How to Detect & Prevent Plagiarism in the Online Classroom

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Presented by:
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Errol Craig Sull has taught online courses for more than 10 years. Currently an online composition instructor, he has developed online teaching activities that are in use at more than 300 colleges and universities throughout the United States & Canada. He was a 2005 recipient of the Dell “Teacher of Excellence” award and is a columnist for the online newsletter Online Cl@ssroom.

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Our presenter

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Agenda

- Six strategies to detect both copy and paste and essay-for-hire plagiarism
- Seven steps you can take to prevent both copy and paste and essay-for-hire plagiarism
- Five suggestions for handling students who plagiarize

How good are you at detecting plagiarism?

- Nearly 80% of all students admit to having plagiarized at least once ... that figure is expected to reach 90% by 2015.

- The following link has two pieces of identical writing: which was plagiarized?
The answer is ... A!

- What gives it away? First, it's the most difficult kind of plagiarism to spot: a paper created from scratch for the student, but here's what gives it away:

1. Repetition of the same phrases:
   - “which is the greatest” – writers for hire tend to use the same phrases to save time

2. False citation:
   - “Auerbach, Jackson, and Riley” are actually NBA coaches. Many online writers for hire gamble that few educators will check the references — 95% of the time they are right.

3. Incorrect citation date:
   - “2013” is inaccurate. Online writers for hire often toss in poor grammar, punctuation, typos, etc. to give the impression of an imperfect paper. (Same problem in “B” — but fewer red flags, so more likely a student error.)

4. Lifted directly from Google:
   - “employment is expected to grow more slowly in hospitals—healthcare’s largest industry—than in most other healthcare industries.” Google is the search engine of choice for online writers for hire 98% of the time.

The two types of plagiarism:

1. Copied from a pre-existing work, directly or indirectly, without giving credit.

2. Created by a writing for hire service from scratch; a growing market and more difficult to detect than 1.
What can we do?

The more we prevent plagiarism, the less we need to detect plagiarism. Let’s look at some cool and effective ways to keep plagiarism in check.

Remember:

• Ben Franklin once remarked that “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” and Erasmus stated “Prevention is better than cure”—could they have known about plagiarism?

1. Get students’ attention
• Let them know you’re going to actively detect plagiarism.
• Inform them of the consequences.
• Today’s students see so much on plagiarism as blah, blah, blah; Puts students on notice.

2. The following have been shown to have plagiarized
• Helen Keller, advocate for the blind
• Stephen Ambrose, popular historian
• Martin Luther King, civil rights advocate
• James Cameron, director, The Titanic
• Doris Kearns Goodwin, historian and writer
• Michael Bolton, singer/songwriter
• Dan Brown, author, The DaVinci Code
• Michael Jackson, singer/songwriter

The following have been shown to have plagiarized (cont’d)
• George Harrison, Beatle
• Jason Blair, NY Times reporter
• T.S. Eliot, poet
• Alex Haley, author, Roots
• Osama Bin Laden, terrorist
• Mariah Carey, songwriter/singer
• Madonna, singer
The lesson?

- Reputations get tarnished, careers ruined, monies lost as a result of plagiarism.

3. “Common knowledge” or citation?

See handouts for some websites that explain the difference

4. Teach how to correctly cite

- Post info for students on proper citation
- Help students learn a skill they will need beyond your course
- Presents you as an instructor who cares that students “get it right”
- Provides a necessary tool for students

5. Require up-to-date research

- Paper mills often use older sources.
- Many online “writers for hire” use Google and don’t pay attention to dates of research.
- Requiring research no more than five years old puts up another hurdle.

6. Show students how to use quotes

Many students don’t know how to integrate quotes into a paragraph – including proper citation

7. Show students how to paraphrase

- Explain what it is, how to do it and how to cite it.
- Be certain students know what style citation you require, e.g., APA, MLA, CMS, etc.
8. Show plagiarism-checking software

- Post a screen shot (if available).
- Bright colors show plagiarism and possible plagiarism.
- Remind students you'll be using software.
- If available, require students to submit papers.

9. Require revisions

- Any paper needs drafts and revisions before final submission.
- If copied, it's difficult to submit a draft.
- Additional drafts will cost student more money and time.
- Becomes another obstacle.

10. Require journal of writing process

- If students know they will need to discuss their research, how they arrive at their topic and thesis statement, and problems they encountered, they will be less inclined to submit non-original work.

11. Vary audience of major assignments

- Require a different audience for each paper.
- Require specific vocabulary, structural approach & research for each audience.
- Can't be found through papers on Internet.
- More time consuming (& expensive) if paper is bought from an essays-for-hire writer.

Remember

- *A teacher has always been a mixture of Socrates, Helen Keller, Confucius, Horace Mann, Galileo, Booker T. Washington, and Ayn Rand... but now must add Sherlock Holmes, Indiana Jones, and Wyatt Earp.*
• No matter how successful one might be in reducing instances of student plagiarism ... students will plagiarize; there are several tried and true AND new approaches to detecting this.

A. Which of the following passages is plagiarized:

B. Answer two questions based on the passage written by a student:

A – Example B – no citation
B
2. Student does not use attribution.

Your turn

Jot down 5 methods for detecting plagiarism in student essays or assignments; submit these. A master list (that are different from mine) will be distributed to each of you with any leftover questions.

1. Tell me about yourself essay

• Provides example of writing style, grammar, punctuation, spelling, proofreading errors, and layout approach.
• Ask about course & post-college goals – can tell you if student does know or is winging it (as writers for hire are wont to do).

2. Discussion threads are shadow plagiarism checkers

• Discussion threads ask for mostly spontaneous postings, so students are less likely to pay others (but it does happen).
• Go over suspected student’s discussion postings – they live “forever.”
• Nice trail of a student’s true writing style.
Discussion threads cont’d

- Note suspect students’ posts:
  - frequency
  - tone
  - times
  - sophistication
- Compare and contrast posts for hints of a pseudo student.

3. Use Google and other search engines

- A quick means of checking students’ work.
- Google & Google Scholar.
- Type 1-2 sentences, then “Enter.” Many use Internet content, either whole or in parts.
- Spot check papers for Internet text buried in content. Save URL if you find copied text.

4. Note changes in voice, vocabulary & approaches

- Many not sophisticated enough to integrate plagiarized portions into their own writing.
- Results in sudden, obvious changes in vocabulary, sentence structure, voice & flow.
- A nearly certain sign student inserted material that is not his or her own.

5. Ask “reveal questions”

- In live phone chat – ask questions such as, “Very interesting point you raised in your paper – what made you decide on that topic?”
- “You had really good writing in portions of your paper. But I’m curious why other parts read almost as if they were written by someone else – could you explain this?”

Ask “reveal questions” cont’d

- “Your research was excellent, I found passage after passage that showed you used the Internet extensively – but you have no citations: why?”
- You aren’t accusing the student of cheating; you ask “focused questions,” i.e., begin with positive, narrow in on problem. Ask follow-up question.

6. Have plagiarism software ready

- Most effective in checking for material that is copied, not custom created by an essay writer for hire.
- Many schools subscribe to fee-based software and make it available for students and/or faculty at no cost.
7. Customized essays often become stock essays
   - The initial custom paper is more difficult to detect as not the student’s own work.
   - Many end up as stock papers from essay mills and can be found on the web.
   - Check any suspect student’s work (ideally, all essays) with plagiarism software.

8. Save student emails
   - When students send email, it is nearly always the real students registered in your class that are writing.
   - Save these to check the students’ writing style, errors, and voice against any papers.

9. Use egos of custom-essay-for-sale writers against them
   - Many “writers-for-hire” are frustrated writers.
   - Style, voice, vocabulary, and flow of the person hired – not student.
   - Sophistication stands out in stark contrast to real student’s writings & discussion posts.

10. Note repetition of the same errors
    - Errors included to give the impression of a not-so-perfect essay.
    - Repeating errors can give impression of being “signature” errors of real student.
    - If errors you’ve pointed out pop up again, the student may be purchasing an essay.

5 Suggestions to Deal with Plagiarism

1. Know and use the plagiarism detection programs and / or protocol of your school
Suggestions to deal with plagiarism

2. Email the student asking about plagiarism in an upbeat, non-accusatory style and tone

3. If plagiarism is accidental – and a first time – allow the student to redo the assignment (learning more important than punishment)

4. If plagiarism is purposeful OR accidental but not the first time – sanctions are in order, based on your policy

5. Remind student of long-range effects of plagiarism ... and use specific examples.

Summary

Three ways to kill plagiarism dead:
1. Post plagiarism “prevention tools”
2. Know how to detect plagiarism – and look for it often
3. Take a pro-active yet teachable moment approach in dealing with plagiarism

I’m happy to help you out!

- Any questions on plagiarism not covered here? There can be – and will be – many.
- Just drop me a note: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com
Thank you for joining us!

- We would like to hear from you. Please consider filling out a brief survey that can be found at:
  http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/51711