

## HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND AVOID PLAGIARISM

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When I first began teaching freshman English years ago as a graduate student at the University of Florida, I made one naive assumption about my students' understanding of plagiarism. I assumed that if I simply told them not to plagiarize that they would not.

During my first term teaching, I was given a class of 25 at-risk freshmen. I assigned a brief research paper, showed the class the sources they were to use, and told them not to plagiarize. At the end of the term, I decided to grade their papers in the reference section of the library in front of the sources they were to use (not out of malice—I shared an office with 30 other teaching assistants and found the library a better place to work). To my complete dismay, 25 out of 25 students were guilty of blatant plagiarism. No, I did not fail every student in my class—though I did feel that I had failed in my instruction. I learned a valuable lesson: if I wanted students to understand and avoid plagiarism, I would have to explain the concept completely.

Over the years, I have had to refine my approach. Years of teaching the nonliterary research paper showed me that even many of my better students did not have an accurate understanding of the topic. However, using the following approach, I was able to decrease the percentage of plagiarized papers I received from about 75% to less than 10%.

*Define plagiarism.* Many students (and some instructors) have inaccurate or incomplete understandings of what constitutes plagiarism. While most students understand that repeating someone else's words verbatim without the use of quotation marks is plagiarism, many do not understand the less blatant forms. According to the MLA Handbook, these forms include using apt phrase without appropriate acknowledgment, paraphrasing another person's argument as your own [without citing your source], and presenting another's line of thinking as though it were your own. (Gibaldi 22-23)

*Plagiarism also includes* using statistics from another source without acknowledgment of the source and citing sources incorrectly (faulty documentation). Most typically this includes waiting until the end of a paragraph to acknowledge a source and wrongly believing that

if a source is acknowledged in one paragraph it need not be acknowledged in the next paragraph.

*Show students real examples of plagiarism.* When students see and hear real examples of plagiarism, they have a better understanding of what to avoid in their own papers.

*Explain how plagiarism is detected.* Some students fail to give the instructor any credit, not realizing that over the course of a semester the instructor gets to know a student's writing style rather well.

*Explain the consequences of plagiarism.* Explain the consequences in general (failing papers, failing courses, being kicked out of school, having degrees taken away) and your policy in particular.

*Give students practice in adequate paraphrasing and in accurate documentation.* This does not have to be as boring as it may sound. Choose interesting or humorous passages for them to paraphrase and document. Some of my former classes have had fun paraphrasing and documenting articles such as "Psychotherapy of the Dead" by Samuel Senahem and "The Etiology and Treatment of Childhood" by Jordan Smoller).

*Require students to submit their sources with their rough draft and completed drafts.* This is perhaps the easiest way to reduce plagiarism but does not eliminate it completely. And the cost of photocopying a few papers (many of which were printed from the Internet) is not prohibitive.

*Look for plagiarism in rough or final drafts.* I realize that this may sound intentionally mean. However, I examine all rough drafts for plagiarism (yes, even those papers written by A students). I give my students forewarning; then, I follow through. I do not fail students when I find parts of their rough drafts to be plagiarized; I use the situation as a teaching opportunity and give these students a chance to do it right. Now, very rarely do I have a student plagiarize on the final draft (and those who do fail the course). While this practice is time consuming, most of my students do have a better appreciation for the art of writing a documented paper, and it is better that they learn this in freshman English at the start of their academic careers.

*Keep a plagiarism file.* If you do find plagiarism in a student's paper, make a copy of the plagiarized essay and a copy of the source to keep on file. Should a student later question a failing grade (though none of mine to this date ever have), you will have the proof readily available.

*Help students generalize.* Though this should be unnecessary, it is important that we help our students understand that the rules governing documentation and plagia-

rism apply to all papers they write in college, not simply those written for English classes.

Over the years, a number of students (including many I have not taught) have come to me for help with their research papers in sociology, psychology, and environmental science. It is disheartening to see these papers laden with plagiarized passages. While I do point out the problem to these students, all instructors should work together to help students master paraphrasing and documentation to eliminate a problem that may not be intentional but is sadly common in student research. I have found the preceding approach to work quite well, and I seldom find plagiarism now even in rough drafts. \*

## Work Cited

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## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING 2020

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Experiential Learning 2020 — perfect vision in review and assessment or forward thinking into the year 2020? Either direction, the importance of experiential learning activities is most evident in the performance ability and understanding level of our graduates on the job. Those graduates who were able to experience such activities have a better understanding of the "school-to-work" philosophy and demonstrate more effective critical thinking and problem-solving skills. A "perfect vision (20-20)" is the best description that applies to experiential learners as our workforce enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Students with experiential learning experience are in a better position to learn and develop those skills and characteristics that will be needed early in their careers. Today's experiential learners become tomorrow's work force.

Characteristics to search for in experiential learners include: ability to accept responsibility, honesty, integrity, sincerity, eagerness, enthusiasm, initiative, intelligence, oral communication and other verbal skills, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, self-esteem, confidence, creativity, listening and reasoning skills, attentiveness, and leadership skills. Having some or all of these characteristics moves the experiential learner into an operational mode that can be more productive to all parties involved. Certain management skills will surface over time that allow the experiential learner to further accept increasing responsibility.

Regardless of one's job title or position of responsibility, mastering such skills as time management, project planning, and personnel management is critical. Any manager has always exercised "perfect vision" as an assessment tool and determined that each needs to be more effective. We all need to be able