Help Students Develop Paraphrasing Skills to Help Deter Plagiarism

Although many discussions of academic integrity and plagiarism focus on failures in ethical reasoning, student problems with good authorship practices are often motivated by weaknesses in reading comprehension or skill in writing paraphrases (e.g., Roig, 2007). Students frequently have problems paraphrasing ideas from primary sources because their understanding of the original work is weak. Sometimes these problems manifest as an over-reliance on quotations. The student who has difficulty paraphrasing might string together quoted material to create a paper and contribute few, if any, thoughts stated in the student’s own language. Some students may attempt to disguise their reliance on quoted material by omitting the quotation marks (and, even worse, omitting a citation) and then discover they are now charged with plagiarism.

**Use an in-class reading and paraphrasing activity to promote comprehension of source material and good authorship practices**

Assign a brief source passage for students to read and then write a one paragraph summary in which they describe or paraphrase an idea or argument presented by the author of the reading. If you think this part of the activity will take too much time, assign this in advance and require students to bring their written paragraphs to class. Use a pair-share activity in which students share their one-paragraph paraphrases with one another and evaluate how accurately they describe the original idea or argument and how well they use original language when writing their description. After discussing their paragraphs in small groups, ask the students to draft an accurate paraphrase of the original passage as a group. Describe the methods used in your discipline for providing a citation for the original passage and include an appropriate citation in the draft created by the class.

This exercise will give students practice in writing appropriate paraphrases. It will also serve as an immediate source of feedback about how well they understood the original passage and the concepts discussed. When the class develops a paraphrase that is both accurate and original, misunderstandings of the original ideas will be clarified and corrected. The class will also get direct practice with good authorship practices.


Submitted by:
Claudia J. Stanny, Ph.D., Director
Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment
University of West Florida
www.uwf.edu/cutla/