

Why Students Plagiarize

There are many reasons students plagiarize. Sometimes deadlines come around more quickly than expected, sometimes assignments feel overwhelming, and sometimes the boundaries of plagiarism and research just get confused. But what situations are most likely to result in plagiarism? More importantly, how can they be avoided? Learning to identify the factors that make plagiarism an attractive alternative is the best way to stop it before it starts.

Intentional Plagiarism

Just like hacking into websites, plagiarizing papers can be something of a thrill in itself. For many students it becomes a question of ingenuity: "can I sneak a plagiarized paper past my professor?" But there is usually more behind intentional plagiarism than just the thrill of deception.

Searching vs. Researching

Today's students learn quickly that finding and manipulating data on the Internet is a valuable skill. With the wealth of information available online, the production of original analysis and interpretation may seem like "busy work" compared to finding the best or most obscure sources.

Teach your students that the real skills they need to learn are interpretation and analysis -- how to process the information they find. Tell them that anyone with some basic knowledge can find information on the Internet -- it's what they do with that information that is important.

"But their words are better"

Some students might think, "Why sweat over producing an analysis that has already been done better, by someone who knows more?" Students may also be intimidated by the quality of work found online, thinking their own work cannot compare.

Tell your students that what interests you most is seeing how they understand the assigned topic, and how they develop their own style and voice. This might go a long way toward making them feel more comfortable with writing. Explain to them that you know writing is a learning process, and that you do not expect them to be as brilliant as experts who have devoted years to the subject. You may also want to let them know that their experiences and the context of your class give them a unique perspective that may give them a far more interesting angle on the issues than those of the "experts."

Making the Grade

Students are under enormous pressure from family, peers, and instructors to compete for scholarships, admissions, and, of course, places in the job market. They often see education as a rung in the ladder to success, and not an active process valuable in itself. Because of this, students tend to focus on the end results of their research, rather than the skills they learn in doing it.

Explain to your students that while they may be able to hide ignorance of particular facts or theories, research and writing skills make themselves very apparent to anyone evaluating them. In other words, your students' grades won't matter if they don't have the skills to show for them. Also, you may wish to emphasize improvement as a factor in grading, as this can encourage students to try developing their own abilities. This depends entirely upon your own pedagogical style, of course.

"Everyone else is doing it"

Students often justify plagiarism by pointing out that since their peers plagiarize, they must do the same to keep up. They feel faced with a choice: put in several hours of work and risk a mediocre grade with less time for other subjects, or do what their peers do and copy something good from the internet for an easy A with time to spare

One of the only ways to deal with this is by catching those students who do plagiarize. It takes a great deal of the pressure off of those who want to work honestly but are afraid of falling behind their peers.

Poor Planning

Students are not always the best judges of how much time their assignments will take. They may not be aware of the extent of work involved in a research paper, or may simply be overwhelmed by the task and put it off until the last minute, leaving them with no time for original work of their own.

Scheduling stages of progress on their papers is a very effective way to deal with this. Having them submit bibliographies, outlines, thesis statements, or drafts on specified dates before the final draft is due will give them a good idea of the amount of work involved. It will also help them organize their time and make the task seem less overwhelming.

Unintentional Plagiarism

No honest student would walk out of a neighbors' house accidentally carrying their television. But even the most well-intentioned writers sometimes "appropriate" the work of others without proper authority. How does this happen?

Citation Confusion

Perhaps the most common reason for inadvertent plagiarism is simply an ignorance of the proper forms of citation.

See our printable handout on [how to cite sources properly](#)

Plagiarism vs. Paraphrasing

Many students have trouble knowing when they are paraphrasing and when they are plagiarizing. In an effort to make their work seem "more original" by "putting things in their own words," students may often inadvertently plagiarize by changing the original too much or, sometimes, not enough.

Doing exercises in class where you hand out paraphrased and plagiarized passages in order to discuss the differences might be very helpful. Explain that your students must retain the essential ideas of the original, but significantly change the style and grammatical structure to fit in the context of their argument. You may also want to send your students to our [what is plagiarism?](#) page.

"I was just copying my notes"

Students often mix their own ideas and those of their sources when they take sloppy notes, creating confusion when they begin writing their papers.

It may be worthwhile to go over some note-taking methods with your students. Teaching them to document their sources using different colored pens and "post-it" tabs to mark pages, for example, will save time and keep references clear.

"I couldn't find the source"

Students are often sloppy about writing down the bibliographic information of their sources, leaving them unable to properly attribute information when it comes to writing the paper.

Explain how important it is to keep careful track of references during the note-taking stage. Students may be eager to focus entirely on the content of their research, and need to be told that how they handle their reference material is a significant part of the assignment. Having them turn in bibliographies before they turn in the paper itself will also encourage them to pay more attention to their sources.

"I thought we didn't have to quote facts"

Because the Internet makes information so readily available, students may find it difficult to tell the difference between "common knowledge" they are free to use, and original ideas which are the intellectual property of others.

The easiest thing to do is teach your students the maxim "When in doubt, cite sources."

Confusion about expectations

Students may not be aware of what proper research requires. They may think they are being asked simply to report critical commentary, or to "borrow" from a number of sources to show that they have "done their homework." In either case, it becomes a problem if what they turn in tends to be predominantly the work of others.

One of the most common sources of confusion is the ambiguity of terms such as "analyze" and "discuss." You should explain to your students that these words have specific meanings in academic discourse, and that they imply a degree of original thought that goes beyond mere "reporting." Emphasizing your interest in their own ideas will also help them understand what you expect from them.

Cultural Perspectives on Plagiarism

Not all cultures take the same view of plagiarism. The Western notion that "ideas" can be the property of individuals may actually seem absurd to those with different views on what constitutes shared information or public discourse. Students from cultures which have a more collective sense of identity, for example, may have a difficult time understanding the distinctions some cultures draw between individual and public property. You might spend some very productive class time discussing your students' perspectives on this issue.