

How to Avoid Getting Caught Plagiarizing

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Pssst. Hey, student! Thinking of plagiarizing a paper for your English or history class? Want to avoid detection? Here are four common mistakes that greatly increase your chances of getting caught.

First, plagiarize only once in a class. Most students make the crucial mistake of plagiarizing only one paper in a class, usually as an act of desperation near the end of the semester. But, think about it. If you turn in a paper or two with sentences like, “Gun control would be a very good idea if it didn’t have so many problems that it caused associated with it,” then you should probably avoid turning in a paper that starts something like this: “*Fin de siecle* Victorian advocates of eugenics, bolstered by the Darwinian dream of a perfected human race, provided philosophical justification for barbarous Nazi experiments a generation later.” As you can see, the contrast is simply too stark to avoid detection. And, who made such a comparison possible? You did! So, if you are going to plagiarize, do it right from the beginning of the semester so that you establish yourself early on as an excellent writer.

Second, include words you don’t understand Your professor has probably made some pretty shrewd guesses regarding the typical vocabulary of the average college student. He or she knows that you commonly use terms like “excellent,” probably know the meaning of “egalitarian,” probably don’t know the meaning of “exigence,” and probably never use “egregious” in speech or writing. So eschew (that is, avoid) exotic or esoteric terms when you plagiarize. Of course, this means going back through the stolen document and doctoring it up with terms you *do* commonly use. This is a lot of work, but it pays off in the end. The *last* thing you want is to be asked what “onerous” means—having just used it in a paper—and to be forced to respond, “I don’t know.” It would be safer, though more laborious, to locate and remove “onerous,” and then substitute “demanding.” While we’re on the topic of vocabulary, always delete foreign or foreign sounding words and phrases from your plagiarized sources. Terms like *zeitgeist*, *bon ton*, *milieu*, *menage* and *quid pro quo* are just red flags. Get rid of them!

Third, ignore the clear distinction between professional and amateur writing Most of your faculty are professional writers. No, they’re not Norman Mailer or Ellen Goodman or even Stephen Jay Gould, but they make their living writing and editing in addition to teaching. So, just as Yo-Yo Ma could easily distinguish between the beginning cello student and the cello teacher playing in the next rehearsal room, your professor will instantly spot the work of a professional writer in a plagiarized paper. You, on the other hand, are *not* a professional writer, and such distinctions do not stand out to you. Thus, the professor has an unfair advantage in this regard. She may not know precisely *where* the writing originated (though diabolical new technology is providing solutions to this problem), but she will recognize the unaltered work of a professional. So, here’s my advice. Alter the professional’s work so that it looks like an amateur’s work. Where the

professional said something was “unique,” you change it to “very unique.” That’s redundant, and professional writers try to avoid redundancies. Where the professional said, “market indicators suggest that major Asian economies will rebound in the second quarter,” you write, “so it looks like the economies of a lot of countries like Japan and Korea will be doing better soon.” You get the idea. Of course, like substituting a common word for an exotic one, changing whole phrases is a lot of work. But the effort is worth it. Otherwise, you will have to write your own papers.

Fourth. make yourself “one of the usual suspects” Most faculty believe that the student most likely to plagiarize is a C or D student who has shown little interest in a class. That is, they have concluded that plagiarists are slackers, the sort of people who try to get other people to do their work for them. I know this is not a fair generalization, but there it is. So, avoid being categorized as “one of the usual suspects.” Go to class regularly, participate in class discussions, study hard, and do well on exams. You’d be surprised how much good will this creates, and how difficult it is for a faculty member to believe that this kind of student actually plagiarized a paper.

Well, there they are—four mistakes that ensure your detection as a plagiarist. Avoid them at all costs! Of course, you could simply do the research and writing for your own papers, but this is terribly inconvenient and taxing under certain circumstances. On the other hand, it’s not a lot *more* inconvenient and taxing than following my advice.

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