

# Wreck your career before it starts!

## The truth about plagiarism

By Guy Robertson



Plagiarism is easy. Simply surf the Net for 2000 intelligent words on Shakespeare. Print and submit. A week later, your prof returns your essay with an “A” on the title page. “An insightful effort, well written and convincing” is the comment. It’s time for a celebration! Won’t everybody be surprised that you know so much about Hamlet?

Indeed they will be surprised, perhaps none more than your prof, who might also become suspicious. University departments regularly warn faculty members about the latest cheating techniques. Profs are increasingly on the alert for plagiarism, and many are adept at spotting it.

What do they look for? First, you. Let’s say that you’re under 30 and a high school grad. But your essay makes you sound like a much older scholar, with a formidable vocabulary and a mature turn of phrase. In fact, you sound like a nineteenth century Oxford specialist in Elizabethan drama. You may have numerous good points, but your essay doesn’t sound like you. Profs are very sensitive to your natural style. When you submit an essay with even a slightly different way of putting things, they start looking for other inconsistencies.

For example, your research. You’ve had only a week to write your paper, but your bibliography indicates that you’ve conducted a lengthy perusal of numerous scholarly resources. You’ve cited articles in obscure jour-

nals to which the university library doesn’t subscribe. You’ve quoted books long out-of-print and Shakespeareans long dead. Your prof is familiar with many of these sources and their authors, and wonders how you’ve absorbed so much information so quickly. Curiouser and curiouser.

Now the prof transmits a couple of your sentences—or even less—to a web site that compares them with all other Net sources. In a few nanoseconds you’re caught. The prof has evidence that you have taken another person’s work and presented it as your own. The university will accuse you of plagiarism.

Your prof might give you an opportunity to admit the truth. Some cases merit leniency, but most lead to an investigation by a disciplinary committee. The members of this committee will consider your case and—taking your personal circumstances into account—might recommend your suspension from the university. Some plagiarists are permanently expelled.

Your university has an official policy on plagiarism, and you’ll find it on the university web site and in the course calendar. Ignorance of this policy is no excuse. What it doesn’t mention are the long-term results of plagiarism, which can be more unpleasant than the original investigation.

Students disciplined for plagiarism are often surprised at how seriously other people

take their illicit activities. Family members can react badly, expressing shame, anger and outright hostility. Forgiveness can be slow in coming, especially if parents are embarrassed by their offspring’s misdeeds. Friends and fellow students can be unsympathetic. Naturally professional schools and graduate programs shun anyone with a record of plagiarism or any other form of cheating.

How does the news about plagiarism cases spread? The university might publish a record of them, along with a description of the punishment. Mercifully these records don’t always include the names of plagiarists. But these days gossip spreads worldwide via e-mail. You can’t swear everyone to secrecy. People love to talk. When you’re found guilty, the world can become a small and noisy village. There goes your reputation, along with your job, career and opportunities for success.

The Net is not the only source of material for plagiarism, merely the most current. Plagiarists have also relied on hard-copy items such as encyclopedias, magazine and newspaper articles, and essays that other students have submitted previously. Plagiarists can make stupid mistakes. Last year at a local community college, an instructor received the same essay on Latin American history from four different students. Each of them accused the others of stealing his paper. During a quick trip to the college library, the instructor discovered that

the essay originally appeared in 1970, in an anthology on Latin American politics. The college failed the students in the course and suspended them for a year.

In a legendary case at UBC during the 1970s, a student handed his prof a paper on mythology. The prof commended the student for such excellent work, but failed him. Why? Because the student had plagiarized a scholarly paper by the professor’s wife, who was an expert on mythology and taught in the same department. The student left the campus before the department could take disciplinary action. Evidently he was too embarrassed to face his prof, or his prof’s wife.

Sometimes a student finds a useful passage in a book or article and simply inserts it into her essay without noting the source of the passage with a footnote. When you obscure the real author of a passage or even a sentence by leaving out the appropriate footnote and bibliographical entry, you’re committing plagiarism. Admittedly students simply forget to mention the author. This could be a dangerous mistake, especially if there’s any attempt to “adjust” the real author’s style through rephrasing the passage, changing the odd word here and there, and making it sound original rather than stolen.

Another form of plagiarism involves the submission of an essay from a paper mill. For what can be a substantial sum of money, the

plagiarist may select an essay from the mill’s files. The mill claims that the paper is “for personal research purposes only”, and that the mill is not responsible for the eventual use of its products. Of course the mill doesn’t object to customers’ illicit use of any product.

Often the quality of paper mill products is high. Remember, however, that profs will become suspicious of any work that sounds bogus. That’s when you might receive an invitation to your prof’s office for a discussion regarding specific points raised in the paper that you submitted. Profs don’t want accuse a

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student of plagiarism without solid evidence. Could you anticipate your prof’s questions regarding a paper that you didn’t write? Forget it. But the moment you stumble and say that you really don’t know why you made a certain point, or admit that that you don’t remember a source in your bibliography that you (or the paper mill writer) quoted at length, you’re in trouble. The prof will monitor your work carefully, and make sure that it’s of a consistent quality. If you fail a quiz after a stellar performance in your essays, you might find yourself under even harsher scrutiny.

You’re correct in thinking that universities and colleges hold plagiarism in contempt. After all, these institutions are run by people who have worked hard—and produced their own essays—in the course of long academic careers. The thought that anyone would try to steal success angers them. That’s why they are relentless in their pursuit of plagiarists, and disinclined to forgive anyone found guilty of the offence.

If you commit a non-violent crime in Canada, after a number of years a federal department called Pardons Canada might agree to seal your file and let you live without a criminal record. But academics are not nearly as lenient. Once you establish your academic record—good, bad or ugly—it will be with you for the rest of your life. You might be tempted at some point to cheat, to claim that somebody else’s essay or lab report or book review is your own. But why take the chance? It’s not worth it.

Besides, there’s more satisfaction in knowing that the assignment you wrestled with for days is finished, handed in and—for better or worse—entirely your own. Your conscience will be clear. Don’t envy the plagiarist who gets away with it. He will spend the rest of his life knowing that while most people submitted their own work, he didn’t have the brains or stamina to do the right thing. And that might be the plagiarist’s worst punishment.