

PREVENTING PLAGIARIZING IN PAPERS AND AT-HOME ASSIGNMENTS

Stopping students from plagiarizing is the best way to avoid having to deal with it, and it is a solution to the reluctance some instructors have to formally “charge” a student with plagiarism and go through the procedure of reporting it. There are a number of methods that greatly reduce the chances of students plagiarizing first, and those who do plagiarize will be, with any luck, immediately recognizable. Here are some suggestions.

Essay Topics:

Vary your topics from semester to semester to make it difficult for students to “borrow” papers from previous students.

Make your essay topics very specific. One method that works well is to make the essay comparative, with two specific points being compared, thus making it less likely they can find a standard paper online.

“Personalize” topics with special questions or points that need to be included so that students cannot just do a generic Google search to find a paper.

Use material from classroom discussions as partial basis for the essay topics, not just what is in the textbook.

Do not let students change topics for their papers after the first week, as a general rule.

Gauging the Level of Students’ Writing:

If most of the marks in your course are for one large assignment, make sure you get a good look at each student’s unaided writing style and level before the major paper comes in. Set a short, in-class writing assignment. Ideally, that would be an essay mid-term, but it could also be smaller assignments, like a book or article review, a journal, or a written response to a specific event or poem, for example. If you don’t have a good idea of a student’s writing level, you are less likely to be able to pick up plagiarism. In other words, if the student writes at a D level in class and at an A level at home, there is clearly something going on.

Essay Sources:

Some instructors make all the students in any given class use the same basic research materials (article, case study, book, film, website) for their papers. Students can then add extra ones of their own.

Ask for a variety of sources: an online academic article, an article from a “paper” academic journal, a book, a website, a video, a primary document, etc. You can add requirements like certain timelines, particular writers, or specialized topics.

Get the students to put their bibliographies together, annotate them, and hand them in part way through the semester.

Talk to students about appropriate and inappropriate academic sources and where to find them.

Interim Writing and Presentation Exercises for Students:

Students can be asked to give a short presentation on the progress of their essay in class at some stage in the writing process.

If you have time, you can get the students to write a short assignment on both sides of the topic, not just the one they have chosen, or get them to do some on-the-spot writing in class on their topic.

Some instructors ask students to write a short piece in class the day the paper is handed in on “what I learned from doing this assignment.”

Feedback:

Students can get feedback from a variety of sources before they hand in the final draft. Obviously, their instructor, the Writing Centre, and WriteAway are all good, but they can also bring their drafts to class and swap papers with another student to get feedback and to clear up confusing or unclear ideas.

Addressing Plagiarism Before the Papers are Handed In:

Deter students from using papers from previous students by telling them you keep copies of all the papers you receive for several years, so you can check if a paper seems familiar.

Use examples in class (on the overhead, don't hand them out!) of appropriately written academic essays and plagiarized ones for students to see.

And finally, students usually plagiarize out of desperation, exhaustion, or panic. This is particularly true of international students who may find that their writing skills are not up to the task of writing papers at the Canadian post-secondary level. If you can identify those students and get them some help early on (see WriteAway and the Writing Centre), you may be able to stop them committing academic suicide. Of course, let's face it; some students will plagiarize out of laziness or reluctance to do the work in the first place. Fortunately the latter students often self-identify by not coming to class, not doing the readings, or not submitting all their assignments on time.

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