Plagiarism 101: Advice for Instructors and TAs

Why Students Plagiarize

At the University of Toronto, the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters states that it is the students’ responsibility to know what constitutes an academic offence. Most students will have no difficulty giving a definition of plagiarism, such as: using someone else’s ideas without credit, pretending someone else’s work is your own, or copying without citing. However, many students are unable to recognize plagiarism in their own work, lacking a full understanding of how to cite, paraphrase, summarize and quote from their sources, coupled with poor research and writing skills.

Common root causes of “negligent” plagiarism often reported in cases heard at OSAI are:

1. Copying material from an electronic source and pasting it directly into a draft document
2. Poor ability to paraphrase and summarize from sources (leading to over-reliance on source text)
3. Delaying referencing and citing until the last stages of the editing process, instead of during the writing
4. Poor note-taking that does not identify the source of material, and what is in the student’s own words versus copied directly from the source.
5. Not knowing when to insert quotation marks or what statements require references
6. Poor or naïve research processes, including inability to identify meaningful scholarly sources & relying on Google rather than library resources
7. Previous education not reinforcing the importance of citing and quoting sources
8. Low confidence to express concepts in their own words; being confident in taking a position
9. Assumption that plagiarism means intention to deceive, or feeling that “it won’t happen to me”.

Talking to Your Students about Academic Integrity

Most students have encountered academic integrity policies and have been reminded not to plagiarize, but not all retain this info or incorporate it into their learning strategies. The most effective way for instructors and TAs to convey academic integrity information in a way that will “stick” is by discussing the subject in lecture or tutorial. This helps personalize policies and give students the opportunity to both engage with you and connect academic integrity to their own skills development and habits within your course. Avoid explaining only the punitive side of academic integrity policies, which can have the effect of alienating students from the topic.

1. Make it clear why academic integrity (and in particular, avoiding plagiarism) is a priority in your class (e.g. ensuring fairness, preparation for future courses, forecasting professional standards).
2. Draw their attention to your syllabus statement on academic integrity, and walk them through it. Discuss any particular offences you feel are a risk, or that students may not be prepared for, such as sharing work with friends, or re-submission of work.
3. Ask them for examples of behaviour that they might have witnessed and thought was unfair, and discuss why.
4. Discuss recent reports of plagiarism in the media to help clarify that plagiarism is an important issue outside the University too.
5. If there are specialized tutorials or skills development opportunities in your course, emphasise these and the purpose they serve in the course (e.g. help students produce better assignments, improve their skills).
6. Raise examples of past offences that have occurred in your course, to make students aware of common risks and the possible outcomes.

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http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai
Tutorial Activities

Academic integrity and skills development can be incorporated as into one or several tutorial meetings (perhaps at key times before assignment deadlines). Any of the following activities can be done in tutorial, or combined with a class discussion on how to prepare for an assignment. These discussions can model for students strategies that lead to better writing and improved contributions to class, and reinforce that academic integrity goes hand in hand with academic success.

(The last page of this document contains a handout entitled “Paraphrased vs. Plagiarized” that can be used to support or initiate any of these activities.)

Short Activities (5-10 minutes):
- Ask each student to write a short paragraph explaining what they think plagiarism is, what they need to do to avoid it, and why they think everyone makes such a big deal about it. Discuss responses. Note that this also gives you a sample of students’ writing abilities.
- Review common problems usually observed in assignments (such as examples C & D in the handout). Explain what is expected in terms of quotation marks and citations including clarifying that when material is copied word for word from a source, BOTH quotation marks AND a citation are required.
- Address frequently asked questions such as “how many sources do I need?” or “when should I put in a citation”?
- Brainstorm note-taking or essay outlining strategies with the class. How long does it take to write an outline or a draft?
- Review the required citation style, or if there is no specific style required, review a common one (e.g. MLA or APA). Use examples about how to cite online sources, journal articles, or articles as part of a collection. Invite questions to help any anxieties. For example, will students be expected to cite lecture material?
- If your course is using Turnitin, explain why your course is using it, and remind students that you are not looking for a “magic number” in the originality reports. The use of Turnitin in your course is to deter plagiarism and help students work on writing ideas in their own words.

Discussion-Based Tutorial Activities (10+ minutes):
- Paraphrasing practice: give students a short sample piece of writing (e.g. a journal abstract or a newspaper article on a topic relevant to the course) and ask them to take 5 minutes and paraphrase or summarize an idea. (e.g. explain the author’s argument, paraphrase an important conclusion). Take 5 minutes to have students read aloud their answers, or review with a partner. Was this difficult? Why?
- Provide students with examples of failed paraphrase (such as on the handout), and ask them if they think this is plagiarism. Talk to them about what “tracing” (as in example C) means and why it is a bad habit to get into (not relying on own ideas, accidental plagiarism, not remembering sources).
- Discuss what sources are appropriate and how they should be used. Provide an example of a source that might be used for an essay assignment. Ask students if it is easier to use Google or the Library catalog. Discuss how sources found in each way could be helpful, or unhelpful. Why is Google easier? Acknowledge the time involved in research, and good time management.
- Discuss good note-taking techniques including indicating what source notes are from and ways to indicate clearly what notes are in their own words and what are copied directly from the source (e.g. highlight all copied material in blue so that no matter where it is moved, it will be clear that it needs paraphrasing or quotation marks), and
- Ask for a show of hands to ask if any of your students are concerned that they might plagiarize in their own work, maybe accidentally? Depending on how many hands are raised, this might
show that no one thinks it will happen to “them”, or perhaps that many are nervous about it but don’t know how to ask.

- Review “How not to plagiarize” in tutorial and engage students in discussion.

In addition to any of the above activities, reminders and alerts during the term can help your class manage their time. For example:

- Reminding students about policy on late submissions & illness, and that accepting a 1- or 2-day late penalty can be a way to help manage time without harming quality of the work.
- A few weeks before the deadline, asking students how their essays are going and remind them about help that is available. Tell them how they can contact you with questions and when you will be available.
- Reviewing the assignment criteria and asking students how they are getting started.

Resources

The U of T Writing Centre website has excellent advice files on the writing process that both you and your students may find helpful:

- Quotations: http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/quotations
- Paraphrase: http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/paraphrase
Paraphrased vs. Plagiarised: How to Correctly Use Source Material

Original passage:
“You can’t buy your way into Major Junior A hockey. It doesn’t matter who your father or mother is, or who your grandfather was, or what business your family is in. Nor does it matter if you live in the most remote corner of the most northerly province in Canada. If you have ability, the vast network of hockey scouts and talent spotters will find you, and if you are willing to work to develop that ability, the system will reward you. Success in hockey is based on individual merit – and both of these words are important. Players are judged on their own performance, not on anyone else’s, and on the basis of their ability, not on some other arbitrary fact.” (Gladwell, 17)


To use these ideas in an essay, use a paraphrase (by putting the ideas in your own words) or a direct quotation:

A. Correct paraphrase:
   In his study of successful hockey players, Malcolm Gladwell argues that the most important factors are players' individual performance and talent. Family influences, bribery or proximity to urban areas matter less than merit and hard work. (Gladwell, 17)

B. Correct quotation
   According to Malcolm Gladwell, the most important factors in determining success and hockey are individual performance and talent. “Players are judged … on the basis of their ability, not on some other arbitrary fact.” (Gladwell, 17)

Remember that any exact phrases from the source must be in quotation marks. In the following examples, the highlighted words show how much of Gladwell’s phrasing remains. Since these phrases are not quoted, these passages are plagiarized:

C. Failed paraphrase/plagiarism:
   I agree with Malcolm Gladwell’s opinion that you can’t buy your way into Junior hockey. It doesn’t matter who your mother and father are, or who your grandfather was. It doesn’t even matter if you live way up north where no one will find you. If you can play well enough, all the hockey scouts and talent people will find you. If you want to develop your ability, the system will reward you for it. Success in hockey is based on individual merit, not on any other arbitrary fact.

D. Failed paraphrase/plagiarism as leading text to quotation:
   If you have the ability to play hockey, the vast network of hockey scouts and talent spotters will find you, and if you are willing to work to develop that ability, you will succeed. "Players are judged on their own performance, not on anyone else’s, and on the basis of their ability, not on some other arbitrary fact.” (Gladwell, 17)

Get into a habit of practicing paraphrasing and summarizing from your sources, and avoid typing into your essay while reading directly from your sources.