



Virtual Academic Integrity Laboratory (VAIL) Faculty/Administrator Resource Guide:

Plagiarism Alarms!

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Introduction

Why do we suspect students of plagiarizing? Is it because teachers have a general distrust of their students? Or, is it because we were all once students with little time to devote to assignments, watching our classmates with even less time sometimes do inappropriate things to complete course requirements? Because the Internet provides students with a wealth of information and opportunity to borrow text and ideas from sources without proper documentation, it has become important that instructors are familiar with ways to detect plagiarism. In an instructor's continued quest to enable students to reach their educational goals, it is imperative that instructors take the time necessary to critically evaluate their students writing and provide guidance as they develop intellectually.

This guide focuses on finding indicators of possible plagiarism in the body of the text itself usually without comparing it to an outside source. It will provide a list of indicators for student plagiarism that may justify further investigation. This list is not exhaustive, and the presence of many of these indicators still may not confirm that plagiarism has taken place. All "alarms" or potential indicators of plagiarism should be presented to the student and taken in the context of the particular student's body of work, writing style, and the requirements of the course and or assignment.

In addition to looking for these indicators, a teacher can use one of the plagiarism detection tools or software packages currently available. While these tools can be convenient for investigating borrowed text that may have originated on the World Wide Web, when the origin of suspected plagiarism is completely unknown or the detection tools fail to identify a source, it may prove useful to investigate and

evaluate the body of the actual written document. For more on this method of discovery and an overview of the products available please see the VAIL guide entitled *Detection Tools and Methods* (http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/vail/faculty/detection_tools/intro.html).

Plagiarism Indicators in Formatting:

- **Has evidence of web browser headers or footers.** Although this may be a silly mistake, it is a mistake made by students in a hurry to turn in an assignment. Additionally, headers and footers are often hidden in a web document and are not usually displayed on the screen, they can therefore be overlooked until the document is printed.
- **Has formatting irregularities.** Cutting and pasting text from a web document to a word processor can leave minute oddities in the page layout that can indicate un-attributed text.
 - Incorrect spacing between sentences.
 - Unusual or inconsistent margins,
 - Gray text. Often word processors transfer text in their coded web colors. This can be overlooked when copying text to a new document.

In Context:

- **Right place, wrong time.** Finding shifts in a student's context may be an indicator of borrowed text. For example, a passionate plea for president Clinton to sign the Welfare Reform Bill into law (this example **may** become obsolete if Hillary ever gets in the presidential office).
- **Presenting presents.** Sources and examples are different from the context of the subject being discussed. No! Not homographs where polar bears may bear it all on a hot summer day, and in haste similar items appear to be related. However, the student may incorporate statistics of teenage runaways in Rio de Janeiro in a discussion that seemed to focus on the Pacific Northwest region of the United States.
- **...& why these years, again?!** Tables and charts reflect what seem like random time periods. For example, presenting the deaths from vehicular accidents from 1996 to 1992 to support an argument. Make sure the remainder of a student's offering places, or offers an explanation for the use of illustrations that are not necessarily current or in context with the time period being discussed.
- **Is this what I assigned?** The paper is completely out of scope with the requirements of the assignment.

In Style:

- **Shift in author's voice and tone** from paragraph to paragraph. For example, moves from an academic/scholarly tone to one of news reporting. This may be evidence of cut & paste plagiarism or collaborative work between students.
- **Reality jump.** The writing style does not match that of student's previous writing. This could be an example of a completely plagiarized submission.

- **TheatER or TheaRE?** Unusual spelling of words may suggest cribbing from British or other foreign sites and sources.
- **Know it alls.** Student writes as an expert in the subject. While a student's vocabulary cannot be the only indicator, coupled with a very authoritative tone and ample references, it is reasonable to be curious of an undergraduate's originality.
- **Just beyond me!** Concepts discussed in the student's paper are too sophisticated for the level of the course. Although research can introduce new concepts to a student, this may be an indicator.

In Bibliographies and In-text Citations

- **Like the buck, the dates stop here.** All references are within a specific date range or reach a specific year and then stop. If the paper is not about a specific news and or historical event, then there is a chance the paper and/or the references are completely borrowed from an out of date source.
- **APA, MLA, ALA... whatever!** The citation style used throughout the paper is not consistent. For example, there is a shift from using parenthetical references to footnotes.
- **Appearing reference items!** Items appear in the bibliography or works cited list that are not mentioned in the paper. This may be an indicator of padding the reference list/bibliography.
- **Disappearing reference items!** The text makes reference to items that seem to be un-original thought but they are not cited in the bibliography. While this may be carelessness on the student's part, it may also be an indicator of intentionally borrowed and un-cited text.
- **5 page paper, 4 page bibliography?** Unfortunately, some students believe that they can impress by padding or building a very large bibliography. Be cautious.
- **Primary or secondary?** Students fail to cite the source of statistics when primary scientific research is not being reported.
- **Hmmm, why so may dissertations from the University of Alaska?** Unless a student of U of A or researching Inuit culture, and extensive list of items not available to the student may be an indicator. For example, theses, dissertations, etc.
- **It's obvious .** Lacks in-text citations for quoted and/or obviously paraphrased text.
- **Just makes No sense.** Cites non-existent sources.

In Examinations:

Questionable text in examinations, usually fall more under the concept of cheating or fraud rather than "plagiarism." Strategies for identifying questionable student work in examinations vary depending on the format of the examinations. However, many of the items listed in this guide can be applied to open book examinations.