

The Writing Center Recommendations on Plagiarism

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The Writing Center at The University of Montana endorses the Council of Writing Program Administrators statement, “Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices”. This document, which can be viewed in full at <http://www.wpacouncil.org>, recognizes the difference between **plagiarism**—“submitting someone else’s text as one’s own” with the intent to avoid doing original work— and **misuse of sources**—“carelessly or inadequately citing ideas and words borrowed from another source”. This distinction should inform the instructor’s response to student papers. Plagiarism intends to deceive others and irresponsibly rejects the instructor’s effort to teach. Misuse of sources reveals the ignorance or miseducation of the student, which calls for additional instruction. Cases of plagiarism and misuse of sources provide the instructor with the opportunity to teach the ethical and practical norms of academic work.

The following frequently asked questions and responses set forth The Writing Center’s recommendations to UM faculty on dealing with plagiarism and the misuse of sources. It does not represent nor replace the official UM policy on plagiarism which appears in *The University of Montana Student Conduct Code*.

➤ How can I prevent plagiarism in my course?

The WPA statement “Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism” makes two important recommendations on preventing plagiarism. **First**, they recommend that faculty discuss plagiarism and why it harms students in their classes. Citing the Student Conduct Code and enumerating the penalties for plagiarism in your syllabus alerts students to the issue but may not convince them all that plagiarism is self-defeating. For suggestions on how to talk to your classes about plagiarism go to <http://bedfordstmartins.com/technotes/techtiparchive/ttip102401.htm>. Or, visit the Writing Center to borrow our copy of *The Plagiarism Handbook* which contains sample quizzes and activities that help students discover their own attitudes toward plagiarism and standard citation practices.

Second, the WPA statement recommends that faculty strive to design writing assignments that are difficult to plagiarize. The basic strategy for creating plagiarism-unfriendly assignments is to avoid assignments that primarily ask students to “tell about” a topic of their choice. Such assignments do not encourage focused, original analysis and problem-solving. They may even encourage plagiarism by conscientious but naïve students. It is also best not to make identical assignments semester after semester, or to assign long research papers due for the first time at the end of the semester.

Assignments that are difficult to plagiarize are those that: 1) ask students to answer a specific question using a unique combination of course materials; 2) ask students to report on, review, or analyze local current events, issues, circumstances, or behaviors; 3) require evidence of the writing process as part of the course grade, including reading notes, outlines, an abstract or research

prospectus, and successive drafts; 4) ask students to defend or refute a statement provided by the instructor; or 5) are peer-reviewed or written during class time. For additional suggestions on how to construct plagiarism-unfriendly assignments, contact The Writing Center or go to <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/plagiarism/assignments.cfm>.

➤ How can I tell if a paper is plagiarized?

Faculty who are attentive to their students' written work develop a "radar" for plagiarism. Some common signs that a paper is not original include: 1) the entire paper is written with a sophistication not seen in a student's previous work; 2) the style of the paper alternates substantially from one paragraph or section to another, with or without citations; 3) some passages in the paper are highly polished while linking material is unsophisticated, and sources are rarely or improperly indicated; 4) the paper has a unique argument or turn of phrase that is reminiscent of a paper submitted by another student; 5) the sources cited do not exist.

In some cases, faculty can confirm their suspicions by searching the Web for matching phrases. However, the best way to determine if sources have been abused is to discuss the paper with the student in private. If the student shows little grasp of the paper's content or cannot produce notes and drafts of the paper from his writing process, the paper may be plagiarized. Some students will readily admit to having plagiarized once they are called on it. In other cases, the student may convince the instructor that the paper was not plagiarized or that s/he merely misunderstood how to use sources properly.

➤ What should I do when I suspect plagiarism?

Without telling the student why, ask the student to meet with you to discuss the paper. You do not have to prove that the paper is plagiarized in order to have a conversation with a student about a suspicious paper, but be prepared to give the student specific reasons why the paper seems problematic. Allow the student to explain how he used his sources and constructed the paper.

If your suspicions of plagiarism are supported, explain why the paper is not acceptable and describe the possible consequences for the student. These might include receiving no credit for the paper, full or partial credit for a rewrite of the paper, or an opportunity to complete an alternate assignment. (Make a written note of the consequences so you can follow up with the student.) Because plagiarism and the misuse of sources reveals that the student has not internalized the norms of academic writing, contact The Writing Center to arrange for a tutor to help the student rewrite the paper to your standards. The tutor will not correct the paper, but will give the student extra instruction and practice with using source materials that will lead to an original paper.

If your suspicions of plagiarism are supported but the student rejects the charge of plagiarism, read and follow the procedures outlined in the Student Conduct Code for filing a formal complaint.

If the student convinces you that the paper was properly constructed, explain to the student why it is important for you to address the issue of plagiarism whenever your suspicions are raised. You should not have to apologize for discussing the paper with the student if the tone you adopt during the conference is measured and non-threatening throughout.

➤ **When do I report a case of plagiarism?**

Report a case of plagiarism to your dean or the vice-president for Student Affairs when, after meeting informally with the student, your suspicions are supported but the student denies your claims. The dean or the vice-president will have access to any prior accusations made against the same student by other faculty; they will also assist in assuring due process for the accused student.

While making a formal accusation of plagiarism may be daunting, bear in mind that a student who plagiarizes even one paper per course with impunity can accumulate 40 plagiarized papers as he moves through a four-year degree program. If individual faculty do not report plagiarists, the teaching mission of the University suffers.

➤ **What should I tell my T.A.s and graders to do about plagiarism?**

T.A.s and graders should be encouraged to report suspicious papers to you. You should then meet with the student(s) yourself. Familiarize yourself with the paper and be prepared to explain what prompted the T.A.'s or grader's suspicions. See *What should I do when I suspect plagiarism?*, above.

➤ **Who is responsible for combatting plagiarism?**

Students, faculty, and the administration must share responsibility for maintaining the norms of academic writing. Students have a responsibility to do their own work and learn the conventions that govern academic writing. Faculty should explicitly teach the conventions they want their students to observe in written documents. In addition, faculty have a responsibility to design assignments that stimulate original critical thinking and discourage inappropriate behaviors. They also have to report stubborn plagiarists in order to keep them from gaining a degree fraudulently. The administration should help educate students about plagiarism and provide the resources for faculty to teach students to be authors of their own ideas.

➤ **Where can I find more help with plagiarism?**

“Making Plagiarism-proof Assignments”

<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/plagiarism/assignments.cfm>

“The Council of Writing Program Administrators Statement on Plagiarism”

<http://www.ilstu.edu/~ddhesse/wpa/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf>

“The University of Montana Conduct Code”

<http://www.umt.edu/SA/documents/fromWeb/StudentConductCode1.pdf>

“Thinking and Talking about Plagiarism”

<http://bedfordstmartins.com/technotes/techtiparchive/ttip102401.htm>