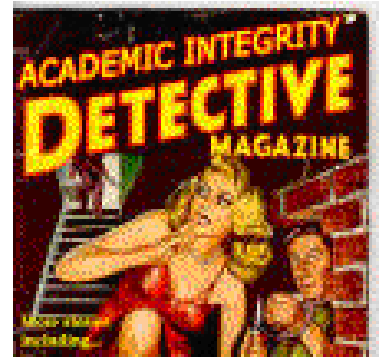# It's Still Plagiarism, Even if it's Virtual

A student who has decided to plagiarize has many sources to choose from: the millions of free Web pages available on the Internet, published articles found in the Library's subscription databases, commercial paper mills found on the Internet, and unofficial archives of college papers housed by fraternities, sororities, or other student groups.

While there are many techniques and services you can use to detect plagiarism, none works for all of the sources listed above. This handout provides an overview of the techniques and services available to you if you suspect a student has plagiarized.

Web Sites

The easiest way for a student to plagiarize is to locate a Web site on his topic, then cut and paste material from the Web site into his paper. Fortunately, cases such as this are some of the easiest to detect.

> **Example 1**: Here's a real-life case: an instructor came into the Library seeking help because she suspected a student had plagiarized a portion of her paper, a critical work on the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The instructor was familiar with the student's writing style, and some passages in the paper did not ring true.
>
> I asked the instructor to select a portion of the text that she thought was suspicious. We constructed the following search in Google. Notice we used quotation marks to ensure Google was searching phrases and not individual words. Notice too that Google does not require you to put the Boolean operator "And" between search terms; it assumes that an "And" is in there already:
>
> **"to kill a mockingbird" "deeply affecting adaptation"**
>
> The first site returned in the search results was a record for *To Kill a Mockingbird* on DVD from Amazon.com, with the phrase "deeply affecting adaptation" appearing in the first review. The paragraph that followed was identical to the one in the student's paper.

Of course, not all cases are this easy or straightforward. Since no search engine searches all Internet sites, you may want to try a combination of search tools such as Google (www.google.com), Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com), MetaCrawler (www.metacrawler.com), and AlltheWeb (www.alltheweb.com). Since the search techniques differ with each search tool, click

on the Help, Search Tips, or Advanced Search options on each search tool's Home page for examples of how to construct a search.

> **Example 2:** A student submits a paper on autism. Some portions of the paper seem out of place - the writing style is different, and the passage has a more authoritative tone than the rest of the paper. Part of the paper reads:

>> In many families, there appears to be a pattern of autism or related disabilities, further supporting a genetic basis to the disorder. While no one gene has been identified as causing autism, researchers are searching for irregular segments of genetic code that autistic children may have inherited.

> If you suspect this passage is plagiarized, focus on a few key words or phrases in the passage to construct a search. The less generic the search terms are, the greater the odds of a successful search. In the above passage, rather than searching for "pattern" or "disabilities," phrases such as "irregular segments" and "genetic code" will yield better results. Including additional search terms increases the likelihood of finding the exact passage on a Web site.

> Here's a sample search using MetaCrawler. Notice that, like Google, phrases are set off by quotation marks. Unlike Google, the Boolean "And" connects the search terms:

> **autism and "irregular segments" and "genetic code"**

> In the search results, the first Web site retrieved is an article from the Autism Society of America's Web site, entitled "What Causes Autism?" The first paragraph on the page contains the exact wording that appeared in the student's paper.

Subscription Databases

The Library subscribes to over 25 databases, many of which offer the full text of articles published in popular magazines, professional journals, and newspapers. You can see a list of these databases by going to the Library Home Page http://www.blinn.edu/library and selecting Journal, Magazine & Newspaper Articles or Databases in the Find It column.

If you suspect that a student has plagiarized from a published article, searching one or more subscription databases will be the easiest way of finding out. If you are not sure how to get started, a Reference Librarian will be glad to help.

Unless the paper is on a very obscure or specialized topic, Academic Search Premier would be the best place to start. Academic Search Premier indexes over 4000 general-interest magazines and professional journals.

> **Example 3:** A student submits a paper on the topic of ADHD and Ritalin. You are suspicious of a portion of the paper that seems out of place. That portion contains this passage:

>> As useful as Ritalin is to children who have ADHD, it has potential side effects that the child, the parents, and the medical provider must weigh against the benefits before prescribing or continuing the therapy. While on Ritalin, some

children have experienced weight loss, decrease or loss of appetite, a temporary decrease in bone growth, sleep disturbance, increase in blood pressure, occasional tics, nausea, hypersensitivity, anxiety, tension, or nervousness (Lilley & Aucker, 1999). However, recent research has shown that there is little evidence that stimulant use affects either weight or normal grown (Spencer, Biederman & Wilens cited in N. C. Frisch & L. E. Frisch, 2002).

Examine the text from the student's paper to construct the best search strategy. "ADHD" and "Ritalin" are the obvious search terms, but that search would yield hundreds of articles. Adding a less common phrase from the text, such as "bone growth," will narrow down the number of articles retrieved. Notice too that the paragraph has references from 2002. This allows you to further limit your search to articles published in 2002 or later.

To make sure that you are searching through the text of the articles, and not just the subject headings assigned to the articles, select the Advanced Search Option in Academic Search Premier, then select the All Text option from the dropdown boxes. Select "and" from the dropdown boxes to connect the three search terms. Notice that the Full Text option is checked, and in the Date Published field, the search is limited to articles published between January 2002 and March 2004. The completed search screen would look like this:

Constructing a narrow search in this way yields only two articles that meet all of the criteria. You will see the following results screen:

Only result #1 offers the complete text of the article. Click on the HTML Full Text option to bring up the article. The article is eight pages long, but since your search terms are highlighted, you can scan through it until you locate the section that has the term "bone growth." You will locate the portion of this article that appeared verbatim in the student's paper. (Note: If the article is in PDF format, you can view the article, but your search terms are not highlighted).

You can apply these search techniques in other databases and electronic resources. For nursing or medical topics, you could try the Health Reference Center or the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL). For literary topics, try Literature Resource Center or Dictionary of Literary Biography. For government topics, try SIRS Government Reporter and the Military and Government Collection. Project Muse, SIRS Researcher and EJS (Electronic Journal Service) provide full text on a variety of topics.

Paper Mills

Paper mills, clearinghouses where students can purchase term papers and essays, existed long before the Internet. In their online incarnation, they offer students an environment that allows them to find a paper on their topic, pay with a credit card, and receive it immediately by email or fax. Some of the most popular are School Sucks (www.schoolsucks.com), Other People's Papers (www.oppapers.com), and A1 Termpaper (www.a1-termpaper.com). Some, such as CheatHouse (www.cheathouse.com), offer free essays to students who submit a paper of their own to the database.

In response to online paper mills, some for-fee plagiarism detection services offer instructors a site to turn in student papers and compare them with Web sites and paper mill databases.

Plagiarism Detection Services

Of the current plagiarism detection services, perhaps the best known, and most controversial, is turnitin.com (also available at http://www.plagiarism.org). Turnitin.com boasts a database of paper mill papers, Web sites, electronic books, and some subscription databases. Students or instructors submit a paper to turnitin.com, and that paper becomes part of the database against which new papers are compared. An institution can purchase a membership, or individual instructors can purchase their own memberships.

After a paper is submitted, the software analyzes it for non-original content, and returns an Originality Report. Material in the paper that has been copied from another source is highlighted in red, and the source of the material is listed.

The controversies about this service include issues of student privacy, copyright, intellectual property, as well as concerns about the toll it may take on trust in the classroom. Other educators give the service excellent reviews; over 400 U.S. colleges have used the service.

Another well-known detection service is the Essay Verification Engine (EVE2), available at http://www.canexus.com/eve/index.shtml. EVE2's search engine is limited to Web sites.

Strategies for Combating Plagiarism

While it may seem almost a given that students will borrow liberally from the Internet or other sources, you can take positive steps to decrease this likelihood. You probably already use many of the pedagogic techniques discussed below. Taken together, they will minimize the chances that your students will plagiarize to complete an assignment.

➢ Educate your students about plagiarism. Discuss the meaning of academic integrity and the consequences of plagiarism. Show examples of work that has been properly cited and work that has not.

➢ Require your students to select a topic from a specific list you supply. The more narrow the topic, the less likely there is a full-text article or paper-mill paper on the subject. Change topics each semester to prevent papers from being handed down from one generation of student to the next.

➢ Require incremental steps as they write their papers. Have students turn in outlines, topic sentences, and rough drafts as the semester progresses. Have them turn in copies of articles they have located on their topics. Not only does this prevent students from waiting until the last minute to narrow down and research a topic - increasing the temptation to get "help" from the Internet or a paper mill - it gives you a sense of the students' writing style and progress in the course.

➢ Set limits on the type of research information you will accept. For instance, you could limit students to two Web sites from the "free" Internet, and require at least three recently-published articles from a subscription database such as Academic Search Premier. Or, require students to write about a particular passage or article you assign. Paper-mill papers don't usually conform to these criteria.

➢ Require students to turn in a printed page of any Web site, or the first page of any research article, used in the paper. Students who are aware of this requirement may be less tempted to cheat, and it makes it easier for you to check the source if you suspect they have borrowed a bit too freely.

For More Information

For an overview of plagiarism, including prevention and detection strategies, go to:

Robert Harris, Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers
http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm

Gretchen Pearson, Electronic Plagiarism Seminar – LeMoyne College
http://www.lemoyne.edu/library/plagiarism/prevention_strategies.htm

Penn State University's Cyberplagiarism page:
http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cyberplag/

The University of Maryland's Virtual Academic Integrity Library (VAIL) contains resources for faculty and students, including an online tutorial for students:
http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/vail/home.html

Duke University Library has assembled a helpful site for students, including definitions of plagiarism, guides to proper citations, and tips to avoid plagiarism:
http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/plagiarism.htm

A comparison of plagiarism detection services is available at:
http://www.wou.edu/provost/library/staff/kincanon/plagiarism/chart.htm (This site was not available on 11/11/05)

For articles about Turnitin.com and other plagiarism detection services, perform a search in Academic Search Premier, available from the Library's General Periodical Indexes page: http://www.blinn.edu/library/find/articles/general.htm. Use the search term "turnitin.com" or "plagiarism detection" and check Full Text box.

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