

## ***From Transition to College Writing*** **by Keith Hjortshoj, pages 172-184**

### **Theft, Fraud, and the Loss of Voice**

Derived from the Latin word for kidnapping, *plagiarism* is the theft of someone else's "brainchild" — that person's language, ideas, or research — and the origin of the word conveys the seriousness of such offenses in the view of college teachers and administrators. The reason is that words, ideas, and research are the main forms of currency in academic life. Because they represent the "intellectual property" with which scholars have built their careers, using that property without permission or credit is a form of larceny. Teachers also assume that the writing and other work students turn in is the product of their own effort, and because grades (another form of academic currency) are based on that work, "borrowing" language and ideas from someone else constitutes cheating.

As a consequence, all colleges and universities include warnings against plagiarism among their published rules for academic conduct, along with the procedures and penalties that result from breaking those rules. Because such regulations are usually strict and often unfamiliar to new students, you should read them carefully to make sure you know what practices are prohibited. The most serious forms of plagiarism can lead to failure in a course, notice of misconduct on one's academic record, and even suspension.

Legalistic accounts of plagiarism, however, are also idealistic. In other words, they assume an ideal world in which the boundaries between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable practices, one's own language and the language of others, can be clearly de-fined by regulations. In fact, the term *plagiarism* covers a wide range of deceptions and errors, from serious cases of cheating to minor instances of faulty citation. Plagiarism also includes some types of "unauthorized assistance," and some forms of assistance authorized in one course or assignment might be unauthorized in another. Some of the practices that many students consider acceptable survival strategies are, for their teachers, punishable offenses. In my effort to clarify these boundaries, therefore, I will also be quite frank about the dilemmas and temptations you are likely to face in your college work.

I'll begin with the most obvious violations of academic integrity codes and end with some deeper, more ambiguous questions about authority, acknowledgment, and originality in academic work — questions essential to all writing based upon research.

### **Theft and Fraud**

The great majority of formal plagiarism charges result from deliberate attempts to deceive teachers, avoid work, and gain unfair advantage over other students. While these practices share common motives, they take several forms:

- Using published material verbatim, without citation or quotation marks, as all or part of work submitted as your own. (This category includes not only writing but also quantitative data, graphs, and other published research material.)
- Close, deliberate paraphrase of another author's published or unpublished work without acknowledgment.
- Submitting as your own work papers or portions of papers formerly written by other students or purchased from commercial services.
- Having someone else write a paper for you and turning it in as your own work, or writing a paper for someone else.

- Submitting copies of a single paper (written individually or collaboratively) as the individual work of two or more students.
- Turning in a paper you previously wrote for another course, or one paper for two current courses, without permission from the instructors

When I identify these kinds of deception I prosecute them without hesitation, as other teachers do, but I've also learned not to jump to hasty conclusions about the motives and characters of students who resort to plagiarism. Heavy workloads and intense competition sometimes encourage students to use any strategy that gives them an edge, and if substantial numbers adopt this survival-of-the-fittest ethos, more scrupulous, responsible students can get drawn into plagiarism and other forms of cheating in order to compete.

In a misdirected fashion, some of these violations are also generous. To counter the effects of competition between individuals, students share work and help one another— behavior that would represent virtue in other circumstances but becomes a violation when students are being graded for individual performance. A very bright, capable senior once explained to me, in a completely matter-of-fact way, that freshmen were disadvantaged in a large science course because they didn't yet have access to the sorority and fraternity files of old lab reports, and had to write their own! These files of old papers, paper-writing and note-taking services, published volumes of student research papers, Cliffs Notes, and other easy routes to completing assignments seem to authorize strategies that campus regulations condemn. Internet services make the purchase of "prewritten" term papers entirely too easy, and although selling papers might be legal, turning them in as your own work can violate campus and course policies.

With these and other opportunities available, and with other students using them, what will you do when you are short on time, energy, or ideas or when you feel that a teacher expects you to write with authority and skills you don't have? What will you do when you find that a published source says exactly what you would like to say on an assigned topic or when your friend has already written a paper on the subject and offers it to you? You don't have to be morally bankrupt to find plagiarism tempting in such situations.

But each year thousands of otherwise honest, fair-minded students are convicted of plagiarism. Setting some real moral issues aside, one very good reason for avoiding *all* forms of plagiarism is that you might get caught. And if you do, you will find yourself in deep trouble. Frequently and unpredictably, these cases come to the attention of teachers for reasons that plagiarists fail to take into account:

- Teachers are often much more familiar with published sources on a subject than their students realize.
- Many teachers are attuned to shifts of voice and style, both within a paper and from one paper to the next. They can tell when the author has changed.
- Teachers talk to one another about student work, more than students realize, and show papers they have received to other teachers, sometimes to get advice.
- If they are suspicious that a paper has been taken from the Internet, some teachers use search tools to locate the sources, which they can find fairly easily.

These are the ways in which charges of plagiarism usually begin, and they lead to what seems very much like a criminal trial before a committee that serves as judge and jury — examining evidence, hearing testimony, delivering a verdict, and (if the verdict is guilty) determining

penalties. This is a dreadful ordeal, and no matter how safe and tempting the opportunity to plagiarize might appear to be, it is not worth the risk.

### **Unauthorized Assistance or Collaboration**

Two kinds of “theft and fraud” listed in the previous section represent extreme forms of unauthorized assistance or collaboration: turning in someone else’s writing as your own and using one paper to represent the individual work of more than one person. In other forms, however, the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable collaboration are not always so clear. Most teachers want students to discuss course material outside class, share ideas and information, and help one another grasp important concepts.

Collaborative learning methods have become increasingly common in higher education, especially in the sciences. When you graduate, most of you will need to work closely with others toward common goals, including the production of reports and other documents. Most teachers show drafts of our writing to colleagues and rely on one another for substantial help before we send our work to publishers.

For these reasons, teachers often explicitly *authorize* assistance or collaboration on research projects, lab reports, and problem sets. Writing teachers frequently advise students to exchange drafts of their papers, to help one another with revision in pairs or small groups, and to visit writing centers.

But the value of cooperation sometimes conflicts with the value of individual effort. I know a science major who was formally charged with plagiarism for receiving unauthorized help from a friend on the revision of a paper for a humanities course. Collaborative writing is very common in the sciences, where students might also work together on problem sets, labs, other research projects, and reports. But individual authorship is the norm in the humanities, and teachers in fields such as English, history, and philosophy tend to assume that a paper will represent the work of a single writer.

Because collaboration is such a valuable life skill and aid to learning, I do *not* advise you categorically to avoid helping one another with assignments out of fear that you will violate rules. I encourage you instead to *make sure that you know where the boundaries between authorized and unauthorized assistance lie in every course, with awareness that these boundaries will differ*. If a teacher, course syllabus, or assignment does not make these expectations clear, ask for clarification.

### **Lazy Citation and Paraphrase**

Years ago I knew a teacher who became embattled with his small class of six students over an elaborate research paper he assigned in stages: topic selection, a note card system for recording information, outlines, first drafts, and so on. The teacher became very fussy about these procedures; his students put up resistance to his demands. At the end of the semester the students were supposed to turn in with their finished papers all of their note cards, outlines, and drafts. Then I saw the teacher heading off to the library with all of this material in a cardboard box, intending to look up every reference, to check every quotation, citation, and page number.

When he had completed this onerous task, he charged five of the six students with plagiarism. Because he presented evidence that the students had violated the campus code, his department had to pursue the charges, which were upheld in the hearing.

The most serious offense was a passage copied directly from a source without quotation marks or citation. Even in this case, however, the student claimed that he had plagiarized accidentally, by failing to use quotation marks on his note card and therefore assuming, when he wrote the paper, that the writing was his own. There were also individual sentences and phrases borrowed from sources, uncomfortably close paraphrases without acknowledgment, a quotation from one source attributed to another, and inaccurate titles or page numbers. Most of these

violations were minor, and the students were sentenced only to rewrite the papers.

Because these cases resulted partly from bad relations in the class, the teacher and students were probably equally to blame for the resulting “plagiarism.” In the end, however, the students had to bear the consequences of their careless documentation. If all college teachers became equally fanatical about the rules for citation and quotation, I suspect that they could find similar kinds of faulty reference in a large proportion of student research papers.

When you are writing under time constraints and find a passage in a source that says essentially what you want to say, when you find a useful quotation in your notes but didn’t record the source, or when you forgot to write down the page number for a reference you need, what should you do?

- You should either quote the source directly or cite it after your own paraphrase.
- You should either find the missing reference or not use the quotation.
- You should go back to the reference and find the page number.

I know that these efforts might seem to require more time than the problems are worth and that the chances a teacher will notice a faulty reference are slim. But a larger question is involved, regardless of your attitudes toward the teacher and the task: What kind of student, scholar, and writer do you want to be?

Accurately crediting and documenting the work of others will be essential in most of the professions you pursue, and if you maintain high standards now you will learn to keep track of this information carefully in the future. Habits of carelessness and disregard, in turn, are difficult to break.

### Loss of Voice

Both deliberate and accidental forms of plagiarism often result from the central challenge student writers face, especially in research papers: establishing a voice and perspective of their own. I’ve already explained that if you have not established your own authority over the subject and a reason for writing, it will be difficult to identify the boundaries between your ideas and language and those of other writers. What you have to say will be what others have already said. Everything you write will come directly from sources and will seem to need citation.

In their effort to avoid these strings of citations, students who are writing directly from research notes often drift into plagiarism, closely paraphrasing sources without citing them, or “borrowing” exact phrases and sentences without quotation. The following is a passage from Steven Pinker’s book *The Language Instinct* (1995):

*But household robots are still confined to science fiction. The main lesson of thirty-five years of AI [artificial intelligence] research is that the hard problems are easy and the easy problems are hard. The mental abilities of a four-year-old that we take for granted—recognizing a face, lifting a pencil, walking across a room, answering a question – in fact solve some of the hardest engineering problems ever conceived. (192-93)*

And here is an uncomfortably close paraphrase that, when passed off as the writer’s own work, drifts into plagiarism:

*The helpful household robots of science fiction have not become a reality. Over thirty-five years of research, the field*

*of artificial intelligence has demonstrated that the hard problems are easy to solve and the easy problems are hard. A four-year-old can easily recognize a face, walk across a room, pick up objects, and answer simple questions, but these are some of the hardest problems AI engineers have tried to solve.*

Like other experienced teachers, I can usually hear these patchworks of voices running through individual passages and whole papers, creating the impression that no one in particular is the author. When I convey my suspicions, the writers usually admit that they were writing directly from sources and had trouble avoiding close, continual paraphrasing and quotation.

You cannot reliably avoid this patchwork plagiarism simply by rewording a passage from sources. You can avoid it only by establishing your own voice in reference to the text you are using. Referring directly to the author and text will also remind you that you must cite paraphrases, to tell the reader how to find this source of information.

If you want to use paraphrase rather than quotation, therefore, it's a good idea to read the passage until you establish your own understanding and then put it aside. Then explain to your reader what the author said in your own words, and if you find that you want to use specific phrases from the source, put them in quotation marks:

*In The Language Instinct, Steven Pinker explains why robots have not become common household appliances, in spite of predictions in computer science and science fiction. These predictions failed to materialize, he says, because in the field of Artificial Intelligence, even the most basic mental and physical skills of children, such as walking, turned out to be "some of the hardest engineering problems ever conceived" (193).*

Because this paragraph begins with reference to the source, the reader knows it is a paraphrase of information in Pinker's book on page 93. Even without the quotation at the end you would need to include this page number.

### ***Integrating References***

If you were telling someone a story that involved other people and what they said, you would naturally explain to the listener who those other people were and indicate when you were quoting them. You would not let their voices become confused with yours or simply drop quotations from others into your story without reference to the speaker. The same principles apply to the "stories" you tell readers about your research and what other writers have said on the subject.

When you have established your voice as the narrator and introduced other writers in the text of your paper, you will have tremendous freedom to paraphrase and quote from these sources, without risk of plagiarism.

As long as you use quotation marks around the language you have included from references, you can splice borrowed words, phrases, whole sentences, or passages into your own writing for your own purposes. Suppose, for example, that you are writing a paper on population control policies and want to refer to this passage from Joel Cohen's book *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* (1995):

*My first discovery was that I was not alone in not knowing how many people the Earth could support. Numerical estimates produced over the past century have ranged widely—so widely that they could not all be close to right—from less than 1 billion to more than 1,000 billion. More than half of the estimates fell between 4 billion and 16 billion people.*

*I also learned that the question "How many people can the*

*Earth support?" is not a question like "How old are you?" which has exactly one answer at any given time. The Earth's capacity to support people is determined partly by processes that the human and natural sciences have yet to understand, and partly by choices that we and our descendants have yet to make. (10-11)*

You might want to include the entire passage in a block quotation, as I did here, but there are dozens of other possibilities for using portions of Cohen's writing within your own. You might begin, for example, by paraphrasing the central purpose of his book and then quote portions that underscore the main points you want to convey:

*In How Many People Can the Earth Support?, Joel Cohen explains that all efforts to calculate sustainable population growth depend on diverse assumptions and variables that yield radically different answers to the question posed in the title of his book. As a result of these variables, Cohen notes, "Numerical estimates produced over the past century have ranged widely— so widely that they could not all be close to right— from less than 1 billion to more than 1,000 billion." Because sustainability will depend on "processes that the human and natural sciences have yet to understand" and on "choices that we and our descendants have yet to make," Cohen recognizes that this central question raises hundreds of others, some of which we cannot yet answer (10-11).*

Note that you can splice whole sentences onto your own or quote parts of sentences within yours. In the first sentence quoted here, the capital *N* and the period tell readers that the writer has quoted the whole sentence, without alteration. In the next sentence, lowercase initial letters and the absence of end punctuation indicate that the writer has quoted portions of sentences. "Tags," such as *Cohen notes* or *recognizes*, simply remind the reader of the source and sometimes express the author's viewpoint.

If necessary, you can leave out language within a quotation or add language to it, as long as you indicate to readers that you have done so. You can indicate missing language with an *ellipsis* (. . .) and added language with square brackets ([ ]). For example, if you do not want to include the words between dashes (*so widely that they could not all be close to right*), you can insert an ellipsis to let readers know you have dropped them:

*As a result of these variables, Cohen notes, "Numerical estimates produced over the past century have ranged widely . . . from less than 1 billion to more than 1,000 billion" (10).*

If you cut off the end of a sentence in ways that make it look complete, you should let the reader know you have done so by using an ellipsis and the period at the end:

*As a result of these variables, Cohen notes, "Numerical estimates produced over the past century have ranged widely . . ." (10).*

Brackets allow you to supply information that clarifies a quotation or makes it fit grammatically with your sentence. When you take sentences out of a longer passage, for example, you might need to add words that clarify pronouns: "*Apparently they [Pearl and Reed] did not at first know that Verhulst had derived the same curve . . .*" (85). Or you might need to substitute words that allow the quotation to mesh with your sentence: *Cohen's "first discovery was that [he] was not alone . . ."* (10).

Only three rules limit your freedom to integrate quotations within your own sentences and passages:

1. The readers should always know whose language they are reading.
2. Sentences you assemble with quotations should read grammatically.
3. Your use of quotation (including splices, ellipses, and brackets) should not distort the original meaning of the quoted material.

These methods of integrating quotations and references will require more experimental tinkering than the practice of simply dropping quotations, as “mysterious voices,” into the middle of your work, but they are necessary if you want your research papers to sound like real academic writing and if you want to avoid plagiarism. With practice, weaving references and quotations into your own writing will also become a natural way to compose.

Here is the beginning of a finished research paper in which the student has clearly introduced focused research questions, established her own voice, integrated quotations and references appropriately, and set a direction for further discussion. This paper on the roles of “working memory” in learning and mental disorders was written for an introductory course in cognitive science.

*What limits our capacity to learn? Why don't we have unlimited access to the supposedly infinite number of memories stored in our long-term memory (LTM)? And what prevents those with serious disorders from learning and remembering normally? Part of the answers to those questions lie in working memory (WM), a model for short-term memory first proposed in 1978 by Alan Baddeley and Graham J. Hitch. Baddeley (1986) describes working memory as a “system for the temporary holding and manipulation of information during the performance of a range of cognitive tasks such as comprehension, learning, and reasoning” (p. 39). The capacity for learning and memory depends on the amount of information one can manipulate simultaneously in WM. Working memory is used for everyday cognitive tasks and is our first approach to understanding new ideas and concepts. Our long-term memory, which derives meaning and concepts from information, comes into play based on the information currently stored in WM (Brainerd, 1983). Working memory can be seen as the “work space” for storing and processing information and has a limited capacity for the amount of information it can process.*

*This paper will explore the evidence for working memory and its importance in common cognitive tasks. It will also study how WM affects development of learning from childhood to maturity and its gradual deterioration in the elderly.*

## **Conclusions**

Research papers are not just collections of information you gathered from other writers. They are essays that present information and ideas to readers from a particular perspective, for a specific reason: *your perspective and your reason*. Like these reasons, the forms of a research paper will vary greatly from one field and course to another. In the sciences, business, and some social

science courses they might be organized as formal reports on your investigations, with section headings, charts, and graphs. In many cases the sequence of questions that structure lab reports might be a reliable guide to organization:

- What were you investigating and why?
- How did you do this research?
- What did you find out?
- What conclusions can we draw from the study?

In other courses an equally good research paper might sound like an informative magazine article, beginning with anecdotes or leading questions that draw readers into a casual, continuous discussion of the subject.

Like other essays, however, all research papers should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. As “stories” you tell readers about your research, they should introduce the central questions or issues you intend to pursue, give readers a sense of direction, follow that direction, and arrive at a destination. The process of completing a research paper does require some special strategies:

- Approach this task as an opportunity to explore the topic, with a sense of open curiosity. Let yourself become interested for your own reasons, with attention to the questions the topic raises.
- Begin this task early, shortly after the paper is assigned, and schedule blocks of time to work on it in the following weeks. Research papers begun shortly before the deadline are frustrating to write and usually a disappointment to everyone.
- When you have chosen a topic, immediately begin to narrow and focus research questions, and continue to do so while you are reading and composing.
- Search for materials strategically, using a few good sources to find others and asking for help when you need it.
- Read this material strategically as well, always with a purpose and with a variety of methods.
- Record bibliographical information and page numbers as you take notes, and keep notes also on your own perspective and plans for writing.
- Compose the paper in your own voice, addressed to your readers, introducing references when you choose to include the voices and viewpoints of others.
- Allow time for substantial revision, to move central ideas you have discovered to the beginning of the paper.
- Choose a consistent format for documentation.
- Proofread carefully before you turn in the paper.

If you follow this advice and enter the writing process with an inquisitive interest in the subject, a research paper can become one of the most valuable, memorable experiences you have in college.