

Deterring Plagiarism: Some Strategies

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Knowing how to build personal ideas on past knowledge is a central goal of university study, but it sometimes seems that students hear about it mainly through warnings and threats. Here are some practical ways to lessen the risk of plagiarism in your classes while using writing as a way for students to explore ideas and learn ways of thinking.

These suggestions state general principles and offer methods for applying them efficiently. They include links to practical help for both instructors and students at the University of Toronto. For current theory and research on the nature of academic plagiarism, see the works by Eisner and Vicinus (eds.) and Howard described on our page [Books and Articles about Writing in the Disciplines](#). A website by [Nick Carbone](#) reviews other sources of teaching advice and offers further practical suggestions for alternatives to the policing role.

Make Assignments an Integral Part of Learning in the Course

Students need to know that the work they do for course assignments will contribute to their learning, and they deserve to have their efforts rewarded. Here are some ways of designing assignments to demonstrate the connection of writing with thinking.

1. Show your interest in what students have to say by varying topics from year to year to reflect current issues in the field and in your course. This also ensures that a bank of old papers does not accumulate. You may need to save very general and "classic" topics for in-class writing or oral debates.
2. Make assignments specific to your course experience. Base them on material covered in classes and tutorials (including class discussions and student presentations), not solely on extra reading or out-of-class work. Also make clear that tests and exams will require mastery of work done for assignments.
3. Ask real questions in your discipline, and let students know that you expect engaged critical thinking rather than "correct" answers. Encourage speculation based on evidence and reasoning, not just compilation of existing information or expression of unsupported personal opinion. (For examples of such questions in undergraduate assignments, see our file on [Designing Assignments](#); see also the works by Bean, Walvoord and Anderson, and Wright and Herteis listed in the page [Books and Articles about Writing in the Disciplines](#).)
4. Sometimes ask for papers that start from specific and problematic details: a point of contention from class discussion, an actual result in a lab experiment, an outdated or flawed passage in a course reading, analysis of a local issue or current event. Or ask students to demonstrate a particular technique learned in the course: construction of a table, hand-drawing of a diagram, application of a specific type of theoretical analysis.

5. Consider asking for genres besides essays, reviews, and reports. Letters, blog posts or journalistic articles for specific audiences can require students to use their own observations (including knowledge of likely readers) as well as demonstrate precise clear interpretation of academic evidence.
6. Consider restricting the range of acceptable sources, specifying some as starting points. Or ask for inclusion of a specific component such as a comparison of a course reading with another source, or an annotated reference list.
7. Help all students master the challenges of reading academic sources by applying some of the suggestions outlined in our new file on [Teaching Reading](#). Let them know about the other instruction on reading available, including the new Advice files developed for multilingual students in our section on [Reading and Researching](#).

Demonstrate Your Expectations

It's not enough just to send students to the advice file [How Not to Plagiarize](#). Besides letting students know that they shouldn't copy or cheat, you can build up a positive perspective by showing good use of sources. Point out the ways scholars in your field build on each other's work, outlining the cycle of knowledge production to give students some sense of their place in it as apprentice scholars.

8. Analyse passages from course readings or your own publications to exemplify such operations as aggregation, synthesis, critical analysis, and disagreement. Focus on the thinking involved, not the documentation format.
9. Display excerpts from past student pieces that use sources appropriately. In class or tutorial, point out the range of ways in which they integrate references, and comment on how this increases their value as argument. If you show student samples on the course website, be sure to include your annotations.
10. Warn against taking textbooks and popular journalism as models of referencing practice.
11. See if you can define what constitutes "common knowledge" in your discipline to map out the allowable range of undocumented assertions.
12. Ask [instructional librarians](#) to teach class sessions on research skills relevant to your specific assignment, including ways to use reference resources as initial overviews, and to use databases for identifying relevant journal articles. Mention other resources for self-instruction such as [handbooks](#) on research writing in your discipline.
13. Be reasonable in your expectations of correct language use. Make clear that you expect care and progress, but don't demand perfection. That can drive students into the arms of essay-selling services. (N.B. Although Writing Centres teach students to improve their editing and proofreading skills, they don't perform editing or proofreading on student work.)

14. Maintain a reputation of being tough on cheating without letting that seem your only focus:

- Show students you are familiar with paper mills: e.g., comment on the quality of available papers for your specific assignment, perhaps showing an excerpt in class. (Most will be laughably bad.)
- Consider using the plagiarism-checking software [Turnitin](#) for large or multi-sectioned classes. Mention it in your course syllabus, and note the opt-out provision. It is best not to set a specific percentage of “similarity matches” for an assignment: that encourages gaming the system by merely changing a few words in patchworked borrowings.
- Know the established procedures for confronting students whom you suspect of plagiarism. Expect and use administrative support. The Office of Student Academic Integrity in Arts and Science provides a good explanation in its [Academic Integrity Handbook](#).

Look at the Process as well as the Product

Students left on their own for large assignments tend to get into trouble and cause trouble for you. Here are some alternatives that provide chances to learn and can save you frustration and grief—and even time, in the long run.

15. Don't give just one written assignment per course. If possible, connect several smaller assignments as stages or components of a larger one. Students benefit from preliminary feedback, and you get to know their challenges.
16. Require plans and drafts for larger assignments, including some self-analysis: e.g., reading logs or journals, annotated lists of sources, accounts of problems recognized and solved, analysis of any group work.
17. Occasionally ask students to write self-reflective notes in class (e.g., statement of initial questions, commentary on one source, definition of key terms, a statement on "what I learned by doing this assignment" the day it's handed in). Read these and use them for further instruction or class discussion; consider grading some as part of the assignment.
18. If students tend to collaborate, and if collaboration is expected in professions that apply the knowledge of your discipline, consider building group work and/or guided peer review into the assignments. Offer guidance on focussing group meetings; discuss pitfalls and outline the needed skills of communication and negotiation. Require logs and written notes from meetings, and ask for a summative analysis of other members' contributions.
19. Give constructive feedback on students' written work early in the course. Review key lessons if necessary, and reinforce your recommendation of instructional support. See our file on [Responding to Student Writing](#) for efficient methods of grading and giving feedback.