

What if I Think My Student Plagiarised?

[The University of Central Missouri](#) defines plagiarism as

the borrowing of ideas, opinions, examples, key words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or even structure from another person's work, including work written or produced by others without proper acknowledgment.... "Proper acknowledgment" is defined as the use of quotation marks or indenting plus documentation for directly quoted work and specific, clearly articulated citation for paraphrased or otherwise borrowed material.

However, it is important to distinguish between plagiarism and documentation errors. Plagiarism purposefully attempts to disguise or confuse the authorship of a piece of writing. Documentation errors, on the other hand, are mistakes. According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), "Students are not guilty of plagiarism when they try in good faith to acknowledge others' work but fail to do so accurately or fully" (2003). Instructors should respond to both sets of problems. However, framing many common mistakes as errors rather than crimes places the emphasis on learning rather than punishment.

Tips for Detecting Plagiarism and Documentation Errors

- Look for shifts in the student's "voice." Dramatic changes in style, word choices, or sentence patterns may indicate copy and pasted sentences or passages.
- Notice strange word choices. These may result from patchwriting where a student attempting to write a paraphrase swaps out a few words with synonyms but leaves the sentence otherwise unchanged.
- Notice odd formatting like text with different color, size, or font that may signal copy and pasted sections.
- Compare the number of unique entries on the reference page with the number of unique entries cited in the paper.
- If a student's paper contains no citations or citations in a mixture of documentation formats, major citation errors are happening.
- Do a Google search. If you search for a suspicious sentence or phrase with quotation marks around it, Google will pull results that use that specific combination of words. Shorter strings of text are most useful since students often use patch writing.
- Submit a student's work to [Safe Assign](#)--a plagiarism detection software offered by the university through your Blackboard classroom.

Tips for Questioning

If you suspect plagiarism, meet individually with the student, ideally during office hours rather than in a rush between classes. Having a printed copy of the paper can be useful for pointing

out problem-areas. Before you bring up plagiarism directly, you can use these questions to give the student an “out” or gather more information.

- I was confused about your paper, so I did a Google search. Before I tell you what I found, is there anything **you** want to tell me about it?
- Tell me how you researched and wrote this paper. What process did you use?
- Where did you look for your sources? Which libraries or databases did you consult?
- Where did you find this article...? ...Can you bring me a copy at the next meeting?
- What do you mean by this phrase....?
- This doesn't sound like the rest of your paper. Did you forget to mark this as a quotation?
- Why does the style of your writing change here? (Harris, 2015).

Tips for Teaching

Use specific examples from the student's paper to model proper citation strategies. For example, you can find a paragraph where the student has summarized (but not acknowledged the source) and show them how to add an in-text citation. Then have them find another part of the paper where they made the same error and correct it while you provide encouragement and support. Similarly, if they attempted to paraphrase but didn't change the original sentence enough (patchwriting), you can help them re-write those sentences.

How the Writing Center Can Help

As a student-centered space deeply committed to the idea that writing is a personalized, recursive learning process, the Writing Center does not report or accuse a student of suspected plagiarism. **Rather the Writing Center strives to create an environment where students may freely seek and find answers for their questions about citation and documentation.** Toward that end the Writing Center provides students with individualized instruction on

- APA, Chicago, and MLA documentation styles
- Distinguishing between summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation
- Identifying when to most effectively summarize, paraphrase, or quote a source
- Proper use of in-text citations and signal phrases
- How to integrate cited information into the author's argument
- Interpreting, developing, and analyzing cited information
- Building and formatting a reference page

The Writing Center also offers a limited number of workshops to individual classes each semester. These can take place in your classroom or in the Learning Commons. Previous sessions have focused on MLA formatting, signal phrases, and using sources to build arguments. To schedule a customized, interactive lesson for your class, contact [Heather Hughes](#) or [Diana Gladfelter](#) at the Writing Center.