

FIGHTING PLAGIARISM IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS CLASSROOM: ONE PROFESSOR'S ARSENAL

**Abigail H. O'Connor, Longwood University, 201 High St., Farmville, VA 23909,
oconnorah@longwood.edu**

ABSTRACT

Unfortunately, plagiarism in the classroom is a problem. There are many reasons for this problem. One is that electronic information sources makes it very easy to do and students succumb to this temptation for a variety of reasons. Plagiarism can be a real challenge in any course that requires writing reports. This paper describes specific assignments designed to help students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it.

INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism, a common form of cheating, is a problem we often face in the classroom. According to Plagiarism.org, a website dedicated to the topic, "54% of students admitted to plagiarizing from the Internet"[1]. A study of cheating at Canadian colleges found that "more than half the undergraduates and 35 percent of the graduate students surveyed admitted to some form of cheating on written course work, such as failing to footnote, turning in someone else's work, or falsifying a bibliography" [2].

In addition to being widespread, the problem is not restricted to the classroom. A quick search on any online information database will reveal articles discussing reports and instances of plagiarism in professions such as journalism, advertising, cartooning, and medicine. Even politicians and academics are not above plagiarism.

The use of the Internet and other electronic information sources for researching college reports has made plagiarism in the university classroom particularly easy. All a student needs to do is cut and paste sections of information from the electronic source into his paper. Their reasons for doing this are many – from running out of time to properly research and write their papers, to being lazy and unethical. It is an easy temptation and one that many students fall into.

I teach a Business Communications course to undergraduates of a business college and the culmination of the writing part of that course entails researching and writing a business report. In the fall of 2007, I was shocked and dismayed to find that approximately 25% of my students had taken the easy approach and had cut and paste entire sections from the Internet and other electronic information sources directly into their papers with no citations.

Determined not to let this happen the next semester, I developed a series of assignments designed to help students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. In this paper, I describe these assignments.

TEACHING STUDENTS HOW NOT TO PLAGIARIZE

Part One: Understanding What Plagiarism Is Assignment

The first assignment in the series is also the first writing assignment in the class. Students are asked to complete the first two steps of a three-step writing process and plan and draft memos that define plagiarism and provide information on how our Honor Code deals with cases of plagiarism.

Since students are learning about the importance of analyzing their audience and adapting their message to each audience, they are asked to plan and draft two memos, one each to two different audiences -- new freshmen students and new university professors. This also allows them to think about plagiarism from two perspectives, that of a student and that of a professor.

Students are instructed to use the web pages for the University's Office of Judicial and Honors Programs for the necessary information for their memos. This provides them with information that is specific to our university and ensures that they know how their own university defines plagiarism, what they should do to avoid plagiarism, and what will happen should they be charged with plagiarism.

Students complete a planning document for each memo and compose the first draft of each memo. They are instructed to make each memo no longer than two pages.

Written instructions for this assignment are presented in Appendix A. A copy of the planning document that they complete is presented in Appendix B. The draft memos are graded using a rubric that focuses on assessing the memo's planning. A copy of that rubric is presented in Appendix C.

Part Two: Understanding and Planning Reports Lectures

During the section of the course on report writing, students research and write an informational business report. To start this section, I present a lecture on understanding and planning reports. This lecture includes discussing the work plan and its importance, and gathering information and supporting your message with reliable information.

My lecture on this includes discussions about academic honesty, including documenting sources, paraphrasing, and using quotations. In addition to covering how to do these things and their correct formatting, my discussions with students focus on why it is important. The purpose of this lecture is to make sure that students understand what they need to do to avoid plagiarism. Our discussions build on the foundation of knowledge acquired from their research on plagiarism in the first assignment.

A second lecture on conducting secondary research is presented by the head research librarian at our university. In addition to helping students locate and use the many electronic databases and information sources, she stresses the importance of evaluating and using appropriate sources. Working with my report assignment guidelines, she focuses on helping students understand that they must find information that is authoritative and current.

As a result of her lecture, students have a better understanding of what type of information they need to find and how to find it. However, just as important a benefit is that students feel less overwhelmed when they start to conduct their research. They also are more apt to approach the librarian for help, because they feel that they have a relationship with her from their classroom experience. Because of these factors,

students are less likely to base their reports on one major information source. They are more likely to gather a variety of appropriate resources and apply them to their work.

Part Three: Basing Analysis on Multiple Resources Activity

Once students understand what type of information is needed and how to find it, they need to learn how to apply multiple resources to their analysis. To help them with this, I developed an in-class activity that requires them to answer several questions about a topic using information from multiple sources that I supply.

In my spring 2008 class, students were given three articles from the business press about Starbucks Corp. They were then given three questions to answer and were instructed to answer each question using information from at least two of the three sources. They were required to include in-text citations in their answers to show me where they got the information used in their answers.

This activity gave students the opportunity to practice applying information from multiple sources to answer research questions. By completing this activity, they were able to see first hand how using multiple sources resulted in richer, more complete answers. Hopefully, understanding this will result in less copying of information from one major source into their reports.

They also practiced using in-text citations and applying them appropriately to their work.

A copy of this activity is presented in Appendix D.

Part Four: Researching and Writing a Business Report Assignment

The fourth part of teaching students how not to plagiarize brings all the above work together in an assignment to research and write a business report. The topic of this report is not important. What are important are the requirements and steps of the assignment. The report requirements designed to help fight plagiarism are detailed below:

- **Multiple Resources** – Depending on the topic, students are required to base their reports on at least eight – ten different information resources, of which only one – two may be a .com website (usually the topic company’s website). In addition to requiring that a certain number of resources be used, resources must be current (no older than two years), and must include at least one major article (feature or cover story) from a major business publication. This requires students to pull together information from a variety of sources and merge this information together, limiting their ability to write entirely from one resource and removing the temptation to cut and paste information from an electronic source into their reports. By requiring current resources and at least one major business press article, students also are less likely to be able to purchase a report from an online research service.
- **Annotated Bibliography** – For at least half of their resources, students must annotate their bibliography citation with information about why they selected that resource. This includes reporting how/where the resource was found, why the student considers it to be current, and why the student considers it to be authoritative, including how the author’s credibility is established. The research librarian presents this requirement to the students during her lecture and she also grades this part of the report. Providing this information requires the students to think about why they are using the sources they do and results in better quality information used in the reports.
- **Copy of Major Article(s)** – Students are asked to attach a full-text copy of their major business press article to their reports as an appendix. This helps me evaluate the quality of their research, but it also enables me to see very quickly if the article was plagiarized.

There are also several steps to this report assignment that help deter plagiarism. These steps are described below:

- **Work Plan** – By the first class after the research report assignment is given, students are asked to submit a work plan for their report. In addition to describing the problem statement and purpose for the report, the work plan includes descriptions of the report's scope, the sources and methods of data collection, a preliminary outline, and a timeline detailing the necessary tasks and schedule for completing the report. Preparing this work plan helps students realize the time needed for this assignment and gets them started on the report sooner. And, hopefully, that means that they are less likely to be rushed at the end and less likely to look for “easy” solutions such as plagiarism to their time-management problems.
- **Progress Report** – About one week into the assignment, a progress report is due. Students prepare a short, written progress reporting detailing what's been done and what needs to be done, as well as their plans for completing their reports. These short reports are given to me during a brief, one-on-one progress report session. This gives me with an opportunity to assess whether students are on track or not and to provide any necessary guidance. As with the work plan, the progress report helps ensure that students are working on their reports and not leaving them to the last minute.
- **First Draft** – About one week before the final report is due, students are required to submit a copy of their first draft. This also works to keep them on task, but it also provides me with an opportunity to review their work and provide feedback. If students are not using quotations properly or providing correct in-text citations, I can bring it to their attention and get them to fix their problems. This gives me an opportunity to help them correctly apply what we earlier discussed in class regarding documentation, quotations, and paraphrasing.

Once the final report is submitted, it is graded with a grading rubric that includes evaluating that appropriate, current resources were used and that the report correctly incorporated in-text citations and a bibliography.

A copy of the report guidelines is included in Appendix E. The grading rubric for the report is presented in Appendix F.

RESULTS

Since my experience with plagiarism in the fall of 2007, I've had only one semester to use these anti-plagiarism assignments. But, based on that one semester, these assignments seem to be accomplishing what I wanted. Students' reports in the spring 2008 semester were better and I found no instances of plagiarism. I observed the following differences:

- Students better managed their time. They started their business reports earlier and worked more consistently on them so that they were not as rushed at the end. As a result, they were less likely to look for shortcuts such as cutting and pasting material from resources into their reports.
- The quality of references used was higher. Information provided in their annotated bibliographies indicated that they evaluated and selected more appropriate resources to base their reports upon. In the past, they've often just grabbed the first eight – ten articles from their online searches and not had all the information they really needed for their research. This then led them to copying from the company's website or some other comprehensive source rather than incorporating information from multiple sources.
- Students were more careful about how they used in-text citations and quotations and, on the whole, these were done correctly. In the past, many students had either not cited information that should

have been cited or they had cited entire paragraphs and sections that were paraphrased or quoted from their resources.

I've been very pleased with these results. While I expect that combating plagiarism will be an ongoing battle, it is one that I intend to continue to fight. These assignments and others will continue to be part of my arsenal.

APPENDIX A

Understanding What Plagiarism Is Assignment

We have a problem. New freshmen do not understand what plagiarism is, nor do they understand how our university and its honor system handle cases of plagiarism. In addition, new professors need some of this same information.

Your job is to draft two memos to provide information to these two audiences to help them understand plagiarism. Your memos should provide answers to the following questions:

- What is plagiarism? How does our honor code define it?
- How does our honor system deal with cases of plagiarism?

Also include any other important information that you feel each audience should know. You should be able to find all the information you need on the university website on the pages for the Office of Judicial and Honor Programs.

You will present this information in a memo that is no longer than 2 pages. The memo should follow proper memo formatting (see Appendix A and/or Ch. 6 of your text for information about memo format). Please use a 12-point Times New Roman font, single line spacing, and block paragraphs. You may address them to the “Freshman Class of 2012” and “New Professors.”

In order to develop your memos, you will need to follow the three-step writing process. For this assignment, I want you to follow steps one and two.

- **Step One: Planning** – Complete the attached planning document for each of your 2 memos. This is where you will define your purpose, profile your audience, define the information you’ll gather, organize your communication, and determine how you’ll need to adapt your writing to your different audiences.
- **Step Two: Writing** – Compose your first draft of each memo. Following what you included in your planning document, write the first draft of each memo.

I will be looking for careful and well thought out planning. I will be looking for drafts that follow your plans.

APPENDIX B

Understanding What Plagiarism Is Planning Document

The 3-Step Writing Process: Planning and Writing

Name _____

Audience _____
(indicate whether this worksheet is for your freshmen or new professor memo)

Purpose: *What is the purpose of this communication – both the general purpose and the specific purpose?*

Audience: *Provide an analysis of your audience. (See fig. 3.2 on page 55 for an example of what to include.)*

Information: *What information do you need to include? (list your sources and the key facts that you'll include in your memo.)*

Organization: *Define your main idea, discuss the scope necessary for this memo, determine whether you'll use the direct or indirect approach – and why – and outline your memo.*

Adapting to Your Audience: *How will you adapt your writing to your audience so it will be most effective?*

APPENDIX C

Understanding What Plagiarism Is Grading Rubric

Name _____

Scale: 0 = not done; 1 = not acceptable; 2 = OK, but needs work; 3 = good; 4 = excellent

Purpose – Memo’s purpose is clear, both the general and specific purpose.	0	1	2	3	4
Audience – Memo is adapted to audience as evidenced by organization, word choice, writing style, tone, etc.	0	1	2	3	4
Information – Information included is complete and targeted to audience’s needs. Information is accurate, ethical, and pertinent.	0	1	2	3	4
Organization – Main idea is evident. Overall organizational approach is appropriate for audience and purpose. Memo is easy to follow and understand. Paragraphs cover only one topic each and do not ramble. Transitions are used effectively so the memo flows from topic to topic.	0	1	2	3	4
Tone – Memo is business-like in its tone. Writing is conversational, but displays the appropriate level of formality given the audience and purpose.	0	1	2	3	4
Writing -- Memo is clear and concise, not wordy. It uses effective sentences and paragraphs. Words used are appropriate and convey the intended meaning. Parallel construction is used where necessary.	0	1	2	3	4
Length – Memo is no longer than 2 pages.	0	1	2	3	4
Format – Correct memo format is used.	0	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX D

Basing Analysis on Multiple Resources Activity

Your job as a researcher is to help management solve problems and answer questions by gathering information, analyzing or making sense of it, and presenting it to management in a report. To be sure that your report is balanced and complete, it should be based on multiple sources.

Attached are three articles about Starbucks Corp. Each article presents information about how Starbucks has slipped recently and how it hopes to recover. I want you to use these three articles to answer the following questions:

1. What problems have caused Starbucks to slip?
2. How does Howard Schultz's plan for Starbucks to recover? What does he suggest that Starbucks do?
3. Starbucks faces competition from McDonald's and Dunkin Donuts. Explain the threat that this competition poses to Starbucks.

Be sure that your answers are thorough and complete. Each answer should be based on information in at least two of the three sources.

A few pointers on preparing your answers:

- Use only the information in these articles to answer the questions.
- Weave information from multiple sources together to make a complete answer for each question.
- You may write on the articles and you may make notes from them as you prepare your answers.
- Please include in-text citations (article title and page number) to show me where you got the information used in your answers.

This activity is to help you understand how to use multiple sources of information in your reports. I am not grading your writing in this assignment, but you should still strive for well organized, concise, and clear writing.

APPENDIX E

Researching and Writing a Business Report Assignment

There is a major push in the world today to be environmentally friendly, to protect and sustain our world for future generations. Not only is our university focused on this topic, many businesses are developing new products and changing their processes so that they too help protect and sustain our world.

So what are companies actually doing? Which companies are “greener” than others? As consumers, it’s important to understand the answers to these questions. For this assignment, you’ll answer these questions in a written business report. To do this, you will select two competing companies (two companies operating in the same industry), research both companies, and write a report that presents information and compares each company’s efforts to be “green.” Based on this information, you will conclude which company is “greener.”

Your report should include the following types of information:

- An overview of each company – including where it is located, what it does, and how big it is (in terms of annual revenue).
- A “green” audit of each company – what is it doing to sustain the environment? What is it not doing, or does it do anything that is not environmentally friendly?
- Conclusion – which company is “greener?”

You will present your findings in a memo report to me. This means that your report will follow the format for a business memo; however, it will include headings and subheadings and be longer than a usual business memo. I expect these reports should be about six - eight pages long. Your report should include an introduction, body, conclusion, appendix, and “works cited” bibliography.

Good business reports are based on authoritative, balanced, and current research. You will need to use multiple sources to prepare this report. Primarily you should use appropriate library databases and collect authoritative information. Please keep the following guidelines in mind as you gather your resources:

- You must use at least eight different resources.
- You may only use two .com websites – each company’s website. These will be two of your eight resources.
- You may not use any resource that is older than two years.
- You must include at least one major article per company from the business press – Business Week, Forbes, Fortune, The Economist, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, etc.

You should be able to find all the information you need through the university Library.

Please document your sources using the MLA citation format. MLA format includes in-text citations and a “Works Cited” bibliography. In addition, you will annotate four of your resources in your bibliography with information about why you selected that resource for this report. Our librarian will provide information about what that includes when we meet with her in class.

I would also like a copy of the two major articles you used attached as an appendix to your report.

The various deadlines for this report are detailed below:

- Your work plan is due by our next class. It should include your report's problem statement and purpose. It should also describe your report's scope, your sources and methods of data collection, a preliminary outline, and a timeline detailing the necessary tasks and schedule for completing your report. I will review your work plans and provide feedback to ensure that your report and how you plan to accomplish this work are on track.
- Your progress report is due by May 28th. We will meet in my office to discuss your progress to date and your plan for completing your report. This is also your opportunity to discuss any issues or problems you are encountering.
- The first draft of your report is due on June 5th. You should submit your first draft to me via the assignment link for this project (in the June 2nd folder).
- Your final report is due on the last day of class, June 12th. You will print out your report, staple it and your appendices together, and hand it in at the beginning of class. You will also make an oral presentation of your report in class that day.

My grading rubric for your written report is attached to these guidelines.

Your written report is worth 100 points; the oral presentation of this information is also worth 100 points. These two assignments comprise your final exam for this class.

Separate instructions for the oral presentation of this report are posted on BlackBoard in the June 12th folder.

APPENDIX F

Researching and Writing a Business Report Grading Rubric

Name _____ Date _____

Scale: 0 = not done; 1 = not acceptable; 2 = OK, but needs work; 3 = good; 4 = excellent

Introduction – explains the problem motivating the report, describes the problem’s background and significance, clarifies report scope and limitations, describes the research methodology, previews report’s organization.	0	1	2	3	4
Body – discusses, analyzes, interprets, and evaluates the research findings. Presents evidence that justifies the conclusions. Opinions are supported by facts. Information is balanced.	0	1	2	3	4
Conclusions – tells what the findings mean in terms of solving the problem. No new information is presented.	0	1	2	3	4
Works Cited – citations applied appropriately in-text using the MLA format. Appropriate, current business resources used. Correct Works Cited list.	0	1	2	3	4
Organization – report is well organized, easy to follow, and understand. Similar ideas are grouped together so it’s easy to see relationships and follow arguments.	0	1	2	3	4
Tone – report is business-like in its tone. Tone appropriate for purpose and audience.	0	1	2	3	4
Fluency/Written Expression – information is presented clearly and concisely. Sentence unity and structure, parallelism, word choice, etc. are correct. Paragraphs are limited to one topic only.	0	1	2	3	4
Mechanics – grammar, spelling, punctuation, word use, etc. are all correct.	0	1	2	3	4
Format – consistently applied memo format, 12-pt Times New Roman font, single-spaced, block paragraphs, appropriate headings and sub-headings.	0	1	2	3	4
Graphics – used appropriately to highlight and clarify information. No orphan tables or charts.	0	1	2	3	4

Comments:

REFERENCES

- [1] Plagiarism.org. (2008). *Facts About Plagiarism*. Retrieved May 24, 2008, from <http://www.plagiarism.org/facts.html>

- [2] Birchard, K. (Oct 13, 2006). Cheating Is Rampant at Canadian Colleges. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53, 8. p.NA. Retrieved May 24, 2008, from Academic OneFile via Gale: <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.longwood.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE>