Plagiarism, Source Use, and Writing Ethics

Plagiarism is among the topics most likely to lead to impassioned conversation among teachers. It is a complex problem, particularly in the era of digital information and composition, with varied causes; the term *plagiarism* is often used to describe a broad range of actions ranging from fraud to inadvertent misrepresentation or mis-citation of sources. Given the variety of factors that can contribute to plagiarism, the Writing in the Disciplines Program advocates the following practices for helping students use sources correctly. We emphasize strategies that will help students synthesize sources and make students' writing–and learning–more effective.

Explain Plagiarism and Develop Clear Policies

- Remind students that the goal of research is to understand, augment, dialogue with, and challenge the work of others
- Plagiarism devalues the institution and degree and hurts the student, who loses the opportunity to think independently and participate in a conversation
- Include a policy for using sources in your syllabus and discuss it in class, including consequences of both plagiarism and misuse or inaccurate citation of sources
- Establish and communicate an honor code and process for resolving plagiarism cases to which all students must subscribe
- Consider critiquing a paper from a paper mill in class. This not only shows students you are aware of the existence of such websites, but also provides an opportunity for demonstrating good writing practices

Improve the Design and Sequence of Assignments

- Design assignments that require genuine inquiry leading to an exploration of, or argument about, the research question or topic
- Develop idiosyncratic assignments with the goal of making students feel their work is, or could be, an original contribution to an ongoing discussion in the discipline

- Get students thinking about topics early enough to allow them time to narrow their focus through reading—this will encourage and provide evidence of originality
- Establish a course theme that grounds student research and have students reflect on their topic throughout their research, addressing prior knowledge, new discoveries, and how their project develops
- Develop a course structure and timeline that allows students opportunities to explore and supports work toward defining topics. Good research results in new questions, but students have limited time. Meeting individually with students can help them focus their question and get started finding sources
- Support each step of the research process by staging assignments, and using in-class activities and "low-stakes" assignments to guide students
- Break down a longer project into intermediate steps with deadlines to help establish good research skills, gather evidence of students' originality, and force students to prepare ahead of time
- Make the research process, and technology used for it, visible. Ask your students to consider how various technologies affect the way information is gathered and synthesized, and their possible effects on plagiarism
- Plan activities–like close examinations of readings– that ask students to analyze and reflect on genre conventions they may not be aware of in different disciplines

Attend to Sources and the Use of Reading

- Ask students to work with and document a variety of sources, such as observations, interviews, or surveys to help students develop the ability to gather, assess, read, and incorporate different kinds of information
- Design activities that help students become familiar with and make informed choices about genre conventions
- Show students how to evaluate sources through class or online discussion, or reflective assignments around content quality and context
- Develop activities to help students read carefully and think about whether or how to use readings in their writing
- Ask students to hand in notes to provide evidence of original thought. Consider giving instruction on how to take careful notes during the research process
- Schedule an instructional session for your class with a librarian on using library resources and finding sources. This will help students understand both the possibilities for and limits on their research projects, and will help them become more comfortable and familiar with the research process
- Make explicit the difference between listing facts and writing a research paper

Work on Plagiarism Responsibly

- Distinguish between misuse of sources and plagiarism. In cases of misuse, help students understand how to incorporate and cite sources correctly and have them rewrite
- If you suspect plagiarism, talk with the student about your concern. Request he or she describe their process and show you in-process work (e.g. drafts, outlines, sources). If they can't, discuss the consequences of plagiarism

Take Appropriate Disciplinary Actions

- Pay attention to UVM's institutional guidelines (http://www.uvm.edu/policies/ student/acadintegrity.pdf). In addition to establishing common standards and defining plagiarism, the UVM Code of Academic Integrity distinguishes between "technical" (unintentional) violations and deliberate violations of the code and how to respond to them
- Consider your goal for disciplinary action. In some cases, failing grades, academic probation, or even expulsion may be appropriate. In others, having a student repeat the entire research process may be a more effective approach

The advice in this tip sheet is adapted from Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). The original document is available at http://www.wpacouncil.org.

For more teaching tips, to request a consultation, or to attend a workshop, contact Susanmarie Harrington at smharrin@uvm.edu or visit www.uvm.edu/wid.

For information about how the Undergraduate Writing Center can work with assist your students with this and other writing skills, contact Sheila Boland Chira at sbolandc@uvm.edu or visit www.uvm.edu/writingcenter.