

About Plagiarism and Pixels

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 "You are required to plagiarize. Explain three ways in which you could do it."

■ Diane Boehm, Writing Program

When I use this writing prompt as a way for students to begin clarifying their understanding of plagiarism, the initial response is always the same: some snickers, a few furtive glances at other students, then busy fingers on the keyboards as students write what they know about plagiarism.

Two ways to plagiarize are always mentioned: 1) not identifying quotes, and 2) not including a list of references. Often, however, students lack an understanding of the concept of intellectual property, or fail to recognize the seriousness with which the academic community regards plagiarism. The concept of academic integrity may seem entirely foreign. They may know that they cannot borrow someone else's *words*—but do not realize they cannot borrow *ideas* without crediting the source; they often assume that if an idea was expressed in their own language, they need not acknowledge a source. And the idea of citing sources for graphics may never have occurred to them.

Too often students' mental model of a research paper is the cut-and-paste pastiche of collected bits of information that worked just fine in high school. Many do not realize that the thesis for a research paper should derive from the process of researching; instead, they construct a thesis based on their own knowledge, and then collect random pieces of information that will back them up. They may not understand that sources should support, but cannot substitute for, their own thinking. Or they may assume that all ideas must be original, and not understand how to build their ideas upon the work of others.

If I want to be sure my students have a clear understanding of academic writing conventions, I know I must work with them. We begin by talking about the three ways to use sources—quotations, summaries, paraphrases—and the need to cite the sources for all ideas not our own or in the public domain. I explain how ellipsis and brackets provide flexibility when quoting. We review

the ways plagiarism most often occurs: copying the words of a source without quotation marks or citation; echoing the original words of a source too closely when paraphrasing or summarizing; introducing information from a source without any citation, causing the reader to assume it is their own. Soon what is permissible and what is not becomes clear.

Few students, in my experience, plagiarize intentionally. Most do so out of carelessness or lack of understanding. (There are exceptions, of course, like the student who last semester handed in a science paper which concluded with "Return to home page.")

Technological Changes

I knew how to help my students avoid plagiarism when their research was drawn only from personal sources or from print; then it was relatively easy for me to teach students what they could and could not do. Technology, however, has changed all that. Before the Internet made sources like *Schoolsucks* (<http://www.schoolsucks.com>) or *Slack Shack* (<http://www.vgernet.net/corky2/index.html>) readily available, most of us could easily trace suspected plagiarism and deal with it. Now, however, we are in a new domain, without clear rules to guide us. What once was hard and fast has become uncertain and even confusing.

Electronic media have, for example, created difficulties with the concept of intellectual property—for several reasons. Our old romantic notion of the writer envisioned an individual hidden away in a lonely garret, mystically creating documents from the creative work of a single human mind. Few writers today compose that way (perhaps few ever did). For most contemporary writers, writing is collaborative. Often I will see on a listserv, for example, a discourse involving a number of people, which gradually leads to a consummation based on the thinking of all the participants. A writer will synthesize the ideas of others, or use the ideas of others to trigger his or her own conclusions. Such writing does not "belong" to any one author.

The ease of transmitting documents is a second change. A word-processed document can be quickly e-mailed to a reader, and then returned with comments which may be assimilated into the revised document. Andrew Higgins, from American University, demonstrates that this is a standard part of the writing process for many professionals today: "My wife works for a think tank in Washington and has published numerous articles. She wouldn't think of publishing one without getting feedback from a large number of people, and much of that feedback takes the form of rewriting" (Epiphany-L, 08 Jan. 1997).

Electronic media are also difficult to "track," when we wish to trace a source. The web page I visit today may be radically different from the web page with the same URL my student visited only last week. Unless the student printed out the information he or she found, it may not be possible to locate it.

Furthermore, electronic media have worldwide distribution. Some cultures have no concept of individual intellectual property; for them, borrowing the ideas of another is considered a compliment, rather than an illegal act. When I work with international students, I find I must be especially clear in my explanation that Western countries have very different cultural assumptions about intellectual property than some Asian or African cultures, for example.

In addition, electronic media often blur the distinction between public and private writing. Many people do not think of e-mail or on-line conferencing as copyrighted, though they are considered to be so. Writers think of these as their communiques—and thus see no reason to cite them.

Some scholars are beginning to question even the concept of intellectual property. Certainly it becomes incredibly difficult to define this concept when we no longer have an object—a book or a chart or a sheaf of papers—to claim as evidence of intellectual work. Pixels on a screen have no perma-

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Five Rules for Writing that does not "Suck"

■ Ken Gewerth, Criminal Justice

Anyone who's taught college for more than a day and a half knows that the idea of writing anything more complex than a "To Do" list for a course strikes some students with an inordinate amount of fear, while leading others to the rapid conclusion that the course is more trouble than it's worth. Students in the latter category generally drop the class after the first session, so we need not concern ourselves with them. (Be sure to say "Hi" to them the next time you pull up to the fast food drive thru window; for this is where students who take the easy way out generally end up.)

Students who stick with the course despite an onerous writing requirement are generally full of woe as a consequence, because the writing requirement makes it impossible for the students to know Exactly What The Professor Wants (EWTPW). Since a student's ability to predict a course's EWTPW coefficient is directly proportional to their ability to get an A, which, in turn, is directly related to Everything Else in Life, any writing assignment is a life or death situation. And, since much student writing positively sucks, it would seem that student's fears about writing are well justified.

To reduce the possibility of writing-related suicides in my classes, a portion of my Virtual Gewerth website (<http://www.svsu.edu/~keg>) contains a brief guide to good writing, called (what else) The Virtual Gewerth Guide To Writing That Does Not Suck. Since The Real Gewerth (TRG) is a dour, cynical and judgmental type who, at base, is not a nice person, the five basic rules contained in the first part of the guide are not couched in touchy-feely, all-ideas-are-equally-good, writing-as-an-outlet-for-creativity-and-a-way-to-build-self-esteem psychobabble. The rules set out the absolute minimum expectations for college level writing aimed at a professional audience. And, as described below, *bad things can happen if they are not followed.*

Rule Number 1: Talking And Writing Are Different

Despite the apparent obviousness of this rule, it is lost on a distressingly large number of students. A great deal of bad student writing reads as if the student is talking his way through the assignment or the paper, pouring out half formed ideas in a headlong torrent of words. The "sentences" that result are a patchwork of disjointed ideas, informal phrases, and clipped, meaningless sentence fragments. The end product is something closer to a stream of consciousness *monologue* than *writing*. Someone who does not pay attention to this rule tends to write sentences (and paragraphs and pages) like this:

Their [sic] is alot [sic] of concern

about crime nowadays [sic], it is going up everywhere and people are afraid and are buying more guns, and calling on more criminals to die.

This is an example of Writing That Sucks. One cannot tell from the sentence what point the author is trying to make, or what the remainder of the document is going to be about. Is what follows going to be about people's fear of crime? The fact that a significant segment of the population owns weapons? Or is it about capital punishment? Second, there are large, gaping and obvious mistakes in the sentence that no college student should make. The first word of the sentence, "Their" should be "There." In addition, the colloquial term "a lot" is misspelled (it's two words—a lot—not one), and in fact, shouldn't be used at all since it is too informal an expression to be used in a formal paper directed at a professional audience. Appearing as the opening sentence in a term paper, it is a tragic error that will result in a bad grade. Appearing as an opening sentence on the writing portion of a promotion examination, it is a tragic error that will result in the better job going to someone else who probably paid attention to Rule 1. Appearing as the opening sentence of a report written for a supervisor, it is a tragic error that will, in all probability, lead to an alternate career in the food service industry (drive thru division).

Students must understand that *talking and writing are fundamentally different*. While speaking to someone in conversation is a spontaneous, instantaneous, ephemeral event, good writing is none of these. Since writing takes time, it is expected that the thoughts underlying the writing will be organized, logical, and complete. Since writing takes effort, it is expected that authors will select the words that they use with precision and care, so that what is written reflects what is meant. Moreover, since authors do not have the benefit of the immediate feedback of a listener, it is expected that authors will, to some extent, try to anticipate the likely effect that the choice of words will have on the reader, and alter those word choices accordingly. Finally, since the sole purpose of writing is to render human thought permanent and timeless, it is expected that authors will render these permanent records cleanly and clearly by attending closely to matters of correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, and format.

Assuming that Rule 1 is true, and writing is different than talking, what can students do to make sure that what they write doesn't sound like a monologue run amok? Ironically, one of the best solutions for the monologue problem is to encourage students to go into a room and read what they've written out loud. Strangely enough, reading something out loud can bring out writing

problems that may otherwise escape notice. Read and listen. Do the sentences say what they're meant to? Are some kind of confusing? Are the ideas presented in a logical order, or do they jump around more than Barney on speed?

Also, to eliminate those annoying run-on sentences, use the breath test. This has nothing at all to do with oral hygiene, but it is a sure cure for a sentence that keeps going and going and goingandgoingandgoing. The breath test assumes that one *normal* breath should provide sufficient air to read one good sentence out loud. Breathe. Read. If you run out of breath before you run out of sentence, fix the sentence.

Rule Number 2: People Judge You by What You Write

Rule 2 takes effect *every single time someone reads what someone else writes*. There is no way to avoid Rule 2. Students must stop thinking about writing assignments as things that are merely graded; something that, if done badly, they can compensate for by kicking ass on the mid-term or the final. Writing assignments deserve more respect; they are intimate self portraits in prose form. When people meet someone new, they tend to care about the little details of their appearance—whether their hair is combed, their tie is straight, etc. Since any written document always represents the author to the reader, shouldn't the details count for just as much? Is the correct word in the third sentence of the fourth paragraph "affect" or "effect"? Does the introduction work well enough to tell the reader exactly what the rest of the paper or report is about? Does the conclusion really summarize all that has come before it, or clearly state a position on an issue if that is what is required? Or, does it trail off, and wimp out so that the reader is left to guess where the author stands?

TRG realizes that the substance of Rule 2 (i.e., people make value judgments about others on tiny pieces of evidence—such as a misused "there") and its implications (we should pay attention to the small details of writing from the moment we set down the first word of a document) are not what students want to hear. After all, as a professor, TRG should like all his students, and care about them as people, and not judge them just on the basis of what they write, but also on things like how hard they're trying, and realize that they have other courses to prepare for, and have other demands on their time (such as a job or a family), and recognize that Criminal Justice classes aren't English classes after all. Consequently, TRG should temper his wildly unrealistic expectations about student's writing, and be less demanding and judgmental, and not yell at them in class, and not get all torqued up if a

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Plagiarism "For most contemporary writers, writing is collaborative..."

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nence, no physical object—and thus our notions of intellectual property no longer fit.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The AAHE Bill of Rights and Responsibilities for Electronic Learners states that "all citizens have ownership rights over their own intellectual works" (Article I, Section 5), and that "it shall be each citizen's personal responsibility to recognize (attribute) and honor the intellectual property of others" (Article II, Section 2). Educational institutions, it asserts, must foster an environment wherein "trust and intellectual freedom are the foundation for individual and institutional growth and success" (Article IV, Intro.).

How can we as educators find firm foot-

ing on this shifting sand? How can we foster "trust and intellectual freedom" when new media outpace the ability of our laws and social mores to develop clear guidelines? I believe we must approach this issue from a broader perspective.

Rather than merely defining traditional do's and don'ts to avoid plagiarism, we must have broader discussions with our students about ethics—in all courses, at all levels. We must talk about what it means to have academic integrity when you are a student, and why that is a prerequisite for the ethical integrity the future workplace will demand. The student who plagiarizes and gets caught may fail an assignment—or even a course. The employee who breaches copyright or cuts ethical corners may endanger an entire

company—and be subject to criminal prosecution.

We must also structure assignments and feedback in ways that promote and honor scholarly integrity. When we work with our students as they develop projects and papers; when we give feedback as they work, rather than merely grading the end product; when we model integrity in the way we work with them, our students internalize the professional standards they will take with them into the workplace.

As electronic media become ubiquitous, the stakes are higher than they have ever been. It is incumbent on every one of us to model academic integrity with our students, and to make very clear the need for all students to develop a personal code of ethics to take with them into their future.

Five Rules (Continued from page 2)

student (or twenty or thirty) can't tell the difference between "its" and "it's" by the third year of college.

To which TRG's considered, reasoned response is: BULL. The hard facts are that employers and others frequently care only about what people can accomplish, about whether they do what they're being paid to do. In the end, the world values success and outcome over well-meaning effort. Thus, TRG's tirades about bad writing reflect his profound frustration that a horrendously large proportion of college juniors and seniors are making embarrassing mistakes that should have been corrected long before the sixth grade, as well as his belief that such silly mistakes, if left uncorrected, will prove even more than embarrassing once the student hits and splatters messily on the job market.

TRG also realizes that Rule 2 and its implications lie in opposition to tons of conventional wisdom holding that the placement of too much emphasis on the small details of writing too early in the writing process (e.g., worrying about whether the correct word is "affect" or "effect" in the first draft) impedes a student's ability to learn to write, and causes her or him to eventually hate to write. This ill-considered position implies that: (1) given enough time and enough drafts, the creative chaos of the first draft (with all its half-formed thoughts, random musings, mistimed logical leaps as well as the various and sundry grammatical, syntactic, spelling and punctuation errors that Aren't Important Enough To Worry About Now), will, via successive revision, get chiseled out, so that by draft N, the student will have a flawless five carat gem of a paper; and (2) the intrusion of a dour, cynical and judgmental professor who harps on his students at length for their errors and who is, at base, *not a nice person* (in other words, someone like

TRG), will cause the student to tremble in fear, drop the class, and never write so much as a check for the rest of his life, because he hates writing so much.

Unfortunately, this position is untenable, because it rests on two not-always-true assumptions: (1) that people who write in a business or professional context have loads of time to research, ruminate and revise; and (2) students who hate writing haven't been nurtured.

In most instances, at least in the criminal justice field, there is a strong expectation that police officers, probation agents, attorneys, judges and correctional administrators will be able to write to a deadline that is typically tight at best, and impossibly short at worst. The "read, ruminate, write and revise" model that can take up a whole 15 week semester in college simply won't work anywhere else; in the professional context all four processes may have to occur simultaneously. Consequently, in the professional context, the need is for writers who get it right the first time most of the time. To train students to do otherwise does them little good.

The fact that student writers may need to be nurtured so they won't hate writing may be true, but it is entirely beside the point. In the professional context no employer will hire, much less take the time to nurture a college graduate with severely deficient writing skills. All of which leads us to:

Rule 3: Read, Ruminate, Write And Revise All You Want, as Long as It's on My Desk in an Hour

Rule 4: Writing Isn't Always Creative

Professional writing is the most uncreative act in the world because its structure is so unrelentingly linear. It begins with a short

introduction setting out the problem or issue discussed, moves to a body where, in neatly subdivided sections and subsections, the problem or issue is dissected and presented in a logical and systematic fashion. At the end is a conclusion that summarizes the discussion, and states an opinion, judgment or decision, that can be drawn from the facts (and not the author's feelings or personal opinions) if one is appropriate. In other words, the format for most professional writing follows the traditional outline format: I, A, 1.(a), etc.

Unfortunately, outlining is becoming something of a lost art among students. It's not hard to understand why. There is sometimes an element of tedium involved, and, once again, conventional wisdom tells us that bored students will grow up to hate writing. More importantly, the ability to outline presumes that students have the ability to separate the central and the peripheral ideas in the research that they've done, a skill that can't exactly be taught, much less learned overnight. Consequently, lack of an overarching organizational scheme is a critical problem in student writing. But it's also easy to spot, particularly in longer assignments, since students with this problem frequently turn in a ten or fifteen page paper that is one gigantic, undifferentiated block of text, randomly hacked into paragraphs.

One solution for this problem would be to have the students who exhibit difficulties in this regard try to outline the paper *after* they've written it. Whatever problems exist with linear organization will quickly become apparent.

Rule 5: Reading Is a Spectator Sport

Writing That Sucks turns reading from a spectator sport into a participation sport.

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Consider the example of Writing That Sucks below:

The definition of delinquency is so vague that almost any American striving to succeed [sic] or make to [sic] much money could be considered a criminal. Any wrong act whether it is morally justifiable or not could be a criminal.

The omission of key words (e.g., "youth" after "American" and "act" as the last word in the sentence) and the misspellings mean that the reader must stop the process of reading (and various associated processes like understanding, imagining, and enjoying) and instead, mentally edit what is written so that it makes sense. The solutions to this problem are not pretty; nor are they popular with students because they involve things like being careful and disciplined while writing, paying attention to what is written *and editing* on the fly, and having or, perhaps more accurately, *taking* time to spell check and proofread the final copy.

The blunt fact is that the ability to write at just an adequate level is a supremely difficult skill to develop at all; to do it well is rare; and to do it flawlessly is a gift from God. No matter which of these levels of writing skill a student hopes to attain, all are grounded in discipline and attention to detail that is automatic and available virtually on demand. As my first and favorite writing instructor told me:

Always aim for a good sentence; then tie four or five together and you've got a paragraph; after that sew four or five paragraphs into a page, and then start all over again on the next page, with another sentence, until you're done.

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