

Tips for Detecting Plagiarism

Even if you make every effort to help your students avoid plagiarism, some students may still turn in work that is suspect. What can you do?

Educate Yourself:

- **Ensure You Are Information Literate**
 - ✓ Become proficient in searching the databases provided by the library.
 - ✓ Become proficient in searching the major Internet search engines.
 - ✓ Up-date and/or improve your searching skills and knowledge as technologies change.
- **Establish a Baseline of Student Writing Samples:**
 - ✓ Obtain and retain a writing sample from each student in order to establish his or her baseline writing skills for the semester. Have them write and turn this in during class time so they cannot copy from another source.
- **Save Student Writings**
 - ✓ Professors often feel papers they read seem familiar to those from previous semesters. If you save papers, in either hardcopy or on a disc, you can satisfy that nagging hunch by checking your old paper files.

Step One: Something's Fishy:

- **Your instincts tell you something is wrong with your student's paper or project. These are some common clues:**
 - ✓ The writing style is either inconsistent with the student's previous work or is written at a much higher level than expected.
 - ✓ The paper is slightly (or very) off-topic. The paper does not relate in any fashion to your assignment specifications.
 - ✓ The formatting of the paper is inconsistent. For example, there may be large spaces between the text, multiple font faces and point sizes might be used, the formatting is not what you required in your specifications, or the formatting of the bibliography does not conform to the style manual you require.
 - ✓ Questions arise from the bibliography. For example, the sources may not match the paper topic, may be quite dated, appear to be the kinds of sources not normally purchased by your library, etc.
- **Don't let a poor quality paper fool you.**
 - ✓ Many students purposefully turn in plagiarized papers that are of poor quality simply hoping to receive a passing grade of a C or D. If a student does not write the paper s/he turns in, regardless of the quality this is plagiarism and should be reported to your institution.

Step Two: Follow Your Instincts:

- Trust your instincts by conducting some basic research.
 - ✓ Check sources cited in the bibliography with the holdings of your library using the library catalog or other local library resources. Ask yourself these questions:
 - Does your library own the cited items?
 - If not, do you expect that your student would take advantage of Interlibrary Loan services given the time frame of the assignment?
 - If your library does not own the items, ask a librarian to help you verify the actual existence of the sources using union catalogs and periodical indexes.
 - If your library does own the items, look at those items yourself. Oftentimes students plagiarize liberally and blatantly from the actual sources they cite.

- Meet privately with the student
 - ✓ Talk to your student in a non-threatening way. Tell him/her that you've noticed that the style of writing did not reflect his/her unique voice and ask if they had any help writing the paper. This step may allow your student to open up to you and may identify an unintentional plagiarizer.
 - ✓ Ask your student to comment on the paper topic. Ask questions about the topic.
 - ✓ A more drastic method is to rewrite the first paragraph of your student's paper leaving out every fifth word. If your student actually wrote the paper, s/he should be able to fill in those words for you.

- Search the Internet
 - ✓ Using topic statements, key phrases, or keywords search Internet search engines, free paper sites, and library databases.
 - ✓ If you're searching for plagiarized papers in a web search engine, enter unique or jargon specific keywords or phrases. Be sure that the search engine you searching is capable of full text searching and that you are using the correct search protocols such as quotation marks for a phrase search. You may want to try a meta search engine (like Metacrawler or Ixquick) that will search several search engines simultaneously.
 - ✓ Consider searching a fee based plagiarism checking service such as Turnitin.com.