

Designing Assignments to Curb Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a growing concern at post-secondary institutions nationwide. On our own campus, the Senate Discipline Committee's June 2001 report contains several recommendations that directly address the increasing incidence of plagiarism and suggests steps to control it. Both the detection and prevention of plagiarism need to be considered if the problem is to be combatted effectively. In this issue of Focus we are encouraging prevention by presenting measures aimed at stopping plagiarism before it starts.

Dalhousie Libraries and the Office of Instructional Development and Technology have presented, on three separate occasions, a workshop entitled "But I changed some of the words!" – addressing student plagiarism." The first section of this issue of Focus presents some of the key information provided in the popular workshop. The second section contains examples of assignments devised by Dalhousie faculty whose design make plagiarism difficult. These assignments are taken from Learning Through Writing: A Compendium of Assignments and Techniques, an OI DT publication about ways to improve student writing skills. Not coincidentally, assignments designed to develop writing skills require greater student involvement in the process as well as the material, thereby making plagiarism more difficult and, hopefully, less tempting.

"But I changed some of the words!" — addressing student plagiarism

Fran Nowakowski

MLS, Reference Librarian, Killam Library

Research has shown that student plagiarism has increased across North America, most frequently accomplished by "cut & paste" from the Internet. At Dalhousie, the number of suspected cases of plagiarism reported to the Senate Discipline Committee increased from 25 in 1998 to 52 in 2000. The challenge of cyber-plagiarism has to be addressed through both prevention and detection methods.

First, prevention must take place on several fronts. It is essential to educate students by defining plagiarism, explaining why it is not acceptable behaviour in an academic environment, demonstrating

correct citation methods, and ensuring that they have the necessary research skills to complete the assignment. Some method of formal instruction to all students is required in order to reduce the number of violations and eliminate students' claims that they didn't know what they did was wrong.

Second, redesigning the assignment can make it much more difficult for students to use pre-written papers. Ideas to consider include: having different stages of the paper due over the course of the term; asking for an annotated bibliography which requires some analysis of sources; asking for three possible openings to a paper; requiring explanations, problem solving, choices, or decision making; or collecting interim evidence of progress such as notes, photocopies, etc.

Third, there are tools for detecting plagiarism such as being aware of term paper

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mills (sites that sell term papers or provide free ones), using detection software or commercial detection sites, and searching for unique phrases in a search engine such as Google.

Finally, it is important that the University have a clear statement on academic integrity along with procedural guidelines and that violations are dealt with in a consistent and firm manner. Since the process of reporting an offence can be time-consuming and emotionally taxing, the support of the institution is essential.

Further examples of how to prevent and detect plagiarism, as well as ideas for assignment redesign, are available, along with links to detection software sites, on the Dalhousie University Libraries web site at <http://www.library.dal.ca/how/detect.htm>.

Assignment suggestions to curb plagiarism

From Learning Through Writing: A Compendium of Assignments and Techniques

Comments in italics are the editors'.

Sharpening Students' Analytical Skills

Gregory Hanlon, Department of History
The presence of critical material in all fields of study makes this a very easy assignment to adapt regardless of discipline.

This assignment is given every year to all my first- and second-year classes. It entails making a summary of two research articles on a related topic, encapsulating the authors' arguments and making note of the means by which their conclusions were reached, then linking the two articles analytically – that is, determining why I put them together. I impose only one analytical requirement: students must not moralize.

The total length of the completed assignment is five pages.

The assignment obliges students to write, and rewrite, and rewrite to summarize a 20-page article into about a page and a half. They must have some kind of awareness that, in history, research is based upon sources. And finally, they avoid making moral pronouncements on past societies.

While the exercise does not take long to complete (I allow two weeks) and requires no outside research, it is intellectually challenging and makes the most of students' analytical skills.

Students Respond to Readings

Marjorie Stone, Department of English

This exercise can be used in any class with required readings; the informality of the students' writing makes it useful even in larger classes.

Brief, focussed, informal reading responses in which students register their response to assigned readings can be useful in courses at a variety of levels. Instructions for such responses can be tailored to the class or material concerned, but generally requiring students to produce a few general comments, some questions, and a close analysis of a particular point works well. Since students are told that they do not have to worry about grammar and organization in these responses, the prose is often lively and unconstrained; and for the same reason, they do not take long to grade; a comment ranging from "Excellent" to "Satisfactory" and one or two specific observations are often sufficient.

Such responses ensure that students do the reading and they allow students to raise questions, alerting the professor to areas of interest or difficulty. If students are asked to submit these responses in a uniform format, anonymous excerpts from them can be easily used to generate class discussion, to demonstrate the diversity of possible perspectives, or to show how students often zero in on questions or issues that are central to published treatments of the reading material concerned. Reading responses encourage dialectical thinking and stimulate students with weak reading and analytical skills to learn from stronger students. They allow shy students to contribute significantly to class debate. They can also let students test out ideas before developing them in formal papers, and are a study aid when students are reviewing the course material for examinations.

● **Linking the Theory to Students' Own Personalities**

● *David Mensink, Counselling and Psychological Services*

● *To adapt this assignment, first use a personally relevant reference point, such as a student's own home in architecture, teeth in dentistry, family business in marketing, or favourite play in theatre. Second, instead of a theory, a model, proof, procedure, test, or experiment can be used. The key is personal relevance.*

● **Instruction to students:**

● Select one of the ten personality theories from the course outline. Find a theory that is of particular interest to you. Look through your textbook to find your "favourite" theory. You might wish to enrich your thinking by investigating sources other than the text: a chapter from another personality text, a journal article about your "favourite" theory, or something written by the theorist of your choice.

● The major goal of this paper is to apply the selected personality theory to **your own personality**. That is, evaluate the theory using yourself as the subject of the investigation. How does the theory fit you? What are its strengths and weaknesses with specific reference to your personality? What is the applied value of the personality theory from your point of view?

● Grades will be determined on the basis of the following criteria:

- Creativity and originality
- Understanding of theory
- Thought-provoking content
- Writing style and grammar

● Length: four to six typed (double-spaced) pages.

● **Writing an Editorial and Defending it in the Classroom**

● *Neil J. Mackinnon, College of Pharmacy*

● *This assignment has two key elements: the presence of an external motivational factor (the possibility of being published) and the opportunity to present a personal opinion. Both of these elements are easily adaptable across the disciplines.*

● As they continue to assume new roles in health care by providing pharmaceutical care to their patients, pharmacists are often expected to contribute to health care policy

and decision-making. Therefore, the need for pharmacists to state and defend their positions on various health care issues has become even more crucial.

To address this need, I introduced this assignment into the fourth (and final) year of the pharmacy curriculum at Dalhousie University. In this assignment, the students write an editorial on the topic of their choice (with certain limits) for the *Canadian Pharmaceutical Journal (CPJ)*, one of the main pharmacy journals in Canada. I picked the *CPJ* because it runs a popular national contest for pharmacy students, publishing the best student editorials submitted.

On the date that the assignment is due, the students must be prepared to read their editorials and answer their classmates' questions. Students seem to want to defend their editorials: in my experience, so many students volunteer to present their editorials that the entire class period is filled and I do not have to call on students.

● **Close Analysis of a Single Paragraph**

● *Len Dieveveen, Department of English*

● *To adapt this analytical exercise, consider the close analysis of a particularly difficult theoretical passage or model and ask the students to justify the inclusion of each element, possibly with the help of additional references.*

● **Instruction to students:**

Your first assignment will be a close reading of a paragraph or two (125-200) words of *Babylon Revisited*. After choosing your paragraph (it must not be the beginning or end of the story, and I have suggested some paragraphs at the end of these instructions), type it out double-spaced and label each fictional "event" that is contributing to the story.

Look for your possible categories from my handout on fiction (setting, character delineation through physical description, talk as performance, etc.). After doing this, give a short description of the role that element plays in the paragraph, chapter or story as a whole (you need not do all three for every element). Do not content yourself with a paraphrase of the action; show why that action is included. My guess is that you will come up with between 30-50 elements for your paragraphs, although you need not feel bound by these numbers.

The Abstract Exercise

Martin Willison, Department of Biology
Easily transferable across the disciplines, this exercise can also be kept current as new articles appear.

This exercise, recommended for third-year students, improves students' writing and helps them identify the salient points in complex scientific works. From a journal that uses a numbering system in reference citations, photocopy a good four- or five-page paper.

Now take your scissors and remove all identifying marks from the paper – title, author's name, abstract, reference list, anything that would help the students locate the source. Now reassemble, copy, and distribute the anonymous paper to your class and ask them to write an abstract for the paper in 200-250 words. Return their graded versions along with a copy of the original abstract so the students can compare their versions with the author's.

Peer Review to Increase the Quality of Students' Work

Lawrence Stokes, Department of History
This design lends itself to almost any full-year course with a small number of students.

I introduced this essay writing scheme (actually drawing upon my own undergraduate and graduate student experiences) in my upper-level seminar courses two years ago. It involves, first of all, individually advising students early in the fall on their selection of a research topic for the entire year. During the first semester, they prepare a 12-to 15-page historiographical essay on the subject of

their research; that is, a critical analysis of the scholarly literature and interpretative debate about it up to the present. These papers are intended both to introduce students to what previous authors have written about their topic and to show them the methods and standards of marking I employ.

In the second semester, students prepare individual research papers on some particular aspect(s) of their subject. The students' familiarity with the historiography on it allows the students to expand and deepen their research, for example, into primary sources of various sorts. Up to 10 weeks of the semester are set aside for students to present their papers in a first draft to the entire class. Each week no more than two students provide class members with copies of their essays a week in advance. During that week, the students and I work through these very thoroughly, noting stylistic errors and organizational weaknesses as well as questionable interpretative issues. In the class the students give brief introductions to their papers; there follows a general discussion in which students are encouraged to express the comments they have made on their copies of the essay. At the end of each class, I collect the marked essays and later assign a grade for the effort put in to this work by the students, before turning them into the author. The author then has a few weeks to revise and improve the paper before resubmitting it to me for a final grade. The end result ought to be the best, or at least one of the best, quality essays written by a student as an undergraduate.

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