Plagiarism Response Heuristic Guide

1. **Were ideas or language of a source or sources employed by the writer without acknowledgement of the source?—That is, is it really plagiarism?** If not, then further investigation is not warranted.

   Plagiarism must be a distinct possibility. We need to be able to identify evidence of plagiaristic behavior. But we must also recognize that we could be wrong. Consider Richard Murphy's article “Anorexia: The Cheating Disorder” (College English 52.8 [Dec. 1990]: 898-903). Murphy tells the story of accusing a student in his composition course of plagiarizing her essay on anorexia, only to find out from reading her journal after the course was over that she had NOT plagiarized, that her paper was so well written, because she had personally suffered from her own bout with anorexia and was strongly motivated to communicate her experiences to others. She knew the language of the issue and she could describe in detail the experience of being hospitalized for it—the shame, the fear, the effects it had on her family. Murphy realizes the emotional toll his plagiarism accusation must have taken on her and how it would impact her attitude toward college. He ends the essay saying, “I did not mean for it to come to this.” None of us wants to ever find ourselves saying that.

   This question also should push us to define plagiarism with greater specificity than it is usually defined. For example, if a writer fails to punctuate copied words, phrases, or sentences but still does indicate the particular source of the copied language by introducing the material with “According to X” or “As X states” or “X has concluded that,” has that writer really plagiarized? What should our response be in a case like that?

2. **Does the amount or significance of the plagiarism rise to the level of academic dishonesty?** If not, then there’s no need for further investigation, although there may well be need for further instruction.

   In Crisis on Campus: Confronting Academic Misconduct (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), Wilfried Decoo points out how complicated formal academic citation is, even for the most experienced scholars. “[A]t what point,” he asks, “does a rephrased sentence become ‘sufficiently different’ to be allowed?” (121). He suggests that, in practice, the quantity of plagiarized material should be a criterion in determining the appropriate response to plagiarism. Of course, even a small amount of plagiarism (even just a key word or an important concept) can be significant, but small glitches in source attribution may not be evidence of an effort to cheat and may best be addressed through instruction, not punishment.

3. **Was the plagiarism committed within a context where the use of another’s or others’ ideas and/or language is considered acceptable?** Or is the plagiarizing student under the impression that she or he is writing within on of these contexts?
If so, then further investigation is not warranted—although, in the latter case, instruction about academic conventions and expectations is certainly in order!

There’s a reality we rarely acknowledge—that contexts (primarily nonacademic contexts) where plagiarism is not only acceptable but is expected of writers and even encouraged. Brian Martin has labeled this “institutionalized plagiarism” (“Plagiarism: A Misplaced Emphasis,” *Journal of Information Ethics* 3.2 [Fall 1994]: 7-22). If you are assigned by your supervisor to write, say, a quarterly report of office spending, you will be expected to use past reports as models, even templates, for this new report. To not do so could put your employment in jeopardy.

The other very influential sites where we encounter institutionalized plagiarism are on the Internet. These virtual spaces are profoundly institutionalized, crowded with material copied without attribution from other websites—and generally without complaint. For example, *Wikipedia* entries are copied over and over across numerous websites. And our students see this copying and remixing of information probably daily. Based on her ethnographic study of university students, Susan Blum concludes that the Internet “has changed how [students] think of texts . . . Student engagement in intertextual activity is of a different nature and different purpose from the intertextuality demanded by academia” (*My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2009, 4-5).

Given that neither the text in front of us nor any findings of plagiarism detection programs provide information about the student’s perception of context, this question must suggest to us the need to talk to the student, and in fact, really the only access we have to the writer’s intent is through this interview. The teacher-student conference should be the first important step in responding to cases of possible plagiarism after we have determined that plagiarism did occur and that it does rise to a level that warrants further investigation.

4. **Does it appear that the writer made an effort to adapt the ideas and/or language of the source, rather than merely adopt those ideas and/or language?** If it appears that the writer did attempt to adapt the source material, then the plagiarism may well have been inadvertent, and further investigation of the effort as plagiarism may not be warranted, although, of course, investigation into why the student unintentionally plagiarized is a pedagogical imperative.

While we will need to talk to students we suspect of plagiarism, it helps to go into teacher-student conferences with at least some suspicion of student intent. How the student writer has engaged with source material in the text can be revealing, though not absolutely sure. Generally, *adopting* behaviors are indicated by the existence of little or no manipulation of the material. It will appear to have been mindlessly copied. On the other hand, when source material has been *adapted*, the text usually shows signs of modification in an effort to integrate the material and accommodate it to the student’s purpose and audience. Of course, that alone does not indicate intent with any certainty, but it does provide a starting point for discussion with the student.
5. **Does the plagiarism appear to be the result of a lack of familiarity with the conventions of the community the writer is attempting to address?** If so, then the plagiarism may not have been intended to deceive, and further investigation may not be warranted—even though, obviously, instruction is needed.

Research suggests that plagiarism can, in fact, be a difficult-to-avoid, “transitional” behavior, as the *outsider* writer tries to sound like an *insider* writer. In that outsider situation, humans often attempt to mimic the language, organization, and ideas of the community they are trying to enter and communicate with—and that can lead to plagiarism when these writers misinterpret original ideas as common knowledge within the community and/or inadvertently adopt language that they believe is common within the community. It is worth noting that this is a situation that we place students in: outsiders that we expect to approximate insider ways of discourse.

Rebecca Moore Howard has found that much of what I call “developmental plagiarism” takes the form of *patchwriting*: when a writer doesn’t copy a text word-for-word but paraphrases it too closely, changing some words but not enough words and tending to follow the organization of the source’s passage.

Once again, the importance of the teacher-student conference cannot be overstated.

**Selected Resources**


Howard, Rebecca Moore. “Understanding ‘Internet Plagiarism.’” *Computers and
Nelms, Plagiarism Response Heuristic Guide


Thompson, Leonora C., and Portia G. Williams. “‘But I Changed Three Words!’ Plagiarism in the ESL Classroom.” Clearing House 69.1 (1 September 1995).