

SAFEASSIGN

The materials in this document offer support for instructors interested in using SafeAssign, a plagiarism prevention tool integrated with VCU's BlackBoard system. While plagiarism is a perennial academic issue, reports in recent years have suggested that incidents are on the rise, particularly cases involving electronic source material. Tools like SafeAssign offer one avenue for teaching plagiarism prevention, but they are not foolproof. The materials provided here address some of the theoretical and practical issues associated with tools like SafeAssign and suggest ways such programs might be successfully incorporated into the classroom.

The VCU Writing Center invites you to explore these resources in the hope that they will lead to further discussions about promoting academic integrity in the classroom. Please feel free to contact the Writing Center with questions, comments, or requests for individual consultations regarding writing processes and practice.

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USING SAFEASSIGN

SafeAssign: The View from the Writing Center

As educators, few things are more distressing than confronting a student about plagiarism. An act of plagiarism is by turns infuriating and demoralizing; it leaves us angry at our students and doubtful about our own effectiveness as teachers. While we are right to be frustrated, too often we channel our energies into finding more effective ways to catch and punish those who plagiarize. However, as educators, we should devote our energies, not to catching plagiarism, but to teaching our students how to avoid it: giving them the skills they need to work confidently and successfully with sources, encouraging them toward independent and original thinking, and recasting documentation as part of scholarly conversation and academic genealogy. By concentrating on these things, we approach plagiarism proactively rather than reactively.

Unfortunately, though it is marketed as a “plagiarism prevention tool,” SafeAssign’s main goal seems to be plagiarism detection. SafeAssign electronically tracks source origins and generates an “Originality Report” that notes the percentage of outside material contained in a student’s paper, as well as the source of the matching material. However, the language and presentation of these reports cultivate an “us v them” culture, preemptively casting students as perpetrators and their instructors as the police. Thus, while SafeAssign can be used as part of a learning process, faculty must be aware of and work against the personality of the tool.

Even when used exclusively as a device for detecting plagiarism, SafeAssign is not without its problems. Its databases are not comprehensive, meaning it is not a sure-fire way to uncover instances of plagiarism. The program is not equipped to identify all outside material; identifiable source material is restricted to what is currently available in electronic form in online databases and websites synced with SafeAssign. This leaves out any source material available only in hard-copy, which includes, of course, an entire library of books, journals, and other sorts of print material not available in electronic form. Further, the source comparison report that SafeAssign generates does not examine how or in what context source material is used. The report, for instance, will flag matching text even if the student has included proper attribution, citation, and bibliographic record. So, while SafeAssign detects matching text, it does not and cannot make a judgment about the occurrence of plagiarism.

However, while SafeAssign is an imperfect tool for monitoring or preventing plagiarism, it does offer interesting possibilities for learning about research and writing from sources. When used sensitively and with full awareness of its limitations, SafeAssign can support student learning, providing an additional way that we might foster an ethic of academic integrity in our classes and offering useful opportunities for students to practice writing with sources.

General Guidelines for Using SafeAssign

Provide Notice of Intent to Use SafeAssign

Instructors who choose to use SafeAssign should clarify their intention with their students, most appropriately on the syllabus and as part of class discussion. The use of the program brings up issues of student privacy and intellectual property

rights, so instructors should be aware of these issues and talk to students about how and why the program will be used to advance course learning goals.

Review SafeAssign “Originality Reports” Individually and in Context

SafeAssign’s databases are by no means comprehensive; thus, the use of the program is not a sure-fire way to uncover instances of plagiarism. Instructors should not rely on the face value of a high matching score in the SafeAssign “Originality Report.” While the program can quickly detect matching material, individual analysis and interpretation is critical to making a judgment about the occurrence of plagiarism.

Distinguish Intentional from Unintentional Plagiarism

Because instances of plagiarism fall on a wide continuum, instructors should judge each case in terms of student intentionality and the degree of the abuse. As instructors, this asks us to consider how we might effectively discuss all types of plagiarism with our students and provide strategies for helping them avoid situations that might lead to plagiaristic acts.

Maximize Learning Experiences

Instructors who choose to use SafeAssign should consider the value of the tool for providing active learning experiences. Instructors are encouraged to provide appropriate learning opportunities for clarifying proper citation practices and to use SafeAssign with students in the context of class lessons about research and documentation.

Create Engaging Assignments

One of the best ways instructors can help prevent plagiarism is by designing writing assignments that do not lend themselves to liberal borrowing, idea stealing, or other acts of desperation. Such assignments include clear learning goals, specific contexts, and process-oriented writing tasks that challenge students in the right ways and at the appropriate skill level.

SafeAssign: Intellectual Property Rights

Issue:

Students who turn in papers through SafeAssign are automatically participating in an “institutional database” that collects and stores these papers and checks future papers against them.

Potential Benefits:

The institutional database is intended to prevent students from recycling or duplicating papers. For example, if a student writes a paper for a class, this prevents his roommate from using that paper as his own work the following semester.

Potential Problem:

Students are unable to opt out of having their work stored in the institutional database. Also, students may legitimately return at some later point to previous work, further developing their ideas and building upon that writing. This legitimate re-working would likely be identified as plagiarism in a SafeAssign originality report.

Discussion

Whether one chooses to submit papers on a case-by-case basis or require students to submit their own work, faculty should clarify their intentions with their students and explain the process by which students submit and offer their work for use in the SafeAssign system.

There are two distinct databases associated with SafeAssign that have the ability to collect and use student work: the institutional database and the global database. The institutional database collects only VCU student work, whereas the global database collects papers submitted by all SafeAssign users. Students who are required to submit their papers to SafeAssign through Blackboard have their papers automatically integrated into the institutional database. The global database, however, is an “opt-in” feature. Students have the choice whether or not to add their papers to the global database system.

While the majority of students will undoubtedly go along with the SafeAssign submission process without question, students who do question the ethics of the system raise interesting concerns. Why, for example, should a student provide his or her work to the SafeAssign system without any benefit? Such a system subverts students’ right to own and secure their work for the profit of an outside company. Though the SafeAssign system improves its comprehensiveness as students submit more and more papers to the system, the students themselves are not compensated for their contributions. Further, students may not care to have their work perpetually available in electronic form.

SafeAssign: Comprehensiveness

Issue:

Though SafeAssign checks submitted papers against a wide range of electronic resources, its databases are by no means comprehensive. Any sources that are available only in hard copy are excluded, and not all electronic sources are included in its searchable material.

Potential Benefits:

Because SafeAssign automatically collects student submissions in an institutional database, its comprehensiveness is designed to grow as it is used. Thus, as more student work is submitted to the database and as more resources move into electronic formats, the database will grow increasingly comprehensive.

Potential Problems:

The lack of comprehensiveness presents a limitation to SafeAssign as a tool for both policing and preventing plagiarism. Faculty who already work to identify student plagiarism will likely appreciate the SafeAssign's possibilities for streamlining that process; due to its lack of comprehensiveness, however, instructors should not rely exclusively on SafeAssign either to catch potential plagiarism or to provide a clean bill of health for a paper. Unfortunately, this limitation also hinders SafeAssign's potential as a learning tool, since students may not be able to rely on it to accurately report the ratios of source material to their own thoughts or to help them avoid instances of what we might call "good faith plagiarism," such as inadvertently forgotten attributions.

Discussion:

Though there is no way to resolve the issue, the fact that SafeAssign's database is exclusively comprised of electronic sources is the most significant limitation to its usefulness as a tool for catching plagiarism. It is unable to identify any

material from books, journals, magazines, or newspapers exclusively produced in hard-copy – unless that material has been quoted electronically or in papers already submitted to SafeAssign. Thus, SafeAssign is unable to catch a very wide variety of source material, though reports do suggest that most student plagiarism comes from electronic sources, whether in the form of purchased papers, quotations copied from websites or attributed incorrectly or not at all.

In some ways, the comprehensiveness issue underscores the difference between what we might see as “good faith” and “bad faith” plagiarism. SafeAssign does not deal well with the more inadvertent and unintentional instances of good faith plagiarism (i.e. noting a quotation but not listing a source, poorly paraphrasing a quotation, listing common facts or sayings without naming the source); it may not catch every instance of this type, or it may incorrectly class these instances with more intentional and serious examples of plagiarism. It does, however, address bad faith plagiarism more effectively, particularly in such extreme cases as buying papers online or duplicating papers from section to section or year to year.

SafeAssign: Intellectual Property v Common Phrases

Issue:

SafeAssign detects potential plagiarism by matching text using an algorithm intended to identify both exact and inexact matches. However, this text- and meaning-matching algorithm may result in incorrect matches, such as identifying common phrases as potential plagiarism.

Potential Benefits:

According to Blackboard, the SafeAssign tool is intended to promote originality in student writers, and identifying common phrases in the originality report is, by these lights, accomplishing that goal. Calling a student's attention to the unoriginal phrases in his writing may help him see how he might be more original by moving beyond the obvious phrases, the expected arguments, or the superficial thinking.

Potential Problems:

Though identifying common phrases might be used to help students move beyond stereotypical writing, it significantly hinders the tool's effectiveness as a way of teaching students about intellectual property and the deeper meaning of originality. By zeroing in on the unoriginality of fairly insignificant phrases, it sends the message that ownership and originality is something found only on the sentence level, in one's writing rather than in one's thinking.

Discussion:

Though this seems like a straightforward issue, easily resolved by the evaluator of the papers, SafeAssign's tendency to highlight common phrases as potential plagiarism is problematic for two reasons. First, it represents a limitation for SafeAssign as a tool for policing plagiarism. These instances not only skew the results of the originality report, they also require the evaluator to devote the time and attention necessary to ascertain whether a phrase is a potential act of plagiarism or merely a common turn-of-phrase – which certainly diminishes the timesaving capacities of the tool. Much more important, however, are the drawbacks this poses to SafeAssign's potential as a learning tool. Identifying

such localized similarities reinforces the idea that plagiarism is simply a matter of borrowing someone else's words – when, in fact, most educators would be far more concerned about the borrowing of someone else's thinking. Rather than helping students better understand the relationship between originality and intellectual property, it may actually teach them about an incorrect and oversimplified definition of intellectual property and what it means to have ownership of one's writing and thinking.

BLACKBOARD'S SAFEASSIGN

What is SafeAssign?

In spring 2009, Virginia Commonwealth University acquired SafeAssign, a tool that is integrated with Blackboard to help faculty and students negotiate the challenges of writing and research in electronic media. SafeAssign electronically tracks source origins and measures the amount of outside material contained in a student's paper. When students submit papers to a "SafeAssignment" on Blackboard, the tool compares the students' work to the material stored in its databases, checking the student text for both exact matches and strong resemblances. SafeAssign then generates an "Originality Report" that notes the percentage of matching material in the student work. The database includes a variety of electronic resources, including public access websites and documents, materials included in the ProQuest ABI/Inform databases, and other student papers submitted to and stored in the SafeAssign database.

Interpreting SafeAssign Scores: For Students

The score you receive on your originality report indicates the overall percentage of text in your paper that matches material found in SafeAssign's databases. A score of 25%, for instance, means that 25% of your paper matches material in the SafeAssign databases and 75% of your text is either original or is not included in the available databases. However, matching scores do not necessarily indicate that you have plagiarized or that something is "wrong" with your paper. SafeAssign does not examine how or in what context you have used

outside source material. As a standard rule, though, matching percentages above 50% indicate an overreliance on or a misuse of outside sources.

Your originality report provides you with the opportunity to check to see that all of your matching text has been properly documented. Further, your SafeAssign score allows you to see the ratio between your original work and the work you have incorporated from other writers. Following an analysis of your report, you should revise your paper to make sure that you have documented all outside material correctly and that you have established the appropriate self-to-source balance in your writing.

When you receive a SafeAssign score, remember to interpret it in the context of the assignment. What may be an inappropriate score for one paper might be appropriate for another. Because of this, you should keep in mind the type of assignment, the degree of research involved, and the preferred writing and research style when interpreting your score:

Type of Assignment: If you have submitted a writing assignment that has a research component as its goal, your score will be significantly higher than an assignment that does not require a research component.

- **Research Required:** Depending on the amount of research required and the preferred researched writing and documentation style for the course, an acceptable SafeAssign score could be as high as 35%. Scores in excess of 35% generally indicate an overreliance on outside source material.
- **No Research Required:** If you submitted a piece of writing that did not call for any research or reference to outside sources, your score

should be less than 10%. Ideally, of course, no matching text would be found, but the system does not filter out common phrases and coincidental matches due to similar word combinations. Higher percentages indicate higher degrees of text match.

Degree of Research Involved: The SafeAssign score should be weighed against the type of assignment, its length, and the number of outside sources required. For example, a course term paper of 15+ pages and 10 or more sources will result in a higher matching score than a five page paper utilizing three sources.

Preferred Writing and Research Style: The citation style you are using and the discipline for which you are writing should also be taken into account when interpreting your score.

- **Discipline-Specific Preferences:** Different disciplines hold different preferences with regard to the incorporation of research into your paper. Papers in the humanities (English, history, philosophy) generally prefer a combination of direct quoting and paraphrasing, while the social sciences (psychology, sociology, criminal justice) prefer the use of paraphrasing over directly quoted material. In the sciences (biology, chemistry), paraphrasing is the standard.
- **Preferences of Citation Style:** If you are using the MLA documentation style privileged in the humanities, you may have more quoted material and a higher matching score. If you are using the APA documentation style privileged in the social sciences, you should have a lower matching score. Since paraphrase is preferred, in a science or social science paper, you should have a low SafeAssign score.

Interpreting Scores for Assignments with a Research Component

The SafeAssign score for a research paper should not fall at either end of the spectrum. An extremely low score may indicate that you did not use enough research, while a high score indicates that you have relied too heavily on sources and may, in fact, be plagiarizing parts or all of your paper.

The scores in between these extremes can offer up some interesting insights into your paper and how you have used research material. Bear in mind, however, that SafeAssign can match only material stored in its library of electronic databases. Your paper may include other print sources (books, journals, and magazines) that do not yet exist in electronic form. You should identify whether any sources are missing from your report and make sure that you take these missing sources into account as you think about your score, how well you have documented, and the balance between source work and your own writing and ideas.

But I paraphrased!

If your report highlights sections that you believed were paraphrased, this suggests that your paraphrased version is too close to the original expression, which means you have inadvertently plagiarized. Proper paraphrasing is difficult and it frequently leads to issues of inadvertent plagiarism. A lot of students think that paraphrasing involves simply changing a few words here and there – what we might call patchwork writing — but paraphrasing actually involves more than that. Appropriate paraphrasing means expressing the ideas independently from the original in terms of tone, style, word choice, and sentence structure.

Many people also think that if they paraphrase, they do not need to include reference to authors or page numbers. This is not true. In fact, paraphrasing demands the same level of in-text citation that word-for-word quoting does. The best way to identify to your readers what comes from you alone and what comes from others (even when you paraphrase) is to be overt and explicit about it. Tell your readers in the text of the paper, not just in the citations or bibliography. In addition to your parenthetical citations, use phrases like: “According to X . . .” or “As noted in Y . . .”. Using this sort of in-text attribution can help you clearly indicate which ideas and information came from outside sources and which are your own.

Source Scores Above 50%

Scores above 50% indicate a high degree of text match and suggest excessive quoted or improperly paraphrased, or plagiarized material.

A score this high indicates a misuse of sources, possible plagiarism and certainly an overreliance on sources. You should go back through your paper and evaluate how you are using your sources. When you write with sources, you must work toward striking an appropriate balance between what you have to say and the words and ideas of others. As a general rule, your own writing and thinking should make up approximately 70-75% of your text, devoting the remaining 25-30% to research material that can help you support and develop your points. A score of 50% or more indicates that this balance is lacking in your paper. You may be relying too heavily on research material and not enough on yourself. You will need to go back to your paper and revise in order to let your own reasoning do the primary work of the paper.

Scores between 35 and 50%

Scores between 35 and 50% indicate considerable and perhaps problematic levels of quoting or improper paraphrasing.

Depending on where your score is falling in this range, you could be in some trouble with your use of source work. Your score indicates that your source work is controlling the paper too much, and you should revise to create the correction self-to-source ratio. In addition, you should make sure that your quoted material and your paraphrasing are documented correctly. As noted above, it is important that you strike the appropriate balance between your writing and thinking and the writing and thinking of others. If your score is creeping up toward the higher range, you will want to revise in order to make sure that you and your own reasoning controls the paper, not your source work.

Source Scores Between 20 and 35%

Scores between 20 and 35% indicate that your paper contains significant quoted or improperly paraphrased material.

Scores between 20% and 35% are likely appropriate, provided you have correctly documented your work and have achieved the self-to-source balance required for the assignment. You should go back through your paper to determine whether all your direct quoting is effective and that you have properly paraphrased and provided correct attribution for all paraphrased material.

Source Scores Below 20%

Scores below 20% indicate that some quotes or blocks of text in your paper match other documents.

Provided you have accurately documented your source work, your score may indicate a reasonable use of sources. However, if you are writing a research paper, especially one in the humanities, your paper may need more outside support. Direct reference of research material helps you develop and support the points you wish to make in your paper. If you do not provide sufficient outside source material, you run the risk of undermining your points. By not consulting enough material about your subject matter, as a thinker and writer, you remain detached from the conversation that others are having about your subject. The more you know about this conversation, the stronger your thinking will be about your topic. In order to improve the balance between your thinking and the thinking of others, you might want to do more research and incorporate what you find out into your paper as you revise.

Interpreting SafeAssign Scores: For Instructors

The originality report provides an overall percentage of matching text, indicating how much of the paper matches material found in SafeAssign's databases. A score of 25%, for instance, means that 25% of the submitted paper matches material in the SafeAssign databases and 75% of the text is either original or not included in the available databases. However, because SafeAssign does not examine how or in what context outside source material is used, the matching score does not necessarily indicate plagiarism. As a standard rule, though, matching percentages above 50% indicate that the student has misused or relied too heavily on outside sources.

Instructors should be careful to interpret the SafeAssign score in the context of

their assignment. What may be an inappropriate score for one paper might be fine for another. Because of this, instructors should interpret their students' scores in light of the type of assignment, degree of research involved, and preferred writing and research style of the discipline.

Type of Assignment: Does the assignment include a research component? If so, expect a score that is significantly higher than an assignment that does not require outside sources.

- **Research Required:** Depending on the degree of research required and the preferred researched writing and documentation style for the course, an acceptable SafeAssign score could be as high as 35%. Scores in excess of 35% indicate an overreliance on outside source material.
- **No Research Required:** If the assignment does not call for any research or reference to outside sources, the SafeAssign score should be less than 10%. Ideally, of course, no matching text would be found, but the system does not filter out common phrases and coincidental matches due to similar word combinations. Higher percentages indicate higher degrees of text match.

Degree of Research Involved: How much sourcework does the assignment call for? In addition to the type of assignment, the SafeAssign score should be weighed against the length of the paper and the number of outside sources required. For example, a course term paper of 15+ pages and 10 or more sources will result in a higher matching score than a five page paper utilizing three sources.

Preferred Writing and Research Style: In what discipline is the

student writing? What citation style is being used? The significance of the SafeAssign is also impacted by the different preferences for the incorporation of research. For example, in the MLA documentation style privileged by the humanities, the emphasis on quoted material may result in a higher matching score than is appropriate in fields that use APA or CSE/CBE documentation styles.

Interpreting Scores for Writing Assignments with a Research Component

The easiest scores to interpret are those at either end of the spectrum. An extremely low score, for example, likely indicates that the student did not use enough research, while a high score often implies that the student relied too heavily on sources and may, in fact, be plagiarizing parts or all of the paper.

Bear in mind, however, that SafeAssign can only match material stored in its library of electronic databases. The paper may include other print sources (books, journals, and magazines) that do not yet exist in electronic form, so instructors should be wary of seeing the SafeAssign score as equivalent to the balance between source work and the student's own writing and ideas. Further, because SafeAssign does not and cannot judge whether sources are used appropriately, instructors should also be cautious of relying exclusively on the score to alert them to possible plagiarism.

However, though what constitutes an appropriate or inappropriate score may vary according to the assignment and its context, the following score interpretations may be used as general guidelines for instructors new to SafeAssign:

Source Scores Above 50%

Scores above 50% indicate a high degree of text match and suggest excessive quoted or improperly paraphrased, or plagiarized material.

Scores between 35 and 50%

Scores between 35 and 50% indicate considerable and perhaps problematic levels of quoting or improper paraphrasing. Instructors should consider the assignment's context and where a score falls in this range in order to make a judgment about the paper.

Source Scores Between 20 and 35%

Scores between 20 and 35% indicate that the paper contains significant quoted or improperly paraphrased material. Depending on the assignment, scores in this range are likely appropriate, provided that the student has correctly documented the source work.

Source Scores Below 20%

Scores below 20% indicate that some quotes or blocks of text in the paper match other documents. This score may indicate a reasonable use of sources or may indicate that a paper needs more outside support, depending on the assignment and the amount of research required.

SAFEASSIGN'S POTENTIAL AS A LEARNING TOOL

Incorporating SafeAssign into the Classroom

Other universities using tools like SafeAssign report that students are generally positive about working with the program provided they have sufficient information about the software and adequate guidance in using it (Cohen 5; Smart 2). In order to use the system as an effective and positive learning experience, instructors should plan class lessons to explain the way the system operates and to explicitly address target skill areas like paraphrasing, direct quoting, attribution, and in-text citation.

In introducing the program, the instructor should:

- Emphasize both SafeAssign's capabilities and its limitations
- Explain how SafeAssign will be used to advance student learning
- Set clear expectations for the use of documentation style
- Establish parameters for the expected ratio of student-to-source work
- Explain how students can use their "originality reports" to revise their work and improve their academic writing.

As a learning tool, SafeAssign provides students with the chance to self-assess, revise their work with purpose, and reflect on their academic writing skills. In addition to the opportunity to self-evaluate longer drafts, SafeAssign can be used

effectively with smaller process-based assignments that aim at practicing appropriate documentation and striking the right balance between the student's writing and outside source material.

Teaching SafeAssign and Using SafeAssign to Teach

As instructors, we should capitalize on SafeAssign's detection features for learning purposes rather than purely evaluative ones. While SafeAssign is useful for longer papers, either in draft or final form, it can also be used with smaller, more localized assignments that help students with some of the more complicated aspects of academic writing.

Because different disciplines have different preferences for using outside sources, students benefit from explicit discussions of the instructor's expectations in this regard. For example, disciplines in the humanities privilege direct quoting and synthesizing authors and quotations in such a way as to set up a conversation. Thus, papers written for these classes would likely have a higher matching score on a SafeAssign report. On the other hand, classes in the social sciences prefer a more streamlined approach and favor the use of paraphrasing over direct quoting, which would result in a lower matching score. The lowest score of all would undoubtedly result from papers written for courses in the natural sciences where direct quoting is discouraged and paraphrasing is the standard. Making these differences explicit to students is important. Instructors should take the time in class to examine the reasons for these differences and share models that illustrate the desired features. Further, providing students with opportunities to practice the preferred style of the discipline before they must manage longer and more formal writing assignments can go a long way toward

building confidence in students and lowering the likelihood of both intentional and unintentional forms of plagiarism.

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Using SafeAssign to Teach Paraphrasing

Appropriate paraphrasing is one of the biggest challenges for students learning how to write with sources. In fact, because paraphrasing is difficult, it frequently leads to issues of inadvertent plagiarism. Many students think that paraphrasing involves simply changing a few words here and there – what we might call patchwork writing – but proper paraphrasing involves more than that. Appropriate paraphrasing means expressing the ideas independently from the original in tone, style and sentence structure. Many students also believe that if they paraphrase, they do not need to include reference to authors or page numbers, but, as we know, paraphrasing demands the same level of in-text citation that word-for-word quoting does. By capitalizing on SafeAssign's capacity for detecting matching text, instructors can create assignments that help students develop stronger paraphrasing skills.

Short Assignment: Paraphrasing Exercise

In order to help students meet the challenge of effective paraphrasing, provide them with several brief excerpts of text that will be easily detected in original form from the SafeAssign's library of databases. Ask students to paraphrase each of the brief excerpts, including appropriate author attribution and in-text citation. Have students submit the paraphrased excerpts to a Blackboard SafeAssignment that you have created for this purpose. Evaluate students based on how well they have managed to avoid SafeAssign "detection." A properly paraphrased excerpt should be able to fly under the SafeAssign radar. At the same time, however, it is important to emphasize the need for attribution and citation regardless of how well the excerpt is paraphrased.

Longer Assignment: Summary or Abstract

As a more challenging assignment, have students practice effective paraphrasing with a summary of a longer document. Provide students with an article that will be detected through the SafeAssign library of databases. Ask students to read the article and write a summary that presents the main ideas of the text and includes appropriate author attribution and in-text citation. Have students submit the summary to a Blackboard SafeAssignment that you have created for this purpose. As above, a properly paraphrased summary or abstract should not be identified as a "suspected source" on a SafeAssign originality report.

Using SafeAssign to Teach Direct Quoting

Direct word-for-word quoting is not complicated for students generally, but writing with style and with sophistication when quoting is another matter. Students with little experience writing from sources frequently rely too heavily on block quotes that are too long. These long quotations often contain extraneous material that

obscures the overall point the student is trying to make by referencing the quote. Students who rely too heavily on long block quotes lack the ability to manipulate source material to meet their own writing and thinking needs. The SafeAssign report can offer an interesting visual representation for students to see how heavily they are relying on block quotes and how successful they are at weaving quoted material into their own text with style and sophistication.

Assignment: Summary or Abstract with Quotes

Students can be asked to write a summary or abstract of one or more articles in the SafeAssign database using both paraphrase and direct quoting. Explain to students the methods for modifying quoted material to omit unnecessary details (with ellipsis) or to make the quotation fit more smoothly into the student's base text (with brackets). Challenge students to write in such a way as to integrate and weave all quoted material into their own text, using appropriate author attribution and in-text citation as well. Because the SafeAssign report will highlight directly quoted material, the student will be able to easily evaluate how well she has managed to weave source work into her base writing.

Using SafeAssign to Teach Student-to-Source Ratio

A characteristic weakness of student work is overreliance on quoted material. In the worst of these cases, the paper is little more than a patchwork of quotations strung together. The SafeAssign report can help students determine the ratio between their own writing and thinking and the writing and thinking they have used from other sources. Students can be asked to submit drafts of their papers to SafeAssign to check not only for proper documentation, but also to determine

whether they are striking the right balance between themselves and their sources. Instructors should establish in advance a target score range – say 25 to 35 % – depending on the ratio of student-to-source appropriate for the assignment. Have students submit their papers in draft form to the SafeAssignment created for this purpose on Blackboard. Students should then review their reports, revise their drafts as necessary, and turn in copies of the original, the revision, and perhaps a brief response to the assignment.

A CLOSER LOOK AT PLAGIARISM

SafeAssign: Policing v Prevention

The meteoric rise of electronic environments has brought the more or less timeless issue of plagiarism to the fore of the academic community. While there is no way to really know whether plagiarism today is any worse than it has been in the past, in recent years educators have expressed increasing concern about issues of academic integrity in student populations. Research into the plagiarism issue bears out our general concerns. In 2005, Donald McCabe published the results of a study about the academic integrity of college students. In this study, he found that “one quarter to one half of undergraduates and as many as one quarter of graduate students” reported having engaged in “unauthorized collaboration, paraphrasing or copying a few phrases or sentences from either a written or web source (‘cut and paste’ plagiarism) and fabricating or falsifying a bibliography” (5). McCabe further notes that “16% of all undergraduate respondents and 8% of responding graduate students” reported “turning in work copied from another, copying large sections of text from written sources, turning in work done by another and downloading or otherwise obtaining a paper from a term paper mill or website” (5). Thanks to this and similar studies, educators have given renewed attention to issues of academic honesty, intellectual property, and plagiarism.

In some ways, this heightened awareness of plagiarism has been beneficial. It has encouraged many of us to focus more of our attention on teaching students to use research wisely and well, to incorporate these discussions into our classes at all levels and in all disciplines, and to consider more deeply why students

plagiarize and how we might prevent that. At the same time, however, the increased focus on plagiarism has developed into an unfortunate trend: as educators and evaluators of student writing, we are cast as the policers of plagiarism rather than the preventers. This construction is unfortunate, as it pits educators against students, fosters an “us versus them” mentality, and places us in a “policing” role that is not commensurate with effective teaching.

As faculty more interested in teaching our students to avoid plagiarism than in catching them in the act, we must be careful not take a reactive approach. However, plagiarism detection tools like SafeAssign can be used reactively. In SafeAssign, for example, instructors can submit student papers privately in order to “catch” plagiarized papers. In fact, the “personality” of SafeAssign, both in its language and its reporting process, constructs student writers as assumptive perpetrators and instructors as the plagiarism police.

Though the personality of the tool is unfortunate, SafeAssign can nevertheless be used in positive ways that give students agency and ownership over their writing and their SafeAssign reports. For example, in addition to the feature that allows instructors to generate reports privately, SafeAssign also has a more open and dialogic function that allows students to submit papers in draft form and view their own reports before turning in final products, allowing them to screen their work as they draft. Using the Safe Assign tool in this way allows us to act before students get into trouble with their work, not after.

As we all know, some students do intentionally plagiarize, but most students are not out to cheat. Students plagiarize for all kinds of different reasons, many of which are rooted more in emotional distress or lack of knowledge than in trickery or subterfuge. Of course, some students who plagiarize are flat-out cheaters, but

many more are decent students who may legitimately not understand how to work with sources or have, for one reason or another, simply become overwhelmed by the writing task and have therefore made poor decisions. Thus, rather than making it our goal to ferret out and punish plagiarizers after the fact, we should instead work toward understanding why plagiarism happens in the first place, taking steps toward creating lessons and writing assignments that address issues of academic integrity head on and positively.

For example, instructors might help prevent plagiarism by discussing citation in the context of its goal as scholarly conversation and academic genealogy rather than as simply a tedious exercise for avoiding plagiarism. Most students do not understand the real, scholarly purpose of citation; instead of seeing it as a tool for fellow researchers, they see it only as a way to avoid plagiarism. By elevating the discussion about citation beyond the mere mechanical level, we provide opportunities for students to better understand why they should be so concerned about properly documenting their work in the first place.

References:

McCabe, Donald L. "Cheating among college and university students: A North American perspective." *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 1.1 (2005).

SafeAssign: Intentional v Unintentional Plagiarism

As we all know, issues with academic integrity and plagiarism are amplified and complicated by research and writing in today's electronic environments. The ease of internet information retrieval and the temptations of select, cut, and paste

word processing features create rich opportunities for student writers to use sources inappropriately in large and small ways. Other people's words and ideas might end up in some students' texts without documentation at the phrase, line, or paragraph level. Still other students are more deliberate and bold, copying large portions of successive text or duplicating whole papers. Most of us are aware of the range of offenses that fall under the heading of plagiarism and punish students according to the severity of the offense. We would not, for example, punish a student who had noted a quotation but omitted its attribution in the same way that we would react to a student who had turned in a paper purchased from an Internet "paper mill" – yet both of these offenses constitute plagiarism and are treated as such by programs like SafeAssign.

Because plagiarism constitutes such a wide continuum, we must judge it in terms of student intentionality and the degree of the abuse. As instructors, this asks us to consider how we might effectively discuss all types of plagiarism with our students and provide strategies for helping them avoid situations that might lead to plagiaristic acts. We might, for example, incorporate discussions into our classes about both unintentional acts of plagiarism – what we might call "good faith plagiarism" – and the intentional acts of plagiarism that are unquestionably cheating and even theft.

Most students "get" intentional plagiarism. We would be hard-pressed to find a student who couldn't recognize that purchasing a paper online or turning in a paper his friend wrote for another class is plagiarism. Another common example of intentional plagiarism is what professors Andrew Wright and Ghanashyam Sharma call the "potluck paper," a paper that consists largely of a collection of quotations, summaries, or paraphrases that may or may not be properly

attributed. These instances are clearly plagiarizing. Whether or not the writer considers his act dishonest, in each of them, the author has deliberately presented someone else's ideas as his own.

Less intentional acts of plagiarism, however, are often harder for students to grasp and thus need more of our class time and attention. These instances of plagiarism might include small, inadvertent mistakes: incorrect or omitted citations, inadequate paraphrasing, mixing up two sources, incorrectly assuming that something is common knowledge, and so forth. These types of mistakes are fairly easy for faculty to recognize and can, with guidance, be easy for students to rectify and avoid.

There are also more global instances of unintentional plagiarism, such as when a student leans too heavily on another writer's thinking or mimics the organization of another piece of writing. Sometimes the student has not cited the original work, thinking that, because he has not quoted from it, no citation is necessary; at other times, the student has cited the work but is unaware that such heavy borrowing constitutes plagiarism whether or not it is cited. Though instances like these often appear to us as deliberate plagiarism, they are often not intended as such. In fact, many students in such cases are not aware that they have plagiarized. These students have a superficial understanding of plagiarism, considering it only "stealing another person's words." Faced with an accusation of plagiarism, they are bemused and frequently say things like "but it's on my bibliography page" or "What am I supposed to do? Put a citation after every line?" This missing attribution and citation speaks less about academic dishonesty and more about these students' inability to see that the material they gathered has a connection to real people who deserve credit for their work. For

these students, the world of knowledge is often disconnected from the world of people. In their minds, knowledge has no human agency, it just is. This general disconnect is enhanced by the impersonal nature of electronic environments and new knowledge compendiums like Wikipedia that are collectively created. Such environments challenge and complicate our traditional notions of intellectual property. In many ways, our documentation process and the way we think about intellectual property has not kept pace with the changes in the knowledge-creating and knowledge-consuming landscape.

It is helpful, then, to think about how complicated notions of documentation can be for students. By distinguishing between intentional and unintentional plagiarism and being sensitive to many students' genuine misunderstanding about how and why to document, we also avoid lumping honest students together with cheaters and unfairly criminalizing students in ways that can be damaging both to their learning and writing processes.

References:

Wright, Andrew and Ghanashyam Sharma. "SafeAssign & Plagiarism Prevention." University of Louisville Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning. PowerPoint. 2007. 2 December 2008.

SafeAssign: Culture, A Complicating Factor

The culture and ethnicity of a student may also contribute to the occurrence of unintentional plagiarism. The writing of international students and other English language learners sometimes includes instances that appear to us as deliberate

plagiarism but are not intended as such. As we teach students ways to prevent plagiarism, we should also keep in mind that notions of ownership and intellectual property vary from culture to culture. Western culture is particularly concerned with giving “credit where credit is due,” much more so, in fact, than many other cultures. In his book *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington makes the distinction between the Western privilege of “individualism” and other cultures’ “collective” approach to intellectual property. “Again and again,” he writes, “both Westerners and non-Westerners point to individualism as the central distinguishing mark of the West” (72). This emphasis on the individual manifests itself in American writing and documentation processes as well as in our more material cultural practices.

Though American academic culture privileges the individual as the “owner” of writing at the level of both idea and expression, other cultures have different perspectives on the notion of intellectual property. In many cultures, the “collective wisdom” prevails and taking “individual credit” for something can be seen as a negative. In his article “The Classroom and Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition,” educator and China native Fan Shen writes insightfully about these differences, remarking that he “found that learning to compose in English [was] not an isolated classroom activity, but a social and cultural experience . . . learning the rules of English composition [was], to a certain extent, learning the values of Anglo-American society” (460). As he learned to reschool himself as an American rather than a Chinese writer, Shen points out that the preeminent American intellectual value stood out as “the principle of protecting and promoting individuality” (460). In yet another example, students from Arab cultures that emphasize the memorization of religious or literary texts may quote widely and freely from such texts without understanding

that such quotations are not considered common knowledge or property in America. A further complication, of course, is the process of language acquisition itself. Because of their developing language abilities, English language learners may also find it difficult to paraphrase quotations appropriately and to identify instances when they have relied too heavily on source materials. Instead of simply labeling such instances plagiarism, instructors can use class discussions, comments on drafts, and tools like SafeAssign to educate students about the American conventions and help them develop the academic fluency they need to succeed in the university.

References:

Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

Shen, Fen. "The Classroom and Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 40.4 (1989) 459 – 466.

ASSIGNMENTS THAT DISCOURAGE PLAGIARISM

SafeAssign: Characteristics of Effective Assignments

As instructors, one of the best ways that we can help prevent plagiarism is by designing writing assignments that do not lend themselves to liberal borrowing, idea stealing, or other acts of desperation. These situations are often borne out of a sense of futility on the student's part – no matter how hard she works, the student believes, she will be unable to meet the demands of the task. Good assignment design can help combat this sense of inadequacy. Because students are most successful with their writing when they feel confident in their ability to meet assignment goals, assignments should be designed to foster this sort of confidence. Writing assignments encourage confidence when students see them as immediately relevant to what they are learning in the course; indeed, rather than becoming “performances” or stumbling blocks, these assignments provide students with opportunities to showcase their learning. Such assignments include clear learning goals, specific contexts, and process-oriented writing tasks that challenge students in the right ways and at the appropriate level of skill. Though we do not need to address all of these things in every assignment, attending to some of the following attributes can help minimize opportunities for plagiarism.

Closed: A closed or contained assignment is one in which the instructor pre-selects the focus and source material. An instructor might develop several research questions and supply students with a bibliography of selected sources for each question. Students would be asked to study the sources, reach a conclusion, and use the sources provided to support that conclusion.

Specific: Instructors can limit the possibility for recycling papers or stealing ideas by narrowing the scope of the topic and, if possible, specifically incorporating course concepts or discussions into the assignment. For example, rather than asking students to research a topic of their choice, an instructor might specify a topic and ask students to use the theory or theories of their choice for analysis. Alternately, an instructor might specify a primary theory or critical perspective used in the course and ask students to apply it to a topic of their choice.

Current: Assignments that deal with of-the-moment ideas, issues, events, or topics make it much more difficult for students to recycle a friend's paper or grab a paper from the internet. In addition to preventing plagiarism, assignments that deal with current topics help students understand the ongoing nature of scholarly research and see the learning potential of their assignment.

Contextualized: Assignments can be tailored to address particular problems and audiences to good effect. It is often helpful to invent problematic scenarios that students must use course concepts and additional research to effectively solve. If the student is writing to address a particular problem and context provided by the instructor, there is little chance that a generic paper will work to meet the assignment criteria.

Process Oriented: It can be useful to assign multiple drafts and/or multiple steps in the drafting process. Building in several stages of a writing project offers a variety of learning opportunities for students. Further, this process approach offers students the opportunity to identify and resolve unintentional plagiarism before it becomes a problem. Because these stages can help students learn how to legitimately and effectively engage with sources, it has the potential to both discourage plagiarism for the particular assignment and teach them how to avoid it in the long-term.

SafeAssign: Expose the Writing and Thinking Challenges

In order to design a good assignment, instructors need to consider not only the end goal of the paper product, but also the process, especially the thinking process, that students must undergo to see the assignment to fruition. However, many assignments are heavily weighted toward the final product and give little attention to what students must actually do in order to be successful. Consider, for example, this assignment:

Write a 15-20 page research paper (typed, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins). Your paper should discuss in more depth a topic covered briefly in one of the chapters. Cite at least five sources, using APA documentation format. The paper is due the last day of class and is worth 30% of the course grade.

As this example illustrates, many assignments describe what a final product will look like (in other words, what it is) rather than detailing how the student might go about managing the assignment and why she is being asked to do it in the first place. Of course, all writing assignments must have product goals, but they should also have clear process and learning goals. Thus, the most successful assignments are ones in which the instructor has attended to each of these things, assignments that reflect:

- The what: The product, explaining what the writing should “look like.”
- The how: The process, explaining methods for achieving product goals.

- The why: The rationale, explaining how the assignment connects to particular learning goals for the course.

These categories can provide an overall assignment design template that can help translate instructor objectives for final products into student-friendly guidelines for accomplishing the task.

The Problems with Open-Ended Assignments

It takes time and forethought to develop a writing assignment that attends to the thinking and writing process of the student and clearly reflects the learning goals of the course as well. Weighed down by a host of competing demands, many instructors opt for broad and open-ended assignments that seem to allow students both range and flexibility.

For students, however, open-ended assignments, assignments that provide too many choices or too broad a topic, offer the most potential for both intentional and unintentional plagiarism. A student will have pretty good luck, for instance, finding a paper online (or parts of a paper) that satisfies the general requirements. Further, with a loosely-defined assignment, it becomes easier to throw together a collection of quotations and ideas (whether documented correctly or not) from other sources in the hopes of hitting the right mark.

Many professors favor the open-ended assignment because they want to give students a choice in topic and a chance to work on something meaningful to them. These are admirable goals, but the truth is that students generally don't know how to interpret "what the teacher wants" from overly open-ended assignments like the one in the preceding section. As writing specialist Mark Waldo discusses in *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy*, the open-

ended assignment leaves students with too many questions about what approach to take with the paper. As he notes:

When students do not know what the instructor expects from the assignment, their first thinking strategy is trying to figure out what he or she wants. As a second strategy, they ‘cover all the bases,’ writing about everything in an effort to hit on something acceptable. The third [strategy] is to rely too much on their sources, too little on themselves, because sources feel safer than the expression and support of their own ideas. (105)

Because students are generally trying to do what we ask them to do, the quality of their work results in part from the rationales we give, the contexts we create, and the guidance we provide. For most undergraduate students, the more open the assignment, the more likely they are to become uncertain, unfocused, and unmoored. This is particularly true at the 100 and 200 course level. Students at this level often feel, whether rightly or wrongly, that they do not have the authority to write sufficiently well on a topic. This lack of confidence can lead inexperienced writers to reach too broadly in order to “have enough to say” and can easily turn into an overreliance on sources to do the writing and thinking for them. By the time they are juniors and seniors, students are generally more prepared to take on the challenges of an open-ended assignment; however, all students can benefit from more carefully constructed assignments that help them focus their attention. Thus, we can reduce the possibility for plagiarism in both the short and long term by creating closed rather than open assignments, assignments that are contained, specific, current, and process-oriented.

References:

Waldo, Mark L. *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy: Establishing Discipline-Based Writing Programs*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004.

SafeAssign: The Value of a “Closed System”

For many students, the most difficult assignments to manage effectively are those with a large scope and little scaffolding provided by the instructor. As instructors, one way we can help them negotiate this challenge is by using “closed systems” in our assignments.

The closed system assignment is one that places certain limits and constraints on what the student is asked to do and what materials he or she should use to complete the task. In a closed assignment, the instructor develops a clear agenda and rationale for the writing and supplies the source material that the student must use. To illustrate, consider an upper level art history paper intended to introduce students to the types of scholarship that define the field. In explaining the rationale in the assignment description, the instructor writes:

This assignment will introduce you to two types of art history scholarship that employ different research methodologies. By reading the articles provided, analyzing their approaches, and writing an essay that compares the two, you will gain a better understanding of scholarship and research in the art history field.

The instructor then provides students with the two research articles. This is a

good example of a closed system assignment because both the writing and thinking tasks are clearly defined and the source material is provided for the students. The possibilities for plagiarism are reduced if not completely eradicated by this approach. Because the instructor is already familiar with the sources and because there is very little chance of a student finding a paper or parts of a paper that satisfy the criteria for the assignment, the instructor is more assured that the work she receives from students will be original.

In another example of a closed system, a biology instructor provides his students with a series of research questions and a select bibliography of sources students must use for each one. In his rationale for the assignment, the instructor notes that, among other things, it will allow students “to gain a deeper understanding of how the scientific process really works.” He also explains what he wants his students to do, noting that their main objective “will be to critically evaluate contrasting arguments and evidence about an ecological phenomenon.... You may choose to write about one of several different specified topics. For each topic, I provide key references from which you should build your argument” (Waldo 179). An excerpt of one choice is detailed below:

Biology 314 Ecology & Population Biology Fall 1998

Please choose one of these topics for your essay. The key references listed for each are available on reserve at the library.

- 1. What determines the northern range limits of wintering birds in North America? If you are interested in animal physiological ecology or in studies on large-scale problems using correlation methods, this would be a good topic to select.*

- *Root, T. 1988. Energy constraints on avian distributions and abundances. Ecology 69:330-339.*
- *Repasky, R.R. 1991. Temperature and the northern distributions of wintering birds. Ecology. 75:2274-2285.*
- *Root, T.L. and S.H. Schneider. 1993. Can large-scale climactic models be linked with multi-scale ecological studies? Conservation Biology 7:256-270. (Waldo 182)*

When to Use a Closed System

Because it orients the student and provides materials that significantly reduce the opportunities for plagiarism, the “closed system” assignment has a number of clear advantages for both the instructor and the student. However, it is important to recognize that the closed system assignment front-loads the planning and preparation work for the instructor and limits the range and flexibility available to the student. Thus, when deciding whether to use a closed or open assignment, the instructor should consider the overall learning goals of the assignment and course. If, for example, one of the learning goals is to develop a viable topic and research question and the process for doing so is explicitly addressed as part of course work, it would not make much sense to hand the student an already-defined topic and question. If, on the other hand, the learning goals had little to do with topic formation and more to do with the ability to consider alternative perspectives, weigh opposing viewpoints, and draw conclusions based on these things, a closed system assignment might be the best choice.

In designing a closed assignment, instructors are able to direct students’

energies more accurately, too. For example, rather than having students spend valuable thinking and writing time making sense of online databases and trying to find sources that appropriately fit the assignment, providing students with a bibliography of sources to use (and perhaps even the texts themselves) allows them to focus their energies on the thinking tasks that matter most.

While there is no way to prevent academic dishonesty from those students determined to cheat, we can improve the general quality of the learning experience and the resulting work by creating specific, relevant, and engaging assignments that build students' confidence and give them every opportunity to meet their responsibilities ethically.

References:

Waldo, Mark L. *Demythologizing Language Difference in the Academy: Establishing Discipline-Based Writing Programs*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004.