Exposing the "Root" of Plagiarism

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College writing assignments can be difficult to navigate--like walking through fallen leaves without seeing hidden roots that trip unsuspecting travelers. Students can sidestep the serious root of *plagiarism* by understanding the types of academic dishonesty and by learning how to avoid them.

According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators, "plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source." While that definition accurately describes *deliberate* plagiarism, it fails to include what is called *accidental* or *unintentional* plagiarism. Students must avoid both types to write successfully.

Deliberate Plagiarism

Deliberate plagiarism occurs when students **intentionally** hand in work that is not their own. Examples of deliberate plagiarism include (1) hiring someone else to write a paper, (2) copying and pasting an entire paper from a source without citing it, and (3) copying and pasting portions of many sources—without identifying the sources—to submit as original work.

The third type of deliberate plagiarism is also called *patchwriting* because the process is similar to sewing fabric blocks together to make a patchwork quilt: the final composition contains blocks of text that are sewn together without any ideas from the writer of the paper—paragraphs are purposely copied and pasted into a document, and writers may or may not alter the words and sentences to make them look like their writing. In contrast to the idea of a quilt, an academic paper should be created as a *soup* with small pieces of source material (i.e., clearly identified quotations, summaries, and paraphrases) floating inside the broth of the writer's own words and ideas.

Unintentional Plagiarism

The more subtle—but still serious—type of plagiarism is accidental plagiarism that occurs when writers **unknowingly** (1) forget to cite sources, (2) cite them incorrectly, or (3) fail to completely paraphrase source material.

Accidental plagiarism can be another form of patchwriting because the writer forgets that the information was taken from somewhere else or cites the work but does not realize that the wording is too close to the original. Thus, patchwriting can be considered deliberate or accidental, depending on the situation. Several strategies can help students to avoid the patchwriting trap.

- **Strategy 1: Immediately Begin an Assignment**

  Students are sometimes tempted to plagiarize because they feel inadequate to write "good" papers or because they procrastinate until the day before the deadline, which causes them to panic and copy from sources. The most successful students *begin a writing assignment immediately*, so they have more than enough time to complete their work before the due date.

- **Strategy 2: Create a Writing Plan**

  Another effective strategy is to ***break the larger task into smaller "chunks"*** that will be completed and "checked off" according to a time schedule. For example, a 6-week project can be divided into weekly deadlines for (1) brainstorming and topic selection, (2) researching, (3) writing a first draft, (4) developing ideas and doing more research, if necessary, (5) revising for focus and organization, and (6) editing and proofreading for clarity. Writers who see gradual progress often feel a sense of accomplishment, which can motivate them to keep on track and finish with a strong paper.

  Planning ahead also allows time to solicit feedback on a writing project. Experienced and inexperienced writers can gain confidence and improve their writing ability by discussing their ideas with others, such as a classmate, a roommate, or a writing consultant at the Center for Writers. A "real" audience can help a writer to see the ideas from the reader's perspective and, consequently, to learn where to add more development, to restructure the ideas, or to clarify confusing aspects of the paper.

- **Strategy 3: Carefully Record Information from Sources**

  The third strategy is to ***take careful notes*** to preserve a clear record of the information that came from each source. Each note should clearly identify (1) the author/s, (2) the title, (3) the page number/s, (4) which information is paraphrased, and (5) which words were copied exactly. ***Quotation marks should be used in the notes and transferred immediately to the paper with the exact words.*** Cutting-and-pasting from online sources is very easy in the age of computers, so writers must consciously slow down and use quotation marks when using sources.

- **Strategy 4: Accurately Integrate and Cite Information**

  The fourth strategy is to learn how to integrate information into a document by accurately ***summarizing***, ***paraphrasing***, and ***quoting*** information and by ***citing*** all source material according to the guidelines of the appropriate style manual for the course. Common citation styles include Modern Language Association style (MLA), the American Psychological Association style (APA), and Chicago style (CMS).

  Paraphrasing accurately can cause particular problems for students. Some students erroneously think that paraphrasing means that they can substitute a few synonyms for a few words—or omit a few words—from an original sentence, as long as they cite the author. However, an ***accurate*** paraphrase ***totally restructures*** the sentence with ***all new words*** to convey the same idea. Consider how little difference exists between the following example of plagiarism:

  Original source:
  "plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source"

  Failure to paraphrase completely (original words in bold font):
  According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators, **plagiarism** is **when a writer**

deliberately copies **someone else's language, ideas, or other original material without acknowledging** the author.

The student has three choices to correct the plagiarism:

(1) Quote exactly:
According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators, "plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source."

(2) Completely restructure the sentence:
The Council of Writing Program Administrators explains that plagiarism is the intentional misappropriation of information from outside sources. Responsible writers must give credit to the original authors when referring to anyone else's intellectual property, including exact words and facts or statements that are unique or not widely known.

(3) Restructure the sentence but include a few quoted words:
The Council of Writing Program Administrators defines plagiarism as the intentional failure to identify the source of "someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material."

As the examples show, plagiarism can easily be avoided by clearly distinguishing the ideas and exact words that belong to a source and those that belong to the writer. Students who are unsure if something is "common knowledge" should cite a source to avoid the appearance of dishonesty or sloppiness. Citing sources will also build a writer's credibility and create a stronger paper.

In our electronic age, plagiarism is an easy root to trip over because any form of plagiarism constitutes a serious offense that is equated with cheating on a test. The consequences range from failing an assignment, failing a class, or even being expelled from the university. Therefore, wise students learn how to avoid tripping over the root of plagiarism by managing their time, writing their own papers, and responsibly incorporating material from outside sources according to academic standards and formats. Thus, they will successfully navigate through the tangle of writing assignments to emerge unscathed at graduation.