# TALKING ABOUT PLAGIARISM AND SOURCE USE
*Faculty Resource Series*

Plagiarism may sound straight-forward on the surface, but source use is actually incredibly complex and contextual. Seemingly obvious advice like "don't copy other people's work" edges up against a hairy line when we recognize how much of academic work builds upon others'; too, advice like "you don't need to cite common knowledge" quickly becomes confusing when one person's common knowledge does not match another's.

In short, what counts as appropriate source use versus plagiarism is actually a learned communication practice that depends on context, including disciplinary context: what counts as plagiarism in mathematics will be slightly different than in history. Thus, just like with other communication skills in our disciplines, part of our job is teaching students how to do that well. This guide is intended to give you strategies and resources for teaching about plagiarism and appropriate source use in your classes, going beyond a simple syllabus line that just says "don't cheat."

## Teaching and developing assignments for success

Students plagiarize for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from misunderstanding what counts as common knowledge to poor research skills to external time pressures (Devlin & Gray, 2007). Here are some strategies for how you can design assignments and lectures in your courses to deter plagiarism, whether intentional or accidental:

> ***Explain what types of resources students might draw on in their writing, and distinguish what should be cited (or not) and why.*** As researchers and writers, we often draw on a huge variety of sources when writing: Wikipedia pages, scholarly papers, textbooks, StackOverflow forums. Today, we also are likely to lean upon spellcheck, automated grammar checkers, or even ChatGPT to help us along the way. However, not all of these wind up being cited in our final text. We usually do not think much of grabbing a fact from Wikipedia or refreshing our memory on a concept with a textbook and moving along, sans citation. This learned distinction between sources is often less clear to students. Explain to your students what resources might be drawn on or not and what is appropriate to cite. As you do this, be sure the allowed resources are closely tied to your course learning outcomes.
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> ***Explicitly discuss*** **why** ***sources are used in writing.*** There are many reasons we may cite in a piece of writing, and it often varies by genre. Some of the most common reasons include to provide background information on a topic, present an example to analyze, engage another scholar's argument in relation to your own, or use a method established by another source (Bizup, 2008). Explain to your students

why exactly they might cite in a given assignment, so that they are not trying to integrate sources without a clear understanding of why. The library also has [resources](#) on why we cite sources—consider using these as a starting point in class, and expanding on them by teaching about source use specifically in your discipline.

***Create assignments that are unique to your class.*** Very general assignments (like, "write about Gandhi's beliefs") are easily tackled by online paper mills, and also are recognized by students as less relevant to their educations. Instead, provide specific prompts that are unique to the content engaged with in your class. Not only will this make it harder for students to plagiarize, but it will make the assignment more interesting to students who are engaged in your class material.

***Build in scaffolding to your writing assignment.*** In general, it is good practice to give students regular feedback on their writing throughout the writing process. Doing so also discourages plagiarism because students are required to respond to your feedback and revise their thoughts over time. Consider building in low-stakes outline and rough draft assignments for a larger writing assignment. This allows students to tackle the writing process in small chunks rather than feeling rushed and pressured while up against a deadline, and also allows students some leeway against feeling "stuck" if they are not sure how to proceed with a project.

## Responding to possible plagiarism

If you suspect a student has plagiarized or misused sources in some way, start by talking to the student, framing this meeting as an honest inquiry into how they used sources and why. Steer clear of outright accusing them of dishonesty until you have heard their explanation. At that point, determine the scale of misuse: is this possibly a misunderstanding about appropriate source use? Or, is this a case of blatant plagiarism?

Consider their explanation and your own professional opinion, and choose the best match:

**If you look at the student paper and see small phrases or facts that you think should be cited, or you think a student has unknowingly leaned on a source in an inappropriate way,** this is a perfect opportunity to address misconceptions they may have about how to use sources as part of developing their own ideas. If they have a genuine misunderstanding about appropriate source integration, use this opportunity to teach them and consider allowing a revision without penalty.

**If you look at the student paper and see large chunks that are clearly copy-and-pasted from another source, it directly matches another student's writing, or the student genuinely and knowingly misrepresented work as their own,** this is a case of academic misconduct. Please follow [the standard academic honesty guidelines](#).