Plagiarism

Why It Happens • How to Prevent It

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1 *Introduction*

Taking the Plague Out of Plagiarism

Consider this: In 1892, when she was twelve years old, Helen Keller (yes, *that* Helen Keller) was accused of plagiarism. The work in question was a story titled "The Frost King," substantial portions of which, it turns out, were copied from a story by nineteenth-century author Margaret T. Canby titled "The Frost Fairies."

In her autobiography, Keller admits to borrowing from another's work:

> At that time I eagerly absorbed everything I read without a thought of authorship, and even now I cannot be quite sure of the boundary line between my ideas and those I find in books . . . But the fact remains that Miss Canby's story was read to me once, and that long after I had forgotten it, it came back to me so naturally that I never suspected that it was the child of another mind. (1952, 63)

The accusation and subsequent inquisition of Keller by her teachers, along with the realization that she had, in fact, unwittingly plagiarized a story by another writer, shook Keller. She avoided ever writing fiction again and, if we can believe her assertions of innocence, turned to autobiography partly as a way to prove to herself as well as to others her own authorship.

Flash-forward more than a century, to 2006: Keller's story became a hot topic once more, this time for its usefulness as a comparison with the case of a Harvard sophomore, Kaavya Viswanathan, who was accused of plagiarizing material from two young adult novels by Megan McCafferty. Take, for instance, the *New York Times* article focusing on the young author:

> Under scrutiny, [she] suddenly recalled adoring Ms. McCafferty's books and claimed to have unconsciously channeled them. Given that, her critics charged, she was being treated better than other fabulists of late. . . . But what if she had been deaf and blind? (Zeller 2006)

YOU NEED TO KNOW: Understanding and Defining the Term *Plagiarism*

Many students think of ***plagiarism*** only as copying an entire essay and handing it in as one's own, when in fact the term refers to appropriating any material—ideas, writings, images, or portions of those—and claiming to be the original creator.

The word itself is interesting; its most immediate root is the Latin word ***plagiarius***, meaning "kidnapper," but that word in turn comes from the older Latin word ***plagus***, "net." The metaphors here might resonate with students. What does it mean to kidnap someone's ideas? How does the image of tossing a net over an object to capture it translate to capturing ideas from today's online Net?

It's also worth considering that plagiarism, which applies to questions of authorship, is slightly different from—though related to—forgery (which involves questions of authenticity), copyright infringement (which deals with legal ownership), and the broad label cheating (which implies purposeful deception of any type).

It may seem like splitting hairs to worry too much about definitions—we all know what it means to plagiarize, right? Perhaps as teachers we do, but parents, administrators, students, and the broader community may look for, and find, loopholes. Take the example of an eighth-grade teacher whose students turned in work copied verbatim from an encyclopedia, as is related in an excerpt from ***Preventing Cheating and Plagiarism***:

> [The teacher] said they had plagiarized. Some of the kids' parents appealed to the school's Headmistress. Overruling the teacher, she decreed such copying was not plagiarism—at least not when done by 8th graders. (Clabaugh and Rozycki 2003)

It's worthwhile, therefore, to construct a written definition of plagiarism to work with, preferably for your entire school community, but at least in your own course syllabus. That's not a guarantee that no one will challenge your definition, but, as Clabaugh and Rozycki suggest, "A dictionary definition is better than mere assertion. . . . Dealing effectively with plagiarism requires definitional clarity."

It's a good question, perhaps, but one that doesn't eclipse all other questions. What, for instance, if the Harvard student had been twelve, like Keller, instead of nineteen? What if Keller had just signed a half-million-dollar book deal instead of just showing her story to a teacher? What if Keller had been able to check her work easily and quickly with a Google search or by running it through a paper-checking site like Turnitin.com? And, too, this one: What if Keller's error had become fodder for every blog and website that chose to take up the issue and the fallout had been so thick and sudden she'd been assured of never getting published again?

When we think about plagiarism, in other words, are we asking all of the right questions?

The Nature of the Problem

Plagiarism is easier than ever to commit, is trickier than ever to judge, and resists facile response by educators as much in the twenty-first century as it did in the nineteenth. The very tools available to students have changed the entire landscape of research and writing; if, as a teacher, you're anything like me, you've tried to keep up with that shifting landscape, but it's overwhelming. Just before writing this sentence, for instance, I ran a quick Google search for references to Margaret T. Canby (the author from whom Keller copied her work). Google spit back more than eighty-six thousand results, but the first ten displayed—one screen—simply redirected me back to Keller's autobiography. Rather than paging through all eighty-six thousand sites, I pretty quickly decided just to give up my search—turns out I'm just not quite interested enough in Margaret T. Canby to browse through all of those Google pages.

On the other hand, a quick search for "Helen Keller papers" brought an instant reward: site after site of free term papers, essays, and research projects on the work of Helen Keller. The names of these "paper mills" sometimes say a lot about the content of the sites and their intended subscribers; there's Echeat.com, Fratfiles.com, Schoolsucks.com. Many of the sites will even write custom essays for students for about the same amount many teachers spend at Starbucks on their way to school, and to make matters worse, students can even buy papers that are less than excellent; you can pay good money for a C+ paper that will fool your teacher *just* enough.

So there, in a nutshell, is the terrain of research these days: it's far, far easier for many students to find a prewritten paper on a topic than to do research on one. Especially solid, academic research. To do that, one might even have to—gasp—visit a real library. With *books*.

That's not to say the Internet isn't a wonderful tool—it is. I accessed the *New York Times* article I cited earlier online. I gathered a lot of information for this book online. I'm not arguing a Luddite's position or that we should force students never to use online resources. Just the contrary: In a world where students not only will but ***should*** take advantage of the immense resources available to them, it's more important than ever that teachers guide them toward a strong sense of digital literacy and academic integrity. We shouldn't simply expect students not to cheat; we need to give them the tools to avoid cheating.

To compile those tools, we need to understand our students and ***why*** they cheat. We need to understand the academic culture in which they operate and the ways in which some teachers enable or even encourage plagiarism. And we need to understand that plagiarism and cheating may not always be quite synonymous, or at least that intent and response at the individual level matter. Notice, for instance, how Helen Keller felt when she discovered that she had appropriated another's words:

> The two stories were so much alike in thought and language that it was evident Miss Canby's story had been read to me, and that mine was—a plagiarism. It was difficult to make me understand this; but when I did understand I was astonished and grieved. No child ever drank deeper of the cup of bitterness than I did. I had disgraced myself; I had brought suspicion upon those I loved best. . . . As I lay in my bed that night, I wept as I hope few children have wept. I felt so cold, I imagined I should die before morning, and the thought comforted me. I think if this sorrow had come to me when I was older, it would have broken my spirit beyond repairing. (1952, 64)

And here, by way of contrast, is how Senator Joseph Biden, in the midst of a presidential campaign in 1987, responded to reports that he had plagiarized an article in law school:

> "I was wrong, but I was not malevolent in any way," Mr. Biden said. "I did not intentionally move to mislead anybody. And I didn't. To this day I didn't." (Dionne 1987)

I'm not sure that any student cheats out of malevolence, but I take the point. When I first read about Biden's plagiarism, I was appalled, and the idea of plagiarism without "malevolence" sounded to me like a dog-ate-my-homework bit (or, these days, a damaged hard drive). But later I wondered if, in fact, his statement that he "had simply misunderstood the need to cite sources carefully" might hold some validity. Had anyone ever taught him how to cite sources? Had he simply had a phrase like

"academic integrity" tossed at him in a student handbook, or had it been explained? Were the pressures of his academic system so great that he felt compelled to plagiarize, perhaps because he felt his peers were doing it already? Without making excuses, is there, I wondered, room for understanding, even sympathy?

What's Our Real Concern?

Voices from the Classroom

I'm always afraid that I'll accidentally forget to cite something or have my quotation marks in the wrong place—not that any severe punishment will be exercised at my school, but that when I go to a college next year, it may not be seen as the mistake that it is because the teachers there won't know me yet and may put the honest me in a pool of those "cheating kids."

—Laura, age seventeen

The premise of this book is not that plagiarism is always inevitable nor always excusable, but that once a teacher is reduced to the role of source detective, he has already lost an educational battle. Wouldn't most detectives, after all, prefer stopping the crime in the first place to merely finding and punishing offenders? This is a book, then, about school and classroom culture, about assignment making, and about educating students in areas such as research, process writing, and attribution. It also covers detection and response, because educators need tools and policies to handle the crime when it does occur, but I wish always to place detection—and consequence—within the larger context of education.

Or, to use another comparison, think of teachers as doctors. Don't compare plagiarism itself to a disease, no matter how many times authors like me cleverly pull *plague* out of the word; the metaphor won't necessarily stand up. And for goodness' sake don't start comparing the average salaries of doctors to those of teachers. But imagine the aspects of illness doctors concern themselves with: prevention, symptoms, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment. If we follow this model, we don't want to be, as educators, the equivalent of the highly trained and specialized surgeon who steps in at the last moment to orchestrate and carry out an organ transplant (we may want to be treated as that sort of specialist in other areas of our profession, but not this one). If we find ourselves in that role, all that's left us is a drastic response: cut out the illness, fix what we can. To encourage academic integrity, teachers should rather be the insightful and deductive general practitioner, the one who helps patients find the right mix of diet and exercise and testing to forestall the downward spiral into poor health in the first place, but who also catches the signs of illness and knows how to point patients in the direction of a cure. Or perhaps we must be both diagnostician and surgeon at times, but if so, we must at least balance the one job against the other.

Voices from the Classroom

Has plagiarism gotten worse? I've been teaching for forty years, and I really think problems with plagiarism have gotten better. Students aren't having to cite from books; they can go on the Internet and it's no big deal to put quotes around it. If all I have to do is put quotation marks around it, I don't mind hitting another key on the computer. But if you were never told it was wrong, if it was never emphasized in class, or it was never said to you, "I'm going to turn you in to Turnitin.com," and you thought you could sneak it past me, you probably would. But now, with all these checks, what's the sense?

—Ninth-grade teacher

Prevention, symptoms, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment. That's the ideal, but you may feel, as a classroom practitioner, that you're constantly doing triage—stemming the worst wounds in a constant panic just to stop the bleeding. We all feel that way, sometimes, about writing, about reading, and most certainly about plagiarism and cheating, if for no other reason than when we catch the worst offenders, the crime has already been committed—we enter at the tail end of the story and have no options left except simple response or even punishment. We feel betrayed; we take it personally, as if the criminal had stolen from us, as if the patient's illness were a personal affront, as if the student had violated our trust out of, well, malevolence. And in response, we vow to ourselves to become better watchdogs, to make sure it doesn't happen again. Or, worse, we deal with one student and then go right back about our business, hoping it won't happen again—we stemmed the bleeding, after all, and the rest is out of our hands.

The rest is not out of our hands.

If any of the above symptoms of the betrayed teacher sound familiar, know that you aren't alone. I use the first-person plural because I've been as rocked by cases of plagiarism and as dismayed at my role, before and after, as any other classroom teacher. I recall the sinking feeling in my gut when I realized that a student I really liked—one who had asked me for a recommendation to the Naval Academy—had copied a friend's work almost word for word. I remember the time I trusted a young woman to make up an essay test at home rather than in her study hall only to discover she'd saved her sister's work from two years before and turned it in as her own. And if plagiarism isn't always malevolent, I've at times turned malevolent in response to plagiarism, Googling sentences with a certain wild-eyed malice that I usually reserve for people who talk on their cell phones during movies or student teachers who leave the photocopier with a paper jam when I'm late to class and trying to run off a quiz.

Take a deep breath as you read this book. Teaching *is* personal; I don't blame anyone who takes the callous or just plain thoughtless actions of students to heart. Revenge isn't the answer, though, even if it sometimes feels good in the short term, nor are other short-term responses to bad teaching days (I, too, have been known to gobble down

the last three doughnuts in the teachers lounge between classes in some misplaced attempt at self-consolation—who hasn't?). If you're stuck responding to a case of plagiarism, be prepared to do so. If treatment is needed, give it. But (and I try to write this without moralizing) don't forget the steps that lead to that end or the benefits of planning, of careful design of lessons, and, ultimately, of education. Someday, when one of your students runs for president, perhaps he—or, better, she—will tell the press that yes, she did attribute sources incorrectly, but fortunately there was a fine teacher who, instead of sending her straight to the gallows, showed her the problem and helped her correct it before it kept her from writing—or running—at all.

Voices from the Classroom

I think there is more pressure to get into college than there used to be—before, getting a bachelor's was a big thing; now everybody getting into some level of professionalism gets a bachelor's degree. There's a lot of pressure, therefore, from parents to get into a better college, and they put a lot of pressure on themselves, too, I think. It's more about the grades you make in their minds than what you've learned or whether you're doing the right thing.

—Guidance counselor

What You'll Find in This Book

Every teacher has a story or ten about plagiarism. On the surface, these stories seem to run along similar lines—kids get behind, get careless, and get caught. Motivations, reactions, and responses, however, differ from case to case.

If we're going to talk about plagiarism, we need to remember that when it happens, it happens because of an individual student and, sometimes, an individual teacher, and their stories matter, even if overarching policies or ideals affect them similarly. Throughout this book, you'll find sidebars containing some of these actual stories by teachers and students—stories that, I believe, throw into sharp relief the difficulty of a one-size-fits-all approach to educating about plagiarism and suggest that ordinary classroom teachers constantly struggle to figure out how to best handle these difficult situations.

And since this book is for ordinary classroom teachers who are constantly developing their own stories about arbitration and response, I've organized it with the teacher in mind. Although I believe strongly in the need for education and prevention, I also know from bitter experience that when a case of student plagiarism strikes, it strikes hard. So I've arranged the chapters for a teacher who may have a paper of questionable authenticity sitting on his desk *right now*—who may be deeply concerned about the student, about being fair, about the perceptions of the rest of the class, about dealing with parents and administrators, and just about getting it all right.

First, then, for that teacher, comes detection. Is the paper plagiarized and, if so, from what source? Who else knows and how do you prove it? Those questions, along with strategies for guiding students away from various types of plagiarism, are covered in the next chapter, Chapter 2.

After detection comes response, but choosing between alternatives for response also requires us to practice another type of detection, one that's often more challenging than merely uncovering the crime. Chapter 3, therefore, discusses the importance of uncovering motives and offering students a chance to explain their actions and, through explanation, to reflect. Finding out *why* a student plagiarized is a key not just to helping that student learn but also to restructuring assignments, policies, and perhaps even the culture of a classroom or school.

Chapter 4 covers the options for immediate, short-term response once a teacher *does* discover a case of plagiarism, and after motives have been considered. Such response includes, but isn't limited, consequences and possibilities for correction. This chapter also considers the roles of teachers, administrators, and parents in cases of academic dishonesty.

Next comes long-term response. Though I'd love to emphasize the importance of applying foresight and preventing plagiarism by placing it first, the truth is that most teachers deal with a few actual students and situations first, then revisit the way they structure assignments and educate students on the front end. So Chapters 5 and 6 deal with long-term response in the classroom, with teaching citation rules and designing assignments and assessments, and Chapter 7 addresses issues that affect entire schools such as honor codes, school culture, and overarching policies.

Voices from the Classroom

No one is going to rat you out for cheating because everyone's done it. If we all started turning each other in, we'd be hypocrites stabbing each other in the back. It would just be a mess. The few that have never cheated aren't going to say anything either, because the odds are so incredibly turned against them.

—Aaron, age fifteen

In addition, you'll find other kinds of supplementary information scattered throughout the chapters of this book. The voices of researchers and educational journalists often summarize ideas and approaches well enough that I wish to add their thoughts to my own. I've also included statistics and graphs that illustrate the current educational climate regarding plagiarism. And, too, I included material that reflects my own school and classroom.

But the heart and soul of any book that is useful for classroom teachers are lesson plans, practical strategies, and teaching ideas that help us operate daily. In each chapter, you'll find just such methods presented as succinctly as possible, often using bullet points or numbered lists for your own ease. These strategies can be adopted and transformed as necessary

for your classroom, the grade level you teach, or your distinct student population—use them as you need to (and no, you don't even need to provide an MLA citation when you do).

Moving Forward

It's easy to feel discouraged when you read about plagiarism; the statistics are disheartening, especially for those of us who actually *enjoy* writing, and articles on the subject almost always begin with the most dire and frightening statistics available.

But plagiarists aren't always copying the work of others because they hate writing or because they're lazy. Sometimes they fit both these categories, sure, but not always. And whether the crime is intentional or inadvertent, egregious or subtle, the students we deal with are, generally, adolescents. The mixture of emotions that comes with an accusation of plagiarism—guilt, embarrassment, anger, defensiveness—shouldn't allow students to escape consequences, but it places more responsibility on teachers at all levels to be deliberate, calm, and rational in dealing with such cases.

Again, consider the twelve-year-old Helen Keller:

> I never knew even the names of the members of the "court" who did not speak to me. I was too excited to notice anything, too frightened to ask questions. Indeed, I could scarcely think what I was saying, or what was being said to me. (1952, 69)

A nineteen-year-old is, perhaps, a different matter. Viswanathan appeared on the *Today* show shortly after the media identified more than forty passages of nearly identical syntax and diction—right down to the use of italics—between her book and others; in that interview, she still claimed ignorance and announced plans to reissue the book with revisions and an added preface (no publisher took her up on it). Yet that's not to say that a high school senior, for instance, might not feel the guilt and despair Keller describes. It's not to say that students always have the foresight not to compound one lie with another or not simply to shut down when confronted. And, as with almost every story, there was more to Viswanathan's than initially met the eye. Her book, it turned out, had been packaged by an entertainment company that redirected the plot, characterizations, and overall ideas of the novel from a few sample chapters. There were other pressures in play, too; reporter Mark Patinkin

Voices from the Classroom

Plagiarism? I'd define it as an easy A if you don't get caught, and an easy F if you do.

—Anton, age fourteen

(2006) noted, "It appears another reason this happened is that Kaavya was pushed by adults who seemed even more obsessed than she was with her success." Were her actions excusable? No. But if I were her teacher, I'd want to know the whole story.

I hope as you read this book, you'll look for strategies both to deal with plagiarism and to avoid it in the first place, but I also hope you'll take the time to define your own attitude toward such cases. Policy is important; demeanor is, too. Plagiarism ***isn't*** a disease, even if it's convenient to discuss it as one and even if it feels pandemic in our society; plagiarism is a mistake, one that we, at the best, can help students avoid, and at the worst, can still use as an opportunity for further education and learning.

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