

## DO YOU KNOW WHAT PLAGIARISM IS?

If not, you could get into trouble. Here, *Scope* shows you what it is and how to avoid it.

BY SEAN PRICE



# The Plagiarism Problem

**"T**o be or not to be—that is the question." That sentence could make a really snappy opening for any article. But there's one small problem: It's already a famous line from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

To borrow these exact words in a school paper without using quotation marks or giving Shakespeare credit would be pretty foolish—and not just because it's so famous. Passing off another person's work as your own is called *plagiarism*. And it's a serious offense in any type of writing.

### Choices & CONSEQUENCES

At one point or another, everyone who writes has to decide whether "to be or not to be" a plagiarist. Unfortunately, one study shows that many teens choose to be. More than half of 4,500 high school students surveyed by Rutgers University in 2000 and 2001 admitted to some kind of plagiarizing from the Internet.

"I don't think there's a teacher in America who hasn't confronted an instance of plagiarism," says Timothy Dodd, executive director of Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity.

But plagiarism can lead to humiliation, failing grades, and even expulsion. So why do people do it?

Part of the problem is that plagiarism is not always clear-cut. Writers learn by studying and imitating other writers, so it's easy for some people to go a step further. Instead of just imitating style, they steal key thoughts, phrases, or even whole pages.

Many younger writers make this mistake because they don't

understand plagiarism's ground rules. And learning these rules can be confusing. For example, sometimes it's OK to borrow a well-known phrase—like "To be or not to be"—and not **cite** its source. Someone could start a story with, "To be or not to be on the swim team." That's simply putting a twist on a famous line, not pretending it's yours.

Also, it's easy to borrow too heavily from one source without

meaning to. Erin Horowitz, 16, of Lake Forest, California, says she has caught herself committing something called "unconscious plagiarism."

Fortunately, she knows how to look for this in rough drafts: she compares what she's written with her sources. "I usually go back over my paper just in case something sounds a little off," Erin says.

### Too good to BE TRUE

Debra McCarrell, Erin's teacher at El Toro High School, says she's caught several students plagiarizing on purpose. All of them stole their information from the Internet, she says. And all of them got busted for the same reason: The writing was too good to be theirs. "It's so obvious," McCarrell says. "You can just tell."

Many teachers feel that the Internet encourages plagiarizing. There are roughly 8 billion pages available online—an almost-bottomless supply of free documents. But McCarrell says teachers can usually catch Internet plagiarism easily. She herself simply checks certain phrases in student papers on

the search engine Google.

A growing number of high schools and universities now routinely run more in-depth checks. John Barrie of Turnitin.com says his anti-plagiarism service scans about 40,000 papers a day. It compares them with Internet pages as well as with books, journals, and other student papers. About one third of the papers scanned contain unoriginal material—and just one

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plagiarized sentence can be the tip-off. "The probability of somebody writing the same 16 words in the same order as somebody else is less than one in one trillion," Barrie says.

### The high cost of CHEATING

Students caught plagiarizing in middle or high school usually get a second chance. But plagiarism in the adult world gets much more serious. College students can fail classes or get kicked out of school. Last May, South Florida's *Sun-Sentinel* found that a high school intern had plagiarized several articles. The newspaper ran an embarrassed correction, and the girl lost her internship and a journalism award.

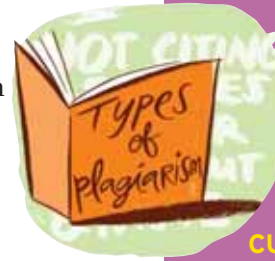
The *Sun-Sentinel* incident is not unique. In recent years, plagiarism scandals have rocked *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and dozens of other publications. Most writers involved lost their jobs. Even famous authors have been tainted. Alex

Haley, the author of the blockbuster novel *Roots*, saw his reputation damaged by evidence that he had plagiarized. The same happened to best-selling historian Stephen Ambrose.

The plagiarism problem can be dealt with in many ways: teachers should be **vigilant**; students must be aware; and penalties for those who are caught must be clearer. But the best advice for students tempted to plagiarize might be to just relax. Teachers say that many of the worst plagiarists are highly intelligent go-getters. They take on too many classes and activities and then cannot keep up their grades without cheating.

Erin Horowitz says most people she knows at El Toro High School would never plagiarize, but those who do tend to be set on succeeding at all costs. "I think that's a big problem," she says. "Most kids have a lot of work to do, and if they can cut corners on anything they will." ■

## Plagiarism [PLAY-jeh-riz-ehm]



Plagiarism is the act of using or passing off as one's own the ideas or writings of another. Here are some common forms of plagiarism:

**CUT-AND-PASTE** - The simplest form of copying is using someone else's writing word-for-word without providing quote marks or giving credit.

**MOSAIC** - This is just like cut-and-paste, but the thief steals from many sources instead of just one.

**PARAPHRASING** - The plagiarizer puts another person's ideas into different words but gives no credit.

**HALF-CREDIT** - Many writers give some credit to their sources but fail to provide *enough* credit.

**UNCONSCIOUS** - All writers borrow from others without realizing it. That's why it's important to check notes and sources. Unconscious plagiarism is often used as an excuse by anyone who gets caught.

## Play It STRAIGHT How to Avoid Plagiarism

Always give credit whenever you use the following:

- another person's idea, opinion, or theory
- any facts, statistics, graphs, drawings—any pieces of information—that are not common knowledge
- quotations of another person's actual spoken or written words
- paraphrasing of another person's spoken or written words

Source: Indiana University's plagiarism Web site at [www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml)

## NO-SWEAT TEST PREP

1. What is the author's point? (*main idea*)
  - Ⓐ plagiarize—just don't get caught
  - Ⓑ never copy very famous writers
  - Ⓒ never use the Internet for research
  - Ⓓ understand plagiarism—and avoid it
  
2. Which of the following is *not* plagiarism? (*reading comprehension*)
  - Ⓐ Copying word-for-word from a book.
  - Ⓑ Paraphrasing another author's work by changing a few words here and there.
  - Ⓒ Finding new information through research and using it in writing a paper.
  - Ⓓ Cutting-and-pasting from a paper.
  
3. About how many of the papers Turnitin.com scans each day contain unoriginal material? (*detail*)
  - Ⓐ one fifth
  - Ⓑ one third
  - Ⓒ half of them
  - Ⓓ all of them
  
4. Who wrote the line "to be or not to be"? (*detail*)
  - Ⓐ William Shakespeare
  - Ⓑ Hamlet, Prince of Denmark
  - Ⓒ nobody—it was never written down
  - Ⓓ Sean Price

## WRITE NOW

Has anyone ever stolen an idea from you or taken credit for your work? Describe or imagine how that experience would make you feel.

## CRITICAL THINKING

Many artists receive money when their work is reused by others. Is it ever OK to use someone's work without giving credit? Consider the use of samples in hip-hop or images of famous artworks such as Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*.