

Academic Honesty, Academic Quality: Learning from Plagiarism

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The subject of this memo is: *how **not** to do research*. In it I will present some examples of the improper use of sources. I hope you will bookmark these examples and refer to them whenever you have doubts or hesitations about the use of material written by others.

To go straight to the point: many students enter college, and some even enter graduate school, without knowing exactly what plagiarism is. The [UCLA Office of Dean of Students](#) cites the definition in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1973, 870), which simply says that to plagiarize is to "steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own without crediting the source; present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source." The [UCLA Office of Dean of Students](#) also describes the act and its consequences from the judicial point of view. Read these links carefully.

Plagiarized papers and exams are usually approached as infringements of academic honesty. The instructor who catches a student in the act is obliged to report him or her for disciplinary measures — a distasteful business that makes teaching resemble police work. Here I shall assume that the case for honesty and for respecting others' intellectual property has been made. My subject will be the often neglected gray area that lies between outright theft and genuinely original work: in a word, the standards of quality in research that a university expects of all its members.

We live in a world of ready-made phrases, concepts, recipes, and institutions: every hour I implicitly call on hundreds of such prefabricated structures, ranging from intellectual formations (the normative concept of democracy or of the sonnet) to social codes (my sense of the right balance of strictness and tolerance in child-rearing, for example; or the convention that requires me to read and answer my mail). I cannot claim to be the originator of these thousands of patterns of behavior; I can, at most, give or refuse my consent to them.

Similarly, any piece of academic writing implies consent to some concepts; modification or synthesis of others; and refusal of still others. The quality of academic writing depends on the writer's use of judgment in the acceptance, refusal, distinction and combination of ideas. Poor academic writing, like plagiarized writing, is often due to the writer's failure to judge ideas found in source materials, or to make clear the reasons for approving them. The plagiarist is, by the nature of plagiarism, unable to draw the distinction between his/her thought and the thought of others; the lazy or easily impressed writer is unwilling to make that distinction clear. Students occasionally defend themselves from charges of plagiarism by contending that they were not aware of the rules. By this defense, they inadvertently show their ignorance of the purpose of academic writing. For the rules are closely related to the characteristics that we teachers seek to foster in our students. The best way to avoid any suspicion of plagiarism is to think — and when your thinking has someone else's writing as its starting point, to announce that fact so that your own work can begin where the earlier work stopped.

Compare the following passages:

- 1 Tu Fu (712–770), being a man of warmth, compassion and intense reformist sentiments, used poetry to attack social injustice, and outrightly described his own, along with other people's, abuses and sufferings. This personal characteristic of the poet led to his poems having an intensely personal touch to it. . . . [*actual example of a plagiarized passage from a student's paper*]
- 2 Since much of Tu Fu's poetry is intensely personal, we can follow in it the tortured course of his life. . . . [Burton Watson, 1984, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, p. 219.]
- 3 Tu Fu . . . was a man of warmth, compassion, and strong reformist sentiments, and he often used his poetry to attack social injustice. . . . [He] boldly described in his own words the abuses and sufferings that he and his contemporaries encountered. [Burton Watson, 1971, *Chinese Lyricism*, pp. 153–154.]

Leaving aside the issue of its (evident) lack of honesty (and grammar!), we can examine the student's paper from the point of view of its quality. What evidence of independent thinking does it offer? The student claims to know what kind of man Tu Fu, dead for some thirteen hundred years, must have been (“a man of warmth, compassion and intense reformist sentiments”). How could the student have gained this knowledge, except from texts? Every claim demands a foundation. The student might have provided it by citing an author whose research could provide a basis for such conclusions; or he/she might have cited a piece of Tu Fu’s writing as evidence of his character. The drive of the paragraph would then have been quite different; it might have read roughly as follows:

Burton Watson describes Tu Fu as “a man of warmth . . .” (Watson 1971, 153) [etc.]. These personal qualities are conspicuous in Tu Fu’s well-known *Ballad of the Army Carts* [. . . which I will now go on to analyze].

Proper citation of sources not only solves the problem of academic honesty; it makes clear, to the reader and (presumably) to the writer alike, who the writer is, on what his/her judgments are based, and what value she/he puts on the work of earlier scholars in the field.

To this we might add that the conflation of two writings by Watson into one paper introduces a problem that the paper's author does not seem to have found worthy of discussion: if the poetry of Tu Fu is marked by a concern for social reform, why is it also “intensely personal”? What allows these two characteristics to coexist? A paper attentive to this problem would perhaps have begun:

Burton Watson (1984, 219) describes Tu Fu as, in contrast to Li Po, an “intensely personal” poet. And yet this “personal” poet is, again in Watson’s words (1971, 154), one who “used poetry to attack social injustice,” a purpose that seems at first sight to go beyond merely personal concerns. What exactly accounts for this apparent split in Tu Fu's poetic personality? How does personal suffering interact, in Tu Fu's poetry, with national catastrophe? [and so on]

While hardly path-breaking, this opening does show that its author is willing to examine and compare the work of previous scholars, instead of merely repeating them.

Another vice of hasty, uncritical or plagiarized writing is the use of undefined or unexplained terms. Again, compare the following passages:

- 4 By polarizing the dignity of genuine living individuals against the decadent, anti-life and inhuman past, the vernacular literature is attributed an eternal value. All these advocates of vernacular literature attempted to legitimize the marriage of literary reform with the larger social and political revolution. [actual example of a plagiarized passage from a student's paper]
- 5 The metaphors used in the extremely self-conscious theorizing of language and literature in [the May Fourth] period follow a consistently dichotomous pattern: traditional literature is decadent, moribund, and antilife, while the literature using [vernacular language] is genuine, natural, and living . . . Characteristic of this marriage of literary reform and political revolution is . . . a newly found humanism that stresses the dignity of living individuals against the “inhuman” past. [Rey Chow, 1990, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 88–89.]

Symptomatically, the student's paper treats as self-evident truths themes which the source text holds up for scrutiny. Words and phrases which appear without explanation in the paper had been designated, in the source text, as “metaphors” and contextualized as elements of a “humanistic” cultural reform. The source text is, again, explicit about its own sources and about its own mission, which is to attempt to weigh the value of the “self-conscious theorizing” done by the writers of the May Fourth era. No such aim is evident in the student's paper.

As I said earlier, “every claim demands a foundation,” and the practical consequence of this observation for academic writing is this. For every claim you make, ask yourself. what is the foundation to which I appeal? Here I shall list a few typical cases.

- * The foundation for your statement may be found in common sense (e.g., animals rarely talk except in fables), in historical fact (the battle of Waterloo was fought in 1815), in logic (if A is larger than B and B is larger than C, then A is larger than C), in the definition of a word (the usual meaning of “tragedy” implies an unhappy ending). In such cases, explicit reference to a source is often unnecessary — but consider your audience and its potential knowledge. (Although it is a fact, not everyone knows that Malay is closely related to Indonesian.)
- * Common sense and historical fact do not usually exhaust the questions asked in the humanistic disciplines. Your basis for making a statement will often have much to do with your ability to frame questions and devise ways of answering them. Here a lesson may be drawn from the examples of plagiarism cited above. They state conclusions instead of working up to them. Working up to conclusions requires that you have a healthy sense of your own starting point. Are you the sort of person who is entitled to pronounce on a certain matter? A biography may assert, on the basis of reported events and many-sided testimony, that a certain person is vile or short-tempered, but you will not have the space or, presumably, the first-hand information to make such assertions. Is your paper the proper forum for making the claim you want to make? “The central reference of Western philosophy, since Descartes, has been humanistic individualism” — better to quote an author and discuss the claim than to give the impression that you have personally read all of Western philosophy from 1629 on.
- * The refusal to use your own judgment may enslave you to unwarranted opinions found in your sources. In referring to those sources, have you accounted for the possibility of error, prejudice or falsification? It is unwise to treat opinions as facts, without submitting them to further examination. Opinions are, in a certain sense, facts — it is certainly a fact about Stalin that he thought his doctors were trying to kill him; but not necessarily a fact about those doctors.
- * Judgments of value inherently require a basis in fact and a criterion (for some readers, Lincoln’s record may not support the verdict that he was the greatest American president; for others, it is the standard of “greatness” that needs clarifying). You need to specify both, not assume them.

This too-brief survey of the advantages and pitfalls of source use is intended to do two things: to remind you of the legal issue of plagiarism, so that you will know what it is and avoid doing it, even unconsciously; and to lead you to see plagiarism as not simply a criminal act committed with dishonest intent but, somewhat closer to home, as the extreme case of poor and thoughtless writing. Avoiding that is more difficult than steering clear of plagiarism; but your efforts to avoid it will show in your writing and thinking.