

Suarez, J., & Martin, A. (2001). Internet plagiarism: A teacher's combat guide. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* [Online serial], 1(4) 546-549.

Internet Plagiarism: A Teacher's Combat Guide

JILL SUAREZ

Bossier Parish Community college

ALLISON MARTIN

Bossier Parish Community college

Have you ever sat down to grade a student's paper and wondered, 'Where in the world did this come from? I know Suzy Sleepalot did not write this paper.' Educators across the country are facing the dilemma of plagiarism more and more. To combat plagiarism, teachers need to know what it is, the strategies to detect it, and the ways to prevent it.

What Is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism 'refers to the presentation or submission of the work of another, without citation or credits, as your own work' (University of Northern British Columbia, 1997, p. 1). A student may plagiarize deliberately or unintentionally. According to Hinchliffe (1998), some common types of plagiarism include

- Submitting another student's paper with or without that student's knowledge.
- Copying a paper or paraphrasing information from a text without proper documentation.
- Purchasing and turning in a paper from a peer, research service, or term paper mill.
- Downloading and submitting a paper from a 'free term paper' Web site (Hinchliffe, 1998).

Paper sharing or copying is not something new, but it has become more widespread due to the easy access of computers and the Internet. Students are able to copy and paste vast amounts of text quickly with just a few clicks of the mouse. Students can also download, as well as purchase, free essays, reports, and term papers from several web sites. The fees can run from about \$10 and up per page (Schevitz, 1999). It is estimated that there are at least 400 web sites that currently offer essays, with 20-30 of them being run professionally (Plagiarized.com, 2000). Some sites that teachers need to be aware of are

- A1 Termpaper (<http://www.a1-termpaper.com/>)
- Absolutely Free Online Essays (<http://www.essays.terrashare.com/>)
- Evil House of Cheat (<http://www.cheathouse.com/>)
- Genius Papers (<http://www.genuispapers.com/>)

- Lazy Students (<http://www.lazystudents.com/papers/>)
- Research Assistance (<http://www.research-assistance.com/>)
- School Sucks (<http://www.schoolsucks.com/>)

For an extensive list of term paper mills, visit Coastal Carolina University's list of Internet Term Paper Sites at <http://coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm>.

What Signs Should Teachers Look For?

To detect plagiarism, teachers should

- Check for unusual formatting or formatting that does not match the assignment requirements (Hinchliffe, 1998). In particular, Robert Harris (2000) suggested that you look for 'strange margins, skewed tables, mixed subheading styles' (p. 6). Also, check for peculiar use of upper/lower case and capitalization, for web site printout page numbers of dates and letters or words that have been whited out (Hinchliffe, 1998).
- Notice mixed paragraph styles and various skill levels of writing. This is a sign that the copy-and-paste method of plagiarism was used (Harris, 2000). Also, notice jargon and advanced vocabulary usages (Hinchliffe, 1998). Asking, 'What do you mean by meridians?' may provide you with beneficial information (Harris, 2000).
- Review the references used in the paper. Check the dates on the reference material, as well as the time frame of the events cited in the paper. Several online papers are old, so if the paper contains references older than 10 years or if it refers to Ronald Regan as President, it's a sign that the paper has been passed around for a while. Also, see if the references are available at your school. Many times, the books may be not only from another state but also from another country.
- Refer to the original assignment and see if the paper is about the assigned topic and if it contains the information that was required. If it doesn't, Harris (2000) warns, 'It may have been borrowed at the last minute or downloaded' (p. 6). Also, if the paper contains extra information that was not required, it's a sign that the paper has been recycled.
- Review the citation styles. If some paragraphs have MLA and some APA citations, the paper has probably been pasted together (Harris, 2000). If there is a lack of references or quotations and the paper contains well-written information, it may have been copied from a general knowledge source such as an encyclopedia.
- Look for dead giveaways such as web printouts with the URL and date in the corner or messages at the end, such as 'Thank you for using Research Papers Online.' Also, look at the name on the title page and make sure that it matches subsequent pages (Plagiarized.com, 2000).

Some Strategies to Prevent Plagiarism

Experts believe that the best way to stop plagiarism is by means of prevention. Some guidelines to prevent plagiarism are

- Offer a list of topics with the option of the student's choosing an alternative topic if he or she discusses it with you first (Plagiarized.com, 2000). Furnishing a topic list provides

students with direction while giving them enough freedom to pick a topic that is interesting to them. Also, change the list of topics each semester to discourage papers from being passed along.

- Require the paper in a specific format with a given number of references from a variety of sources. For example, the requirement might be to have references from two book sources, two journal sources, and two Internet sources. Review (or teach) the proper citation methods with your students. It is also a good idea to have each student turn in photocopies of the sources used (Harris, 2000).
- Periodically check the progress of each student's paper throughout the semester (Clayton, 1997). Assign due dates for the students to turn in the selected topic, thesis, outline, bibliography, rough draft, and final draft. Do not allow students to skip portions of the paper. For example, if a student did not turn in a rough draft, then a final draft would not be accepted. Checking and requiring progress makes it more difficult to acquire someone else's paper; it helps the procrastinators stay on track and, as a result, lessens the temptation to cheat.
- Educate students about plagiarism by explaining what it is and how to avoid it. Also, let them know that you are aware of Internet paper mills (Leland, 2000). Discuss your policy (or the school's) regarding plagiarism, and be sure to outline clear penalties.

Online technology is also available to detect plagiarism from web sites. Educators can subscribe to a service and require students to upload their paper to the service's site. The site compares papers with material on the Web. Some sites even compare papers turned in from previous semesters to detect the papers that were passed along (Schevitz, 1999). Some of these sites are free; others are subscription- based with fees that start at about \$20 per year for a class of 30. Most services that detect online plagiarism offer free trials (Dyrli, 2000). Some plagiarism detection sites are:

- Eve 2 (<http://www.canexus.com/eve>)
- FindSame-free service (<http://www.findsame.com/>)
- HowOriginal.com-free service (<http://www.howoriginal.com/>)
- PaperBin.com (<http://www.paperbin.com/>)
- Plagiarism.org (<http://www.plagiarism.org/>)

Conclusion

Plagiarism has been around since the beginning of organized education; therefore, it is likely that there will always be students who plagiarize. Now that the Web has made it even easier for students to cheat, it has become imperative for teachers to combat plagiarism. Knowing exactly what plagiarism is, learning the clues to detect plagiarism, and practicing the strategies to prevent it can aid teachers in detouring plagiarism.

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Contact Information:

Jill Suarez
Bossier Parish Community College
South Complex, 200 Douglas Dr
Bossier City, LA 71111, USA
318-746-7754 ext. 23
vsuarez@bellsouth.net

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