

Integrity in Academic Writing



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Integrity in Academic Writing

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During my first few years of teaching English, I struggled with the problem of plagiarism. Fortunately, through many in-depth conversations with colleagues coupled with additional teaching experience, I was able to formulate and implement strategies that successfully anticipate and prevent plagiarism.

In this QuickCourse, I do not intend to replace or duplicate previous works that meticulously address the issue of plagiarism. However, I will share strategies that will benefit you. If you are a new or less experienced instructor who is looking for effectual ways to ensure academic integrity in your classroom, studying this QuickCourse material will be of particular benefit.



First, writing integrity should be identified as a learning outcome. Making the effort to ensure that all of your students complete all writing assignments honestly is a goal that benefits everyone.

Goal

First, writing integrity should be identified as a learning outcome. Making the effort to ensure that all of your students complete all writing assignments honestly is a goal that benefits everyone. Only when integrity is maintained can you feel confident in the efficacy of your teaching.

Only when you are sure your students are legitimately generating their own writing can you be convinced that your students have gained invaluable academic skills and an awareness of the professional values necessary for success.

Thus, it's an important part of your responsibility as an instructor to implement a system that monitors and continuously evaluates whether your students are honestly and successfully producing authentic writing samples

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1 Why Students Cheat

To begin with, you need to confront the problem honestly. Why would your students cheat on writing assignments or on any assignment or test for that matter? The root causes will be examined in this chapter.

The question, “Why do they cheat?” arises again with urgency when you have to deal with a student who has cheated. You may experience feelings of shock and betrayal especially when you find it necessary to discipline your student. [You do have a Positive Discipline plan in place that covers cheating don’t you? If not, learn how to create one by taking the TFS QuickCourse, “Ensuring Positive Discipline.” It’s available to Teaching For Success Faculty Success Center institutional members.]

It’s easy to attribute a student’s rationale for cheating to a morally and ethically bankrupt society that believes in getting ahead at any cost. However, that explanation is too pat and narrowly focused to reveal helpful insights. The following points will shed some light on what actually motivates a student to cheat.

Inappropriate Course Placement

First, students may have been placed in an English course that they are not yet prepared to take. Placement tests are not foolproof; therefore, students may be placed in a level, sometimes



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one or even two rungs, above the appropriate class that fits their skills and preparation. Since students do not want to fail, they resort to whatever means are necessary to pass the class, regardless of academic codes or morals. In addition, even if the student is informed that a developmental course would best meet his or her current writing level, the student’s ego may sometimes override this obvious truth. Thus, students may stubbornly remain in an inappropriate class since they believe that an academic and social stigma is attached to taking a necessary developmental courses.

Competition

Next, many schools and programs, especially ones that are heavily focused on math, science engineering and medicine, receive a high number of applicants. Those who are accepted in the programs usually have the highest GPAs.

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Such rigorous standards can convince students that they must receive a “B” or higher in every course. Thus, to guarantee this grade, the student may resort to any means necessary to achieve the required grade.

Wrong perceptions

In addition, a student enrolled in a composition course may believe it is all right to seek substantial help from others when composing essays. However, students need to be informed that the act of writing an essay is a solitary act. Donald McCabe, “Cheating: Why Students Do It and How We Can Help Them Stop,” clearly articulates this view:

It is also important for teachers to clarify their expectations for students.

For example, many teachers fail to explain what level of collaboration is permissible on assignments. When they don't, students must decide for themselves, and, more often than not, they conclude that whatever had not been specifically prohibited is acceptable.

Any teacher who penalizes a student for collaboration when the teacher has not clarified his or her expectations is probably on very weak ground (42).

You must also be sensitive to the fact that many international students are accustomed to group learning communities in which they worked with fellow students on class projects in their native countries.

In order to anticipate and prevent any unfortunate misunderstandings that may occur, you must clearly emphasize to all students that they are expected to write their essays without assistance.

The Need for Approval

Since parents pay tuition costs in many students' situations, they hold certain expectations for their children, sometimes demanding that the children maintain a specific minimum GPA if their children wish to continue having their schooling funded.

Students with low confidence and self-esteem may feel it's necessary to go to any extreme in order to please their parents and to continue their education.

With this knowledge in place, you can begin to recognize and prevent academic dishonesty in developmental and compositional writing courses.



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2. Teaching Developmental Courses

New instructors of developmental writing face many issues during each class period; in addition to the struggle of learning how to effectively teach the course and address learning differences, you must consider the potentiality of cheating.

Anti plagiarism Strategies

Fortunately, there are strategies that address and largely eliminate the possibility of academic dishonesty. The problem is a basic one: when you administer paper exams, you must, naturally, make sure that students keep all textbooks, copybooks, and notes in their school bags.

Acceptable materials that may be openly used during an exam can include a dictionary, thesaurus, and blank paper that you distribute. These instructor approved materials can be used to generate prewriting tasks such as outlining and clustering. If you use a computer lab for testing, I recommend that you proctor examinations from the center of the back of the lab. This centralized vantage point allows you to keep a watchful eye on all computer screens and all possible dishonest scenarios.



For example, what if one of your students quickly went on the Internet, e-mailed the test topic to a friend, who would then write the paragraph for him and immediately e-mail the finished piece to the student as an attachment?

Online Cheating

For example, what if one of your students quickly went on the Internet, e-mailed the test topic to a friend, who would then write the paragraph for him and immediately e-mail the finished piece to the student as an attachment?

The student could then open the attachment, put his/her name on it, and present it to you as his/her own writing. A solution to this problem may be for you to sit at a computer console at the back row of the lab and have the students log onto Net Op, [<http://www.netop.com/>]. This software allows you to monitor students' writing and freeze their screens if necessary.

This program is traditionally used for instructor commentary during practice paragraphs, but it could also be used to remind students that you are constantly keeping a watchful eye on their progress during testing.

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Prewritten Materials

Another problem is that students can have access to pre-written documents or pieces of documents stored on their college-provided network drives, laptops or smart phones. Network drive files can be accessed from any computer on campus. Since many English departments use a set list of approved topics for developmental testing, it is inevitable that topics are used in several classrooms during testing.

Students may become aware of this procedure and communicate with students who are also enrolled in developmental courses to the extent that they exchange previously pass-graded paragraphs with each another, storing them in their Word documents file for future use.

The solution to this problem is to customize the approved list of paragraph topics, pending departmental approval. In addition, after you have allowed students to see their graded paragraphs helping them to become aware of the areas that need improvement, you should collect the paragraphs a second time to prevent the students from sharing their paragraphs with other students.



Define acceptable help and teamwork parameters this is primary to communicating what is and what is not acceptable in your class

3. Teaching Composition Courses

Encourage your students to employ several proofreading techniques for their essays, which include reading from the last line of their essays' texts to the first line, reading their essays aloud to themselves or someone else, or having someone read their essays to them.

However, remind your students that a suggestion or two for improvement is acceptable, but the act of someone else proofreading and rewriting their essays is not. Since you are not omnipresent in their lives, you cannot always monitor all of your students' actions during the writing process. Assigning all in-class essays would cure this problem, but such a policy might have an overall detrimental effect on the quality and diversity of their writing.

Nevertheless, do ask them one pertinent question to emphasize the need for academic integrity in their essays: "Is your family member/friend going to write all of your papers throughout the rest of your college career? More importantly, is this person going to write for you the rest of your life, composing your e-mails, resumes, and business reports?" This emphasis on the honor code and self-sufficiency thus is an act of faith

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on the instructor's part, believing that the students realize that an education is for their self-improvement as writers and citizens.

The textbooks we use for teaching composition supply dozens of interesting essay topics for each pattern of development. Therefore, instructors are showing commonsense when they assign these essay topics. After all, the themes have been proven to be successful since they are generated by instructors whose combined experience represents decades of teaching composition.

Unfortunately, the advent of the Internet has led to sites (e.g., <http://www.schoolsucks.com>) that offer pre-written essays, sometimes for free, oftentimes for money, to students who are eager not to do their own work. Chances are, the textbooks most of us teach from are used across the country. The essay topics found in the textbooks, which are universally used in college classrooms, then become fodder for cheat sites. In addressing these problems, instructors have several options.

Encourage Students to Broaden Their Vocabularies

Students sometimes plagiarize because they have a limited vocabulary and they fear the language. Requiring that students purchase and use dictionaries and thesauruses is one way of building their confidence in speaking and writing the language. The more students know and feel empowered by words, the less chance there is that they will feel the need to plagiarize.



The textbooks we use for teaching composition supply dozens of interesting essay topics for each pattern of development. So, you are teaching properly when you assign these topics as essays.

If a student is technologically oriented, Merriam-Webster Online (<http://www.m-w.com/>) is an excellent resource that addresses this visual learner's needs since it supplies both an online dictionary and thesaurus.

Furthermore, students can receive an electronic "Word of the day" by either looking at Merriam-Webster's front web page on a daily basis or by subscribing to a free daily e-mail offered by the site. With a continuous stream of words floating into students' minds, they are bound to feel more confident when they write.

Employ Turnitin Software (<http://www.turnitin.com/>)

Having students submit essays to Turnitin.com is an effective strategy for eliminating plagiarism. After they have handed in their essays to be checked, you should have them attach to their Turnitin site receipts to their essays.

Customize Textbook Essay Topics.

Turnitin has limitations. It can identify many plagiarized essays, but it does not contain all essays ever written by college students. One solution is for you to customize textbook essay topics by either further limiting the topics or gearing the topics to students' lives so they respond with their unique, personal experiences.

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This strategy also gives students incentive not to cheat. Robert Harris writes, “Students are faced with too many choices, so they put off low priorities. With so many things to do (both of an academic and recreational nature), many students put off assignments that do not interest them. A remedy here would be to customize the research topic to include something of real interest to the students or to offer topics with intrinsic interest to them” (Harris 1). Thus, when students have a personal incentive to write, they are less likely to plagiarize.

Assign Personal Narratives

In addition to customizing textbook essay topics, I believe that the optimal way of steering students towards better structure, details, grammar and self-enlightenment is to assign personal narratives.

At the beginning of the semester in my English Composition I classes, I inform the students that the majority of their essays will be personal narratives. For many of them, it is the first time they have been granted the opportunity to use themselves as the subject matter of their writing. In introducing them to this writing strategy, I apply an art metaphor, telling them that in a basic drawing class the most interesting and challenging assignment is the self-portrait. Likewise, in writing a personal narrative, students are turning the metaphorical mirrors upon themselves in order to better understand themselves before attempting to understand the world around them. Thus, if a student forms a firm conception of one’s own person, he/she then has the tools and apparatus for the effective objective analysis of other subjects.

The application of personal narratives also allows students to concentrate on the craft and mechanics of writing rather than being burdened by the added task of conducting research. When I assign the argumentation-persuasion essay at the end of the term, I offer them the option of conducting research. However, since research is emphasized at many colleges, I prefer to concentrate on building and strengthening my students’ abilities to write on a college level in English Composition I class. Occasionally, students write essays that are extremely personal in tone, but which need to be graded nonetheless. When you assign essay topics, you should politely inform your students that regardless of the essays’ content, the essays still must be evaluated for unity, support, and coherence.

If this criterion is clearly stated, and essays are read objectively, without any judgment being passed on students’ lifestyles, experiences, and opinions, students will feel comfortable in submitting personal narratives. Furthermore, personal narratives are interesting, lively, amusing, and poignant as they allow you a finer understanding of students and add another dimension to the teacher-student dynamic.

Thesis Paragraphs in Class

When assigning potential essays topics, you can monitor the writing process from the first step of the rough draft process by requesting that students compose the thesis paragraph of each essay during class. After the students have spent a portion of the class period working on their thesis paragraphs, you can spend

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the remainder of the period evaluating the students' progress so far, offering suggestions that can improve and refine their writing.

Then, you should have them attach this first attempt at the thesis paragraph to their rough and final drafts. If a draft greatly differs from the initial thesis paragraph, it is up to you to determine if the student did his/her own writing in the subsequent steps of the process.

Schedule a Writers' Workshop.

After the students have completed their thesis paragraphs, the next step is for them to write a rough draft and then to take a hardcopy version of their draft to a writers' workshop. Here, both their fellow students and you can comment on their essays. Peer evaluation allows them to receive helpful advice from other students and to gain objective critical and proofreading skills that they can apply to their own writing.

Not all student advice will be correct, so that is why it is necessary for you to offer the final word on any questionable peer evaluation commentary.

Furthermore, when I run writers' workshops, students will occasionally not have a hardcopy draft of their writing. Because I am sympathetic to situations in students' lives that may prevent them from having their rough drafts completed, I instruct the students to compose their rough drafts over the course of the period.



When assigning potential essays topics, you can monitor the writing process from the first step of the rough draft process by requesting that students compose the thesis paragraph of each essay during class.

However, if a student repeatedly reports to writers' workshops without a printed draft, I then suspect that the student is not doing his/her own writing. I then request

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that the student compose the entirety of the draft in my presence during office hours in order to reassure me that the student is capable of completing an essay on his/her own.

Assign an In-class Essay

When faced with writing an in-class essay, students may react with fear and apprehension. In order to ease their testing anxiety, introduce your students to testing strategies, such as outlining before writing, pacing oneself during the time allotment for the assignment, and carefully proofreading one's writing.

Additionally, remind students that tests are a sometimes painful yet inevitable fact of life, that they will encounter throughout college and when they apply for jobs, since employers will wish to evaluate the knowledge and skill levels of potential employees.

In order to give the student sufficient time to prepare for the in-class essay, supply the students with several potential test questions. On the day of the in-class essay, choose one or two of the questions.

A good student, of course, will outline/prewrite all of the potential essay topics. At the very least, students cannot complain that they were not given sufficient time to prepare for the in-class essay.



However, if a student repeatedly reports to writers' workshops without a type-written draft, I then suspect that the student is not doing his/her own writing.

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4. Monitoring Research

During the last several semesters at my college, the English Department, in a collaborative effort with the libraries, ran a pilot project for their English Composition II courses that were taught by adjunct faculty. The English Department's goal of ensuring that students write well, effectively organize a paper, and accurately cite a source was aligned with the Libraries' focus on information literacy, which is concerned with students gaining the skills to locate appropriate information for research and to think critically as they apply the information to their papers' arguments.

As an English Composition II instructor, I was able to witness the efficacy of this project, which sets parameters for the research component of the course in two parts. For the first part, documentation, the students learn how to properly employ the MLA parenthetical citation style when they incorporate secondary sources, selected by the instructor, in a paper.

For the second part, the research process, students are required to write a research paper of 1000-1400 words in length. The paper cannot exceed 1400 words. This word limitation immediately decreases the chance of plagiarism, because students who attempt to find an already written paper can only search for papers that meet that word



Bottom line or rule number one for ensuring academic integrity, whether you teach in a traditional classroom or online; is that you must take definitive steps to positively know who is doing the work and who is taking the tests.

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requirement. A list of topics chosen by the instructor also limits the focus of their research, and the students must complete question sheets that are designed to both facilitate and monitor students' progress during the research process.

Furthermore, students are required to incorporate a minimum of four sources; these sources can include a book, a journal, and an Internet source, which can be a free Internet source and/or a college-vetted database.

Most importantly, one of the required sources includes a reference source specifically found in the MCCC Libraries. Thus, the chances of plagiarism occurring in these research papers are greatly reduced.

An interview can serve as a fifth source. Allow students to also include a personal interview with an expert or authority in their research, since "an interview creates both a current and a checkable source" (Harris 7).

In addition to these helpful strategies, having students attach copies of the articles/book pages/Internet sources from which they have quoted/paraphrased helps reassure us that our students are composing their own papers. I ask my students to highlight the passages that they have used in their papers.

This request serves a twofold purpose: 1) It allows me to ascertain if they are precisely quoting/paraphrasing the source material. 2) It reassures me that they are composing their own papers.



See Robert Harris' article, "Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers" (<http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm>), which offers detailed reasons for why and how students plagiarize their research papers. Harris also supplies good strategies instructors can employ to detect and deter plagiarism.

Most colleges provide a full description of the research process as part of their library system or special faculty resources.

5. Penalties for Academic Dishonesty

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Depending on the rules established for academic dishonesty at your college/university, you must establish their individualized penalties for plagiarism. If you suspect a student has committed plagiarism, common sense dictates that you proceed cautiously in handling the situation, meaning that you confront the students only after absolute or strong circumstantial evidence has established the student's writing as being plagiarized.

At my college, the administration has implemented a Student Academic Code of Ethics that specifies, "Options for dealing with academic dishonesty are at the discretion of the instructor" (2). You should locate a copy of your college's policies in this matter and become familiar with them.

Furthermore, my college's code warns that an "instructor-imposed sanction may include..." a student "receiving a failing grade for the course with a notation of academic misconduct on the student's transcript"(2) .

This failing grade for plagiarism is an "XF." I inform students that if they receive such a grade, it essentially functions as an indelible mark on their future careers as students and potential employees, since academic admissions officers and potential

employees will see the grade if they read a student's transcripts.

In my experience, this severe penalty alone deters students from considering submitting plagiarized papers. If you and your students are very aware of the various permutations of cheating/plagiarism that exist, you will be able to anticipate and prevent academic dishonesty in your classroom and your students can make informed choices regarding their behavior.

You must be aware, however, that students are ever-evolving, especially in relationship to our increasingly proficient technological society. Thus, you must be patient, energetic, and flexible when enforcing policies that uphold and preserve academic integrity.

As with all things human, it comes down to a matter of establishing trust, and respect between student and instructor. Your expectations of students playing within the rules and your ability to communicate to your class a caring but unbending need for honesty in academics will go along way to helping students make the right choice regarding academic integrity.

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- **McCabe**, Donald. "Cheating: Why Students Do It and How We Can Help Them Stop." American Educator (Winter 2001): 38-43.
- **MCCC** Libraries. The Research Process. Montgomery County, PA: Montgomery County
- **Merriam-Webster** Online. <<http://www.m-w.com/>>.
- **Montgomery** County Community College (MCCC). Student Academic Code of Ethics.
- **Montgomery** County, PA: Montgomery County Community College, 2005. Code of Ethics
- **Turnitin**. <<http://www.turnitin.com/>>.

7. Show You Know

1. Students sometimes cheat because:

- A. They don't like you.
- B. They are unintelligent.
- C. They have been improperly placed in a class that is too difficult given their current skill level.

2. If a student has received extensive assistance from other students in composing an essay, in a class where guidelines for "acceptable assistance were not discussed, you should:

- A. Fail the student's essay.
- B. Reevaluate and refine your classroom policies on "acceptable assistance" on completing writing assignments.
- C. Commend the student for addressing his/her writing problems by having other students edit and co-write the essay.

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3. In order to properly monitor students taking an written exam in a computer lab, the instructor should:

- A. Continuously walk around the room.
- B. Watch the students' screens from a centralized vantage point in the center of the back of the computer lab.
- C. Play on a computer while the students are taking an exam, looking up websites, trusting the students to never cheat.

4. Whenever possible, one should customize textbook essay topics, since:

- A. Customizing essay topics to students' interests gives them incentive to write essays.
- B. The topics are always boring.
- C. You want to make the topic as complex and difficult as possible for the students.

5. Assigning personal narrative is a fine strategy for ensuring academic honesty because:

- A. Students are egotists; they only want to write about themselves.
- B. You want to know as many details as possible about your students.
- C. Personal narratives emphasize subjective details that a student who is tempted to plagiarize cannot easily find in generic, pre-written essays.

6. Establishing a word limit on research papers is a good idea since:

- A. It is a hassle to read and grade research papers that are too long.
- B. It decreases the chances of plagiarism caused by overloading, while maintaining adequate learning levels.
- C. Students are not capable of composing long papers or doing extensive research.

7. If you suspect a student has plagiarized a paper, but you do not possess concrete evidence proving the potential act of academic dishonesty, you should:

- A. Proceed cautiously in handling the situation, adhering to both your classroom policies on plagiarism and your school's policies on the issue.
- B. Ignore the situation and mark the paper with an optimistic, "benefit of a doubt" mind-set.
- C. Immediately fail the essay, and accuse the student of committing plagiarism.

Answers: 

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O. Integrity Awareness

O Checklist

- ☐ I know the definition of plagiarism.
- ☐ A definition is plagiarism and academic integrity is part of my syllabi.
- ☐ I have conducted an open and honest discussion of plagiarism at the beginning of my class.
- ☐ I have obtained a buy-in from each and every student in my class regarding the value of maintaining integrity and the need for penalties for noncompliance.
- ☐ Notice the word, "INTEGRITY" it contains "GRIT" and "GRITY"; remind my students it's not easy and it takes strength of purpose and vigilance to build a life based on integrity.
- ☐ I have created a list of unique essay topics that I know will catch the interest of my students.
- ☐ I visited SchoolSucks.com, and TurnItIn.com and took time to Google other sites offering papers or providing me with the latest information on fighting plagiarism.
- ☐ I have observed my students writing in class.
- ☐ I'm accessible to help my students with writing problems and they know what to do and where to go to get help when I'm not available.
- ☐ I schedule Writers' Workshops to provide evaluation comments and improvement tips.
- ☐ I tailor my assignments to be challenging but trimmed to fit into my students' demanding schedules.
- ☐ I have consulted with other instructors in my department as well as the department head so that I full understand the standards and policies that apply to plagiarism.
- ☐ I understand my college's penalties imposed on those students who are found to be engaged in plagiarism or cheating of any kind.

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9. Site Link and Product List

Site Name or Owner	Site Link	Product(s)	Summary
Coastal Carolina University	http://plagiarism.phys.virginia.edu/Wsoftware.html	Software	This site distributes free software, WCopyfind, to detect plagiarism. Software runs on Windows and Linux platforms and its sole author is Lou Bloomfield, Professor of Physics, University of Virginia, Box 400714, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4714, bloomfield @ virginia.edu.
University California Davis	http://cai.ucdavis.edu/plagiarism.html	Articles on plagiarism	Site provides answers to common questions that students might have regarding properly citing works used and further links to three articles on plagiarism.
The Academic Integrity Project	http://cai.ucdavis.edu/aip.html	Policy papers, Student handouts	The AIP provides policy documents in both html and MS Word formats suitable for handouts.
Plagiarism WebQuest by Dr. Alice Christie, Arizona State University	http://www.west.asu.edu/achristie/NASA/plagiarism.html	Everything you ever wanted to know about plagiarism and links to more sites	This site has something for teachers of all levels. Good questions for self evaluation and questions to ask your students, case histories of plagiarism and famous quotes pertaining to plagiarism. Excellent material for inclusion in your syllabus or for preparing a discussion on the subject with your students.
US Copyright Office	http://www.copyright.gov/	Law, policy, documents	All the information you could want regarding copyright laws; many publications for download.

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	University of Illinois	http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/wp/copyright/copyrightlaw.htm	Explanations, links, references	A site rich in “legal documents, explanation of copyright history, federal statutes, liabilities, international law, and court cases.”
	Library of Congress Copyright FAQs	http://www.copyright.gov/help/faq/	All about copyright in an FAQ format	Excellent site to quickly and easily get basic questioned answered about copyright in plain language. The most interesting question covered might be, “How do I protect my sighting of Elvis?”
	Purdue University OWL, Online Writing Lab	http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/search.php	Writing resources and instructional materials on improving writing, podcasts, flash movies	Part of avoiding plagiarism problems is to know how to cite works. Purdue’s OWL site is replete with easy-to-use instructional materials on the subject. OWL features information in traditional, podcast and flash movie formats.
	“Bob Jensen’s Threads on Plagiarism Detection and Exam Cheating,” Trinity University	http://www.trinity.edu/rjensen/plagiarism.htm#Culture	Long postings of summaries of articles (with links) covering plagiarism and cheating from A to Z	An amazingly detailed and comprehensive site of literally scores of articles and faculty comments collected by the author. This site has the insiders’ scoop on the issues including plagiarism defense sites such as turnitin.com and gives you a feel for what other faculty think and do in this area of academic concern.
	“Avoiding Plagiarism in the Classroom,” Leeward Community College	http://emedia.leeward.hawaii.edu/resources/plagiarism/06detection.htm	Information on the basics of plagiarism detection and prevention	TFS recommends this site for the beginning instructor, especially if you a part-time or adjunct instructor with minimum experience in current academic issues. This site will explain plagiarism basics and provide practical steps for its prevention.