

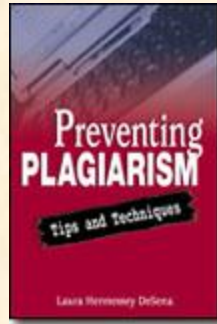
# Preventing Plagiarism

Planning assignments for student  
success and academic integrity

# Planning assignments for student success and academic integrity

- Understand the problem
- Some descriptions of success
- Specific steps to design writing assignments which minimize opportunities and incentives for plagiarism

# Understand the problem



Desena, Laura Hennessey. *Preventing Plagiarism: Tips and Techniques*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE. 2007.

- Many assignments merely “check up” on reading.
- Students are not often made responsible for “insights.”
- Students are taught to think of learning as exchanging “clumps” of information for a price.
- “Clumps” of information are readily available online, for free.
- Students are not taught to construct arguments.

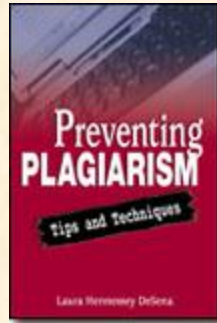
## The Dubious Book Report v. the Authentic Literary Analysis Paper

In requiring students to read, we ask them to demonstrate, to document that they have read. Often we become obsessive about proving to ourselves, as teachers, that all students have completed the reading assignment. We ask for the book report. What is the classic book report? It is pure plot summary, regurgitation that ultimately encourages plagiarism in that it asks for no insights from the students. We place them in this mode early on. Unfortunately, this retelling of the text is useless for several reasons—foremost among them is that it is a shabby mimicking of the original. No one can write Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” as well as Poe, nor should another writer attempt to.

I call this the dubious book report. What has been gained by the assignment? Little in the way of engagement, and in this technological age when students can cut and paste information, they may be completely disengaged through use of online study guides. Even if they are working from the literature itself, in a book report, they are retelling the story, reciting it and, therefore, not responding to it. Their papers will be narrative in structure because they are following the author’s organization. This means, of course, that they are not shaping an argument—that they are not analyzing the text. In the conventional book report template, the only place for student evaluation of text is in the final paragraph, which is typically a general recommendation of the novel to other students because it is “good.” What teachers should



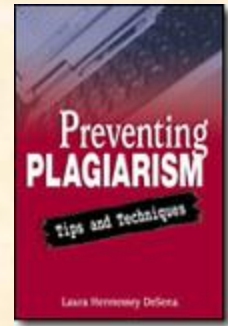
# Understand the problem



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There is also a confidence issue that I encounter in another form when [students] arrive in a college composition course: this sense that they are not scholars, and, therefore, that their criticisms hold little value, as though they have no right to assess the text in any meaningful way. Embedded within this is a palpable fear of being wrong. Students want to be told how to understand a text, rather than wade through it on their own and make discoveries about it. These students are afraid of risk, for fear of being incorrect. As teachers, we must tell them that writers aspire to critical discourse and an original interpretation from among the myriad possibilities, so that they may know there is room for diverse views.

# Understand the problem



- Many assignments merely “check up” on reading.
- Students are not often made responsible for “insights.”
- Students are taught to think of learning as exchanging “clumps” of information for a price.
- “Clumps” of information are readily available online, for free.
- Students are not taught to construct arguments.
- Students fear being wrong.
- Students are taught education is about “right answers” and “fixing mistakes.”
- Students won’t take responsibility for their own thought processes because they think of education as a product they purchase.
- Students won’t take responsibility for their own thought processes because it has not been demanded of them.

# Some descriptions of success

- from Desena:

“As teachers, we must tell them that writers aspire to **critical discourse** and an original **interpretation** from among the myriad possibilities, so that they may know there is room for diverse views.”

- from *Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing*:

“Writers must **work out their answers** to two sorts of questions: questions about their **subject matter** (Will hydrogen fuel cell cars become a solution to the energy crisis? Does Hamlet change in the last act?) and questions about their **audience and purpose** (Who are my readers? How much do they already know and care about this question? What do I want them to see, know, or do?).”

# Some descriptions of success

- from the Apostle Paul:

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it [...] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. [...] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.”

- and again from Paul:

“Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.”

(source <http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=2+Timothy+3%3A14-4%3A5> )

(source <http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Titus+2%3A7-8> )

# Some descriptions of success

- from Quintilian:

“The orator then, whom I am concerned to form, shall be the orator as defined by Marcus Cato, ‘a good man, skilled in speaking.’ But above all he must possess the quality which Cato places first and which is in the very nature of things the greatest and most important, that is, he must be a good man. This is essential not merely on account of the fact that, if the powers of eloquence serve only to lend arms to crime, there can be nothing more pernicious than eloquence to public and private life alike, while I myself, who have laboured to the best of my ability to contribute something of value to oratory, shall have rendered the worst of services to mankind, if I forge these weapons not for a soldier, but for a robber. [...] For it had been better for men to be born dumb and devoid of reason than to turn the gifts of providence to their mutual destruction.”

- and, later in the same discourse:

“In the event of his being compelled to [defend the guilty or dissent from public policy], it will not invalidate our definition of an orator as a ‘good man, skilled in speaking.’ And it is necessary also both to teach and learn how to establish difficult cases by proof. For often even the best cases have a resemblance to bad, and the charges which tell heavily against an innocent person frequently have a strong resemblance to the truth. Consequently, the same methods of defence have to be employed that would be used if he were guilty. Further, there are countless elements which are common to both good cases and bad, such as oral and documentary evidence, suspicions and opinions, all of which have to be established or disposed of in the same way, whether they be true or merely resemble the truth. Therefore, while maintaining his integrity of purpose, the orator will modify his pleading to suit the circumstances.”



*audience and purpose*

maintaining his integrity of purpose

what you have learned

*subject matter*

complete patience and teaching

competent

a model of good works

‘a good man, skilled in speaking.’

integrity, dignity

equipped for every good work

sound speech that cannot be condemned

*critical discourse*

learn how to establish difficult cases by proof

elements which are common to both good cases and bad

*interpretation*

work out their answers

oral and documentary evidence

from whom you learned it

suspicions and opinions

modify his pleading to suit the circumstances

*audience and purpose*

maintaining his integrity of purpose

what you have learned

*subject matter*

We are teaching students how to use language successfully when we

competent

- Expect them to address a specific audience
- Expect them to have a specific purpose in mind
- Expect them to make clear and reasonable arguments
- Expect them to take moral responsibility for their arguments
- Expect them to demonstrate subject-matter competency
- Expect them to adapt to particular settings and disciplines
- Expect them to explicitly state reasoned judgments about other arguments
- Expect them to explicitly state reasoned evaluations of various kinds of evidence
- Expect them to establish their credibility by writing under acknowledged authority
- Expect them to demonstrate their integrity by fairly representing and correctly acknowledging the words and phrasing of others

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oral and documentary evidence

from whom you learned it

suspicious and opinions

modify his pleading to suit the circumstances

## An Invitation to Plagiarism

- Give assignments which merely “check up” on reading.
- Do not hold students responsible for “insights” into the subject matter.
- Reinforce the prevailing cultural notion that learning is exchanging “clumps” of information for a price.
- Forget that “clumps” of information are readily available online, for free.
- Allow students to write “reports” or “responses” which do not teach them to construct arguments.
- Reinforce student fears of being wrong by failing to indicate the range of acceptable alternatives.
- Reinforce student obsessions with “right answers” and “fixing mistakes.”
- Encourage irresponsible student behavior by allowing students to treat education as a commodity.
- Encourage irresponsible student behavior by failing to demand that students commit themselves to an academic conversation in which their words count.

## An Invitation to Success

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# Specific steps

to design writing assignments which minimize opportunities and incentives for plagiarism

- Use multi-stage writing prompts
- Require students to turn in sources
- Require peer review and revisions
- Require students to turn in drafts
- Always assign or approve topics
- Discuss topics and theses in class
- Do not allow late topic changes
- Use the “rewrite” option more frequently
- Modify writing assignments for every class
- Teach a culture of “earned trust”

# Specific steps

to design writing assignments which minimize opportunities and incentives for plagiarism

- **Use multi-stage writing prompts**

Requiring students to “show their work” as they go through the writing process makes it easier to head off accidental plagiarism, harder to hide intentional plagiarism, and removes the “marginal utility” of plagiarism. It is also better writing instruction.

### **Gathering stage:**

- Assign a primary text or require topics to be analytical or critical responses to particular texts (possibly supplied from a pool generated by teams)
- Assign annotated bibliographies of sources, including “how you will use this to support your argument” requirements
- Reserve class time to workshop research, examine existing sources, and specifically recommend sources for the student to integrate

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### **Planning stage:**

- Require students to do planning in groups during class
- Ask students to provide examples of their major supporting points in class; rework them as examples and expect students to integrate your suggestions
- If possible, be available for (or, if this is the principal class project, require) conferences at this stage
- More effective than requiring an outline (which is not bad) is expecting students to attach a clear and logical blueprint statement to the thesis of each paper

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## **Drafting stage:**

- Require drafts and peer reviews
- Discuss comments from peer reviews in class and make suggestions about specific papers which you expect students to integrate
- Reward revision both before and after “final draft,” both to reduce marginal utility of plagiarism (revising plagiarism is either equivalent work or very likely to produce subpar results) and to reveal patterns of changed/unchanged material which make plagiarism obvious
- Display and ridicule the terrible papers generated by most online services
- Grade very heavily on the responsiveness of the paper to the prompt

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### **Revision stage:**

- Emphasize from first to last that revision means “producing a substantially new edition” using previous drafts as notes
- Require and reward revision by using grading portfolios and openly discussing economies of effort
- Mark drafts (even graded “final” papers) as a reader/editor, as though the student will produce another draft
- In class examples, marked drafts, and conferences, be ruthless about cutting paragraphs, lines, and sentences
- Consider making students rewrite the paper for some other audience or genre without notes (as an in-class exercise)



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### **Editing stage:**

- Use a “last-minute review” to give students a chance to catch errors (which will also lead them to expose portions copied without understanding)
- Frequently require students to restate sentences more concisely, which both teaches paraphrasing skills and reveals lack of understanding of source material
- In researched papers, have students do a “final check” by actually marking quoted passages and paraphrased passages, examining citations, and marking the location of the original in their photocopied source packets.

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- Use multi-stage writing prompts
- Require students to turn in sources
- Makes it easier for you to identify specific instances of plagiarism, and also to document the student's research process, while building "earned trust" culture
- Makes it easier for you to demand up-to-date, locally accessible sources
- Creates "buy-in" (copy costs, time) and a sense of the substantive "body of research" behind an argument
- Reduces marginal utility of plagiarism: if buying a paper still means finding all the sources, updating or replacing obsolete or unfindable ones, etc.—then how much harder could it be to just do the work?

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- Use multi-stage writing prompts
- Require students to turn in sources
- Require peer review and revisions

A sense of responsibility to an audience, of group contribution to research, and of visible responsiveness or non-responsiveness to valid criticism makes good writing more desirable and plagiarism less so.

In addition, frequent major revisions make intentional plagiarism stand out, and permit accidental plagiarism to be corrected without discouraging incidents.

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(as described: point brought forward for emphasis)

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- **Always assign or approve topics**

Students who are seeking to recycle, download, or purchase papers will consistently return to the same topics; free use of the “done to death” objection to various topics, as well as insistence on locally relevant topics developed from locally available sources, will make it harder for them to undermine the assignment.

In addition, this permits you to refuse last-minute topic changes, which frequently conceal plagiarism (the student will go through the “process” with one topic, then use the last-minute topic change to insert the plagiarized work in its place).

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## • Use the “rewrite” option more frequently

Teachers often forget that requiring a student to entirely rewrite an essay, on the same topic but having a basically different structure and no repeated paragraphs, is an option. One of several uses for this option is to give the student one last chance to avoid failure or disciplinary measures by correcting any plagiarism.

It also helps to free both teacher and student from wrangling over how much change in the paper yields how much grade improvement.

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Romans 12:17 (New International Version)

“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”

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