

Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers

Robert Harris

Version Date: November 17, 2004

The availability of textual material in electronic format has made plagiarism easier than ever. Copying and pasting of paragraphs or even entire essays now can be performed with just a few mouse clicks. The strategies discussed here can be used to combat what some believe is an increasing amount of plagiarism on research papers. By employing these strategies, you can help encourage students to value the assignment and to do their own work.

Strategies of Awareness

1. Understand why students cheat. By understanding some of the reasons students are tempted to cheat on papers, you can take steps to prevent cheating by attacking the causes. Some of the major reasons include these:

- Students are natural economizers. Many students are interested in the shortest route possible through a course. That's why they ask questions such as, "Will this be on the test?" Copying a paper sometimes looks like the shortcut through an assignment, especially when the student feels overloaded with work already. To combat this cause, assign your paper to be due well before the end-of-term pressures. Remind students that the purpose of the course is to learn and develop skills and not just "get through." The more they learn and develop their skills, the more effective they will be in their future lives.
- Students are faced with too many choices, so they put off low priorities. With so many things to do (both of academic and recreational nature), many students put off assignments that do not interest them. A remedy here would be to customize the research topic to include something of real interest to the students or to offer topics with high intrinsic interest to them.
- Many students have poor time management and planning skills. Some students are just procrastinators, while others do not understand the hours required to develop a good research paper, and they run out of time as the due date looms. Thus, they are most tempted to copy a paper when time is short and they have not yet started the assignment. If you structure your research assignment so that intermediate parts of it (topic, early research, prospectus, outline, draft, bibliography, final draft) are due at regular intervals, students will be less likely to get in a time-pressure panic and look for an expedient shortcut.
- Some students fear that their writing ability is inadequate. Fear of a bad grade and inability to perform cause some students to look for a superior product. Sadly, these students are among those least able to judge a good paper and are

- often likely to turn in a very poor copied one. Some help for these students may come from demonstrating how poor many of the online papers are and by emphasizing the value of the learning process (more on this below). Reassuring students of the help available to them (your personal attention, a writing center, teaching assistants, online writing lab sites, etc.) may give them the courage to persevere.
- A few students like the thrill of rule breaking. The more angrily you condemn plagiarism, the more they can hardly wait to do it. An approach that may have some effect is to present the assignment and the proper citation of sources in a positive light (more below).

2. Educate yourself about plagiarism. Plagiarism on research papers takes many forms. Some of the most common include these:

- Downloading a free research paper. Many of these papers have been written and shared by other students. Since paper swappers are often not among the best students, free papers are often of poor quality, in both mechanics and content. Some of the papers are surprisingly old (with citations being no more recent than the seventies).
- Buying a paper from a commercial paper mill. These papers can be good--and sometimes they are too good. If you have given students an in-class writing assignment, you can compare the quality and be quite enlightened. Moreover, mills often sell both custom and stock papers, with custom papers becoming stock papers very quickly. If you visit some of the mill sites, you might just find the same paper available for sale by searching by title or subject.
- Copying an article from the Web or an online or electronic database. Only some of these articles will have the quantity and type of citations that academic research papers are expected to have. If you receive a well-written, highly informed essay without a single citation (or with just a few), it may have been copied wholesale from an electronic source.
- Copying a paper from a local source. Papers may be copied from students who have taken your course previously, from fraternity files, or from other paper-sharing sources near campus. If you keep copies of previous papers turned in to you, they can be a source of detection of this particular practice.
- Cutting and pasting to create a paper from several sources. These "assembly-kit" papers are often betrayed by wide variations in tone, diction, and citation style. The introduction and conclusion are often student-written and therefore noticeably different from and weaker than the often glowing middle.
- Quoting less than all the words copied. This practice includes premature end quotation marks or missing quotation marks. A common type of plagiarism occurs when a student quotes a sentence or two, places the end quotation mark and the citation, and then continues copying from the source. Or the student may copy from the source verbatim without any quotation marks at all, but adding a citation, implying that the information is the student's summary of the source. Checking the citation will expose this practice.

- Faking a citation. In lieu of real research, some students will make up quotations and supply fake citations. You can discover this practice by randomly checking citations. If you require several Web or other electronic sources for the paper, these can be checked quickly.

Visiting some of the sites that give away or sell research papers can be an informative experience. If you have Web projection capability, you might do this visiting in class and show the students (1) that you know about these sites and (2) that the papers are often well below your expectations for quality, timeliness, and research. There is a list of many of these sites at [Termpapers.com](http://www.termpapers.com) at <http://www.termpapers.com> and at "[Internet Paper Mills](http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm)" at <http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm>.

3. Educate your students about plagiarism. Do not assume that students know what plagiarism is, even if they nod their heads when you ask them. Provide an explicit definition for them. For example, "Plagiarism is using another person's words or ideas without giving credit to the other person. When you use someone else's words, you must put quotation marks around them and give the writer or speaker credit by revealing the source in a citation. Even if you revise or paraphrase the words of someone else or just use their ideas, you still must give the author credit in a note. Not giving due credit to the creator of an idea or writing is very much like lying."

In addition to a definition, though, you should discuss with your students the difference between appropriate, referenced use of ideas or quotations and inappropriate use. You might show them an example of a permissible paraphrase (with its citation) and an impermissible paraphrase (containing some paraphrasing and some copying), and discuss the difference. Discuss also quoting a passage and using quotation marks and a citation as opposed to quoting a passage with neither (in other words, merely copying without attribution). Such a discussion should educate those who truly do not understand citation issues ("But I put it in my own words, so I didn't think I had to cite it") and it will also warn the truly dishonest that you are watching.

Discussing with students why plagiarism is wrong may be helpful also. Clarifying for them that plagiarism is a combination of stealing (another's words) and lying (claiming implicitly that the words are the student's own) should be mentioned at some point, but should not be the whole emphasis or you risk setting up a challenge for the rebels (those who like to break the rules just for fun). Many statements on plagiarism also remind students that such cheating shows contempt for the professor, other students, and the entire academic enterprise. Plagiarizers by their actions declare that they are not at the university to gain an education, but only to pretend to do so, and that they therefore intend to gain by fraud the credentials (the degree) of an educated person.

Perhaps the most effective discussion will ask the students to think about who is really being cheated when someone plagiarizes. Copying papers or even parts of papers short circuits a number of learning experiences and opportunities for the development of skills: actually doing the work of the research paper rather than counterfeiting it gives the student not only knowledge of the subject and insights into the world of information and

controversy, but improves research skills, thinking and analyzing, organizing, writing, planning and time management, and even meticulousness (those picky citation styles actually help improve one's attention to detail). All this is missed when the paper is faked, and it is these missed skills which will be of high value in the working world. A degree will help students get a first job, but performance--using the skills developed by doing just such assignments as research papers--will be required for promotion.

4. Discuss the benefits of citing sources. Many students do not seem to realize that whenever they cite a source, they are strengthening their writing. Citing a source, whether paraphrased or quoted, reveals that they have performed research work and synthesized the findings into their own argument. Using sources shows that the student is engaged in "the great conversation," the world of ideas, and that the student is aware of other thinkers' positions on the topic. By quoting (and citing) writers who support the student's position, the student adds strength to the position. By responding reasonably to those who oppose the position, the student shows that there are valid counter arguments. In a nutshell, citing helps make the essay stronger and sounder and will probably result in a better grade.

Appropriate quoting and citing also evidences the student's respect for the creators of ideas and arguments--honoring thinkers and their intellectual property. Most college graduates will become knowledge workers themselves, earning at least part of their living creating information products. They therefore have an interest in maintaining a respect for intellectual property and the proper attribution of ideas and words.

5. Make the penalties clear. If an institutional policy exists, quote it in your syllabus. If you have your own policy, specify the penalties involved. For example, "Cheating on a paper will result in an F on that paper with no possibility of a makeup. A second act of cheating will result in an F in the course regardless of the student's grade otherwise." If you teach at a university where the penalty for plagiarism is dismissal from the university or being reported to the Academic Dean or Dean of Students, you should make that clear as well. Even the penalties can be presented in a positive light. Penalties exist to reassure honest students that their efforts are respected and valued, so much so that those who would escape the work by fakery will be punished substantially.

Strategies of Prevention

The overall goal of these specific strategies is to make the assignment and requirements unique enough that an off-the-shelf paper or a paper written for another class or a friend's paper will not fulfill the requirements. Only a newly written paper will.

1. Make the assignment clear. Be specific about your expectations. Should the paper be an individual effort or is collaboration permitted? Must the paper be unique to your course, or do you allow it to be submitted to another course as well? (In scholarly publishing, such multiple publication is usually called self-plagiarism. If you require a unique paper, be sure to prohibit photocopied papers and insist on original typescripts or printouts.) What kind of research do you require? How should it be evidenced in the

paper, by quotation or just summary? It has been claimed that a major source of poor student papers (not just plagiarizing) is the unclear assignment. You might ask another faculty member to read your paper assignment and discuss with you whether or not it is clear and detailed enough for students to fulfill in the way you intend.

2. Provide a list of specific topics and require students to choose one of them. Change topics from semester to semester whenever possible. Unusual topics or topics with a narrow twist are good because there will be fewer papers already written on them. If you provide a substantial enough list of topics (say two dozen), most students will find something that can interest them. You can also allow for a custom topic if the student comes to discuss it with you first.

3. Require specific components in the paper. For example, "The paper must make use of two Internet sources, two printed book sources, two printed journal sources, one personal interview, and one personally conducted survey." Or, "You must make use of Wells' article on 'Intelligent Design Principles,' and some material from either the Jones or Smith book." Or, "Include a graph which represents the data discussed in the first section." Requirements that will strongly inhibit the use of a copied paper include these:

- Use of one or more sources written within the past year. A requirement like this will quickly outdate most paper mill products.
- Use of one or more specific articles or books you name or provide. The articles could be available online (from the Web or one of your university's proprietary databases) to save the effort of photocopying and distribution.
- Incorporation of some information you provide (for example, a data set).
- A personal interview with an expert or authority. An interview creates both a current and a checkable source.

If a student begins with someone else's paper and has to work additional material such as the above into it, you'll probably be able to tell. (For example, the fit will be awkward where the new material has been stuffed in or the writing styles will differ.)

4. Require process steps for the paper. Set a series of due dates throughout the term for the various steps of the research paper process: topic or problem, preliminary bibliography, prospectus, research material (annotated photocopies of articles, for example), outline, rough draft, final annotated bibliography, final draft. Some of these parts can be reverse engineered by the determined cheater, but most students should realize that doing the assignment honestly is easier than the alternative.

The rough draft serves several functions. A quick glance will reveal whether whole sections are appearing without citations. At the draft stage, you have the opportunity to educate the student further and discuss how proper citation works. You can also mark places and ask for more research material to be incorporated. If you are suspicious of the paper at this point, ask for the incorporation of some specific material that you name, such as a particular book or article. Keep the drafts and let students know that you expect

major revisions and improvements between drafts. (This is actually a great way to improve students' writing, quite apart from the other goal of preventing plagiarism.)

5. Require oral reports of student papers. Ask students questions about their research and writing process. If students know at the beginning of the term that they will be giving a presentation on their research papers to the rest of the class, they will recognize the need to be very familiar with both the process and the content of the paper. Such knowledge should serve as a strong deterrent against simply copying a paper. Regardless of how many times a student reads over a copied paper, much of the knowledge of the research, the drafting, leaving out, and so on will still remain unknown. Alternative to an in-class presentation is a one-on-one office meeting, where you can quiz the student about several aspects of the paper as needed.

Many students have been caught by simple questions like, "What exactly do you mean here by 'dynamic equivalence'?" Few students use words they cannot pronounce, so having them read some of the paper aloud can be interesting as well (although you may be merely exposing the mindless use of a thesaurus). If you suspect a student has copied a whole paper, complete with citations, asking about the sources can be useful. "Where did you find the article by Edwards? It sounds fascinating. Can you bring me a copy at the next meeting?" Or, "This quotation seems slightly out of context. What was Follet's main point in the chapter?"

6. Have students include an annotated bibliography. The annotation should include a brief summary of the source, where it was located (including call number for books or complete Web URL), and an evaluation about the usefulness of the source. (Optionally, as a lesson in information quality, ask them to comment on why they thought the source credible.) The normal process of research makes completing this task easy, but it creates headaches for students who have copied a paper from someone else since few papers include annotated bibliographies like this. Another benefit of this assignment is that students must reflect on the reliability and quality of their sources.

7. Require most references to be up-to-date. Many of the free term papers online (and many of the ones for sale) are quite old, with correspondingly old references. If you require all research material to be, say, less than five years old, you will automatically eliminate thousands of online papers. Such a recent date restriction is not usually workable for some subjects, such as history or English literature, but you can always require a few sources of recent date.

8. Require a metalearning essay. On the day you collect the papers, have students write an in-class essay about what they learned from the assignment. What problems did they face and how did they overcome them? What research strategy did they follow? Where did they locate most of their sources? What is the most important thing they learned from investigating this subject? For most students, who actually did the research paper, this assignment will help them think about their own learning. It also provides you with information about the students' knowledge of their papers and it gives you a writing sample to compare with the papers. If a student's knowledge of the paper and its process

seems modest or if the in-class essay quality diverges strikingly from the writing ability shown in the paper, further investigation is probably warranted.

Strategies of Detection

1. Look for the clues. As you read the papers, look for internal evidence that may indicate plagiarism. Among the clues are the following:

- Mixed citation styles. If some paragraphs are cited in MLA style, while other references are in APA, and perhaps one or two are in CBE or Chicago, you are probably looking at a paste-up.
- Lack of references or quotations. Lengthy, well written sections without documentation may have been taken from general knowledge sources, such as encyclopedias, popular magazines, or Web sites.
- Unusual formatting. Strange margins, skewed tables, lines broken in half, mixed subhead styles and other formatting anomalies may indicate a hasty copy and paste job.
- Off topic. If the paper does not develop one of the assigned topics or even the topic it announces, it may have been borrowed at the last minute or downloaded. Similarly, if parts of the paper do develop the subject, but other parts seem oddly off, the product may be a cut and paste.
- Signs of datedness. If there are no references after some well past date (e.g. 1985), or if a data table offers a company's sales from 1989 to 1994, either the student is using very old material or the paper itself is rather old.
- Anachronisms. If the paper refers to long-past events as current ("Only after the Gulf War is over will we see lower oil prices" or "Why isn't the Carter administration acting on this?"), you almost certainly have a recycled paper on your hands.
- Anomalies of diction. Many undergraduates do not understand the concept of levels of diction. They think all words are equally welcome in every paper. As a result, when those who plagiarize with the cut-and-paste method perform their deeds, they often mix paragraphs of varying levels together--the sophisticated scholar's paragraph precedes the breezy journalist's commentary, which may be followed by the student's own highly colloquial addition. Similarly, you may come upon some suspiciously elevated vocabulary usages. "Thesauritis" is one source of this, to be sure, but a common source of such vocabulary is another writer, who should have been quoted rather than simply copied. "What do you mean by 'ineffable'?" can sometimes provide you with inexpressible information. Lastly, if you find that the paper uses several archaic terms, or words no longer used in the way the paper uses them, you may be looking at some very old text.
- Anomalies of style. Is the prose style remarkable? Are there two-page paragraphs that remind you of a nineteenth-century encyclopedia? Is there ornate rhetorical structure? Does the introduction get in its own way and stumble around, only to give way to glowing, flowing discourse? Is there a mixture of British and American punctuation or spelling, with consistent usage within large sections?

- Smoking guns. This category might be called "blunders of the clueless," since it includes obvious indicators of copying. Reported in the past have been labels left at the end of papers ("Thank you for using TermPaperMania"), title pages stapled to Web printouts (complete with dates and URL in the corners), title pages claiming the paper is by Tom Jones when subsequent pages say "Smith, page 2," and papers with whiteout over the previous author's name.

Few of these clues will provide courtroom proof of plagiarism, of course, but their presence should alert you to investigate the paper. Even if you do not find the source of the paper, you may be able to use these clues profitably in a discussion with the student in your office.

2. Know where the the sources of papers are. Before you begin to search for the source or sources of a suspect paper, you should know where to look. Here are the major sources of text in electronic form:

- Free and for-sale term paper sites. As mentioned earlier, there is a list of many of these sites at [Termpapers.com](http://www.termpapers.com) at <http://www.termpapers.com> and at "[Internet Paper Mills](http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm)" at <http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm>.
- The free, visible Web. This category includes all the publicly mounted Web pages, which are indexed by search engines.
- The free, invisible Web. This category includes the contents of sites that provide articles free to users, but that content may be accessible only by going directly to the site. That is, the articles are not indexed by search engines and therefore cannot be located by using a search engine. Some magazines, newspapers, reference works, encyclopedias, and subject-specific sites are in this category.
- Paid databases over the Web. This category includes commercial databases for consumers (such as Northern Light's Special Collection) and databases that libraries subscribe to, containing scholarly journals, newspapers, court cases and the like. Providers like Lexis-Nexis, UMI Proquest, Infotrac, JSTOR and others are in this group. To find information from this category, you must have access to the database (through password or an on-campus computer) and search on the database directly.
- CD-ROM resources. Encyclopedias and some databases are available on CD-ROM.

3. Search for the paper online. If you suspect the paper may have come from the Web, you might try these strategies to find it:

- If you find nothing with these tools, try several of the large-database, full-text search engines like [Google](#), [Northern Light](#), or [Fast Search](#), and perform an exact phrase search on a four-to-six-word phrase from a suspect part of the paper (find a phrase that has two or three relatively unusual words in it). Remember that no search engine covers more than about a third of the visible Web, so you should try several engines before you give up.

- Next, locate some appropriate databases on the invisible Web, depending on the subject of the paper. You can find many of these databases by consulting the ["World Wide Web Research Tools"](#) page on this site. If indicated, visit some of the online encyclopedias as well. Here, you will have to use keyword searches rather than exact phrase searches, but using a string of appropriate keywords can be very powerful.
- Now go to your library's online database subscriptions and search on subject-appropriate databases using keyword searches.

4. Use a plagiarism detector. You might also try using software. See [The Plagiarism Resource Center](#) for more information. If you do not find the paper this way, you might want to turn to some commercial services that provide plagiarism detection. Here are some of the services:

- [Plagiarism.com](http://www.plagiarism.com) at <http://www.plagiarism.com>. Educational materials and a software screening program that creates a test of familiarity for a student to complete. The company says that no student has been falsely accused. CD ROM program.
- [Plagiarism.org](http://www.plagiarism.org) at <http://www.plagiarism.org>. Online service that checks submitted student papers against a large database and provides reports of results. Also monitors term paper mills.
- [Plagiarism Finder](http://www.m4-software.com) at <http://www.m4-software.com>. Searches Internet sources.
- [Eve](http://www.canexus.com/eve/) at <http://www.canexus.com/eve/>. Inexpensive software agent that searches the Web to compare a suspect paper with Internet content. Shows site and degree of match.

It is sometimes said that the best plagiarism detector is the student who handed in the paper, because he or she already knows whether or not the paper is genuine, or what part is fraudulent. Therefore, you can sometimes enlist the student's help. You must be very careful about accusing a student of cheating unless you have clear proof, because a false accusation can be both cruel and reason for litigation. But if you ask the right questions in the right way, you will often be successful. Here are some example questions that may help reveal the truth:

- "I was quite surprised by your paper, so I did some investigation into it. Before I tell you what I found out, is there anything you want to tell me about it?" With the appropriately serious demeanor and tone, a well phrased question like this will often result in a confession. If the student is innocent or just hardened and replies, "No," you can always reveal some innocuous fact and go on.
- "I'm curious to know why your writing style is so good in some parts of the paper and so poor in others. And why have you not shown such great writing on the in-class essays?"
- "This long passage doesn't sound like your normal style. Is this a quotation where you accidentally forgot the quotation marks?"

Also of Interest:

Ronald B. Standler's ["Plagiarism in Colleges in USA"](#) provides a legal perspective and other discussion on the issue.

Get the book! Robert Harris has written *The Plagiarism Handbook* for Pyczak Publishing of Los Angeles. The book includes chapters on educating yourself about plagiarism, educating your students about plagiarism, constructing assignments to prevent plagiarism, strategies for detecting plagiarism, strategies for dealing with plagiarism, and administrative and institutional issues relating to plagiarism. Also included are seven appendices, including example definitions and policies, examples of proper and improper use of sources, useful Web links, an annotated list of paper mill sites, and a number of search tools to help find plagiarized papers on the Web. The book is illustrated with two dozen cartoons suitable for use in teaching. For more information, or to order, visit AntiPlagiarism.com