraphrase a text. Show with specific examples how people in your discipline engage each other in conversation and argument through their writing.

Talk to students about the places in your syllabus where they will struggle with time management, fear of starting assignments, and lack of knowledge that may interfere with their completing an assignment.

To help locate these places, invite successful students from a previous semester to participate in a focus group during which they examine your syllabus, talk about the assignments, and give advice about where students will face the temptation of taking short cuts that might include plagiarism. On your course website or in class announcements, provide frequent reminders about the progress students should be making with major assignments. In class, ask students to give progress reports to each other in pairs or small groups about what they've read, what research they have found, what they've written. Arrange for students to visit your office in groups of three or four for fifteen minute appointments where they can give progress reports to you.

Officially manage the research or writing process of your students by creating short assignments as steps to completing major assignments. These short assignments, which can be minimally graded by you, significantly help students to manage their work. Instructors have reported success with a wide variety of assignments that involve either individual students or small groups: proposals, progress reports, annotated bibliographies, concept maps, threaded discussions, lists of terms, reading responses, and so on. You can ask students to assemble all of these into a packet to be included in the final submission of a major assignment, and their work on these short assignments can then become part of your assessment of their research and writing.

Include a section on your syllabus about the nature of academic work in your specific discipline, and sponsor an in-class discussion with students on the ethics of work. The following is an example of such a statement. It is reproduced here by permission from PacSem 2008, the first-year seminar of University of the Pacific. The statement you write should be tailored for your course and your assignments.

Principles of Academic Integrity

Academic work is devoted to pursuing, cultivating, preserving, and transmitting knowledge; it is similar to a very extensive and systematic conversation. Academic integrity consists of the virtues that support and nourish the conversation: accuracy, honesty, transparency, openness to questioning, willingness to communicate, and similar virtues. Violations of academic integrity thwart the purposes of academic work. All professions rely on these virtues and expect them of their members.

Plagiarism consists of representing someone else's words or ideas as your own, whether deliberately or inadvertently. It can take a variety of forms, and they all violate the norms of academic integrity, as do other actions like turning in the same paper for two different classes or cheating on exams. Avoiding plagiarism and maintaining academic integrity is accomplished by a set of good practices that begin with reading and go all the way through accurate referencing in bibliographies.

The good practice of reading means taking notes (writing in books, etc.).

The good practice of attribution means always making clear whose voice or idea is being presented.

The good practice of paraphrasing means to transform an idea into new phrasing, and nearly always means to digest and condense it for the purpose of connecting it with other ideas.

The good practice of quotation means both accuracy of form (including quotation marks) and aptness of selection.

The good practice of citation means clearly locating cited materials in their original sources.

The good practice of accurate bibliographies means clearly identifying the information needed for others to find the original sources.

Plagiarism and disciplinary cultures

When you discuss academic integrity with your students, they may be interested to know that the issue of plagiarism has sparked vigorous scholarly debate and discussion. See, for example, the following recent publications:

Susan D. Blum, *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*, Cornell University Press, 2009.

Carol Peterson Haviland and Joan A. Mullin (editors), *Who Owns This Text? Plagiarism, Authorship, and Disciplinary Cultures*, Utah State University Press, 2008.

Resources

University of the Pacific. PacSem 2008. Principles of Academic Integrity.

Blum, Susan D. *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*. Cornell University Press, 2009.

Haviland, Carol Peterson, and Joan A. Mullin, eds. *Who Owns This Text? Plagiarism, Authorship, and Disciplinary Cultures*. Utah State University Press, 2008.