Reducing the Rate of Plagiarism

The word “plagiarism” is derived from the Latin word for “kidnap.” Most students do not enter university with the intention of committing the crime of “kidnapping” the ideas of others. Reported rates of plagiarism are, however, increasing. The following list offers a variety of techniques to reduce plagiarism.

1. **Acknowledge the difficulties in working with new academic material.** Students may plagiarize out of sheer panic. The course material may feel overwhelming, the language of academics too complex, and the pressure to do well too intense. We can help students overcome this anxiety by acknowledging their difficulties. Letting undergraduate students know that they are not expected initially to understand field-specific forms and language and that becoming professionals is a process helps to ease the burden.

2. **Teach critical reading for form as well as content.** Because students are unfamiliar with academic material, they do not recognize the forms that academics use in their writing. Students can begin to understand these forms if they are first shown and then asked to recognize the patterns. Among the patterns that students should learn to recognize are authors’ methods of distinguishing source material from original text and of integrating quotations smoothly.

3. **Design assignments that do not lend themselves easily to plagiarism.** The rate of plagiarism would be dramatically reduced if assignments were written in a way that clearly placed the students’ ideas as primary, and secondary sources as clearly secondary. For example, if an assignment asks the student to address the key concepts of organizational culture and to apply these concepts to an organization, the student will view the key concepts of organizational culture as of central importance given this wording. If, on the other hand, the student is asked to analyze an organization and, using the key concepts of organizational culture, examine the organization’s culture, the student’s attention is drawn to the application of the concepts. This focus on application rather than description of key concepts reduces the likelihood of plagiarism. Assignments that focus on the number of references required and that elicit description rather than argument are more subject to plagiarism.

4. **Ensure students know how to access the appropriate style manuals.** Tell students which style is appropriate and refer them to the most recently updated version. The Dalhousie Library posts guidelines for several styles at [http://libraries.dal.ca/writing_and_styleguides.html](http://libraries.dal.ca/writing_and_styleguides.html)
5. **Emphasize the importance of academic integrity as a professional moral value.** In university, students learn both the knowledge and the values that will be expected of them as professionals. As members of a professional field, they cannot take credit for material they did not create or fail to credit the achievements of others. Students, particularly those in the early years of study, do not always understand that university writing is the start of engagement in an academic, professional dialogue, a dialogue that propels the fields of study. In addition, students who know professors personally are more likely to feel a personal obligation of honesty.

6. **Break the assignment into stages.** Students who are asked to submit an assignment in stages (e.g., proposal, outline, first draft) over the course of a semester are held accountable throughout the writing process and are less likely to “dump” material into an assignment at the last minute or to purchase a document. A sequenced approach also familiarizes the marker with the students’ writing style and materials and deviations will be more apparent in the final draft. If a marker will not view the sequence of materials, allotting time for peer review can still alleviate the pressure of panicked last minute writing and increase accountability.