

Plagiarism: A How-Not-To Guide for Students

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1 Introduction

Taking the Plague Out of Plagiarism

Plagiarism is easy.

There's no sugarcoating the fact that if you want to cheat on a written assignment, you can find a way, and it will take you less time and effort (unless you get caught) than writing an original paper would. Back when your parents and teachers were in high school, plagiarism wasn't such a snap—if they wanted to plagiarize a report on, say, the migratory habits of mosquito larvae, they had to trudge to the library, actually *find* a source on mosquitoes using an old-fashioned card catalog (no easy trick), and then copy out the information by *hand* onto sheets of notebook paper. What a pain, right? Today you google “mosquito larvae” and “migration,” click a couple of keys, and cut and paste the information from www.mosquitoes.org right into a Word document. What could be simpler?

Of course, getting caught is easy, too. Search engines like Google and Yahoo! make it easier than ever for teachers to find plagiarized material; I often don't have to search more than one time, using one phrase, to find the Web location of borrowed material students include in their papers. Add to that the existence of search detection services like Turnitin.com (with that site, I don't even have to type to search for material online; I can make *students* submit the papers for me and the search results come back to me) and the quest to hunt down plagiarized papers becomes easier than ever.

Avoiding plagiarism, though—that's sometimes tough to do. I don't mean, of course, that you, as a student, are somehow hardwired to cheat at every given opportunity. Most students—at least most I've worked with—agree that wholesale copying is usually wrong and that writing original work is, in the long run, a good idea. So the book you're holding doesn't aim to moralize about what's fundamentally right or wrong, or to insult you by offering advice that's pretty obvious to most students. It also doesn't aim to excuse plagiarism or to remove the responsibility you have for making sure work is your own.

This book aims to help you avoid plagiarism by offering better alternatives.

In fact, I believe that there's a problem with the whole line of thinking I just introduced, the thinking that begins with *plagiarism is easy* and ends with *getting caught is easy, too, so don't do it*. The problem arises when someone assumes that all students plagiarize simply because it's easy to do so or because they're just dishonest twerps (even if that's sometimes the case). And actually, that assumption isn't one that's made only by teachers. Most students I speak with think that plagiarism happens mostly for just those reasons. As you'll see in a chart that appears in the next chapter, about a quarter of the students at the school where I teach think that plagiarism happens mainly because it's easy or because students are plain lazy.

The problem continues when we assume that it's a teacher's job to catch and stop plagiarism. Sure, teachers don't like cheating. But when a teacher has to spend time chasing down copied work, both the teacher and student have already lost valuable time and trust. That means, of course, that your teachers bear some responsibility, not to make sure that you don't plagiarize, but to help make sure that you don't *want* to plagiarize. There's a whole teacher edition of this book that addresses ways teachers can change assignments, grading systems, classroom rules, and school culture to help make plagiarism not only unattractive but just plain unnecessary. In the ideal world, plagiarism would still be easy—it just wouldn't happen.

Uh-huh, you say. Right. We don't live in an ideal world. We live in a world—we go to schools—where deadlines pile up, where the importance of grades has been inflated by parents and schools and the college admissions process, where citation formats can seem complicated and pointless, where assignments aren't always clear, where teachers sometimes do assign busywork, where it seems like those who cheat get ahead, where the Internet makes rules of ownership fuzzy and yes, where plagiarism is easy, sometimes *really* easy. You're expected to navigate that world without resorting to cheating or copying others' work, and the bad news is that as plagiarism gets easier, teachers are feeling less and less sympathetic. Search for books and articles on plagiarism online and you'll find titles that include words like *scourge*, *war*, *robbery*, and my favorite, *plague* (clever writers love to pull that word out of the term plagiarism, but don't be deceived—their Latin roots aren't the same).

Plagiarism is not a disease. It's not a scourge, and if students and teachers consider it to be a war, it's a war everyone will lose. As I said before, teachers have their part to play in making certain that we avoid combat by making learning a mutual, high-interest, student-centered activity.

You have your part to play, too. It involves knowing what is and isn't considered plagiarism, knowing how to write without plagiarizing, and doing your best to make sure that plagiarism and cheating aren't the most attractive options for your own work. To do that, you've got to think about the causes and consequences of cheating, as well as the benefits of original work, *before* you encounter temptation, confusion, or misunderstandings. That's the purpose of this book: not to accuse you of plagiarizing or to make it sound inevitable that you'll cheat, and not only to give you a way out of a tricky situation well before you need it, but also to help you avoid tricky situations in the first place.

■ CASE STUDY: BLIND JUSTICE?

Consider this: In 1892, when she was twelve years old, Helen Keller (yes, *that* Helen Keller) was accused of plagiarism. The work in question was a story titled "The Frost King," substantial portions of which, it turns out, were copied from a story by nineteenth-century author Margaret T. Canby titled "The Frost Fairies."

In her autobiography, Keller admits to borrowing from another's work:

At that time I eagerly absorbed everything I read without a thought of authorship, and even now I cannot be quite sure of the boundary line between my ideas and those I find in books. . . . But the fact remains that Miss Canby's story was read to me once, and that long after I had forgotten it, it came back to me so naturally that I never suspected that it was the child of another mind. (1952, 63)

The accusation and subsequent inquisition of Keller by her teachers, along with the realization that she had, in fact, unwittingly plagiarized a story by another writer, shook Keller. She avoided ever writing fiction again and, if we can believe her assertions of innocence, turned to autobiography partly as a way to prove to herself as well as to others her own authorship. Notice how Keller felt when she discovered that she had appropriated another's words:

The two stories were so much alike in thought and language that it was evident Miss Canby's story had been read to me, and that mine was—a plagiarism. It was difficult to make me understand this; but when I did understand I was astonished and grieved. No child ever drank deeper of the cup of bitterness than I did. I had disgraced myself; I had brought

suspicion upon those I loved best. . . . As I lay in my bed that night, I wept as I hope few children have wept. I felt so cold, I imagined I should die before morning, and the thought comforted me. I think if this sorrow had come to me when I was older, it would have broken my spirit beyond repairing. (1952, 64)

Flash-forward more than a century, to 2006: Keller's story became a hot topic once more, this time for its usefulness as a comparison with the case of a Harvard sophomore, Kaavya Viswanathan, who was accused of plagiarizing material from two young adult novels by Megan McCafferty. Here's an excerpt from a *New York Times* article focusing on the young author:

Under scrutiny, [she] suddenly recalled adoring Ms. McCafferty's books and claimed to have unconsciously channeled them. Given that, her critics charged, she was being treated better than other fabulists of late. . . . But what if she had been deaf and blind? (Zeller 2006)

In other words, the author of this article asks us, would the press today treat Keller and Viswanathan similarly?

For the sake of comparison, look at how Viswanathan explained herself to Katie Couric on the *Today* show:

I completely see the similarities. I'm not denying that those are there, but I can honestly say that any of those similarities were completely unconscious and unintentional, that while I was reading Megan McCafferty's books, I must have just internalized her words. I never, ever intended to deliberately take any of her words. (Schleicher 2006)

Viswanathan's book, incidentally, was withdrawn from stores, and she lost book and movie deals that were potentially worth millions of dollars.

Find Out More

- Check out Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life* (1952), from your library or find it for free on the website of the American Foundation for the Blind (www.afb.org/mylife). The entire account of the episode described in this case study can be found in Chapter 14 of the book.

- Type Kaavya Viswanathan’s name into an online search engine and you’ll find plenty of articles about her. You might wish to visit Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaavya_Viswanathan) to glance at a comprehensive list of the passages she is said to have plagiarized.

Talking Points

1. List some ways in which the cases of Keller and Viswanathan are similar and different. If you wish, use the Venn diagram in Figure 1.1 as a guide for constructing your list.
2. While Viswanathan lost her reputation and book contract after she plagiarized, Keller’s reputation has not suffered. Of the similarities and differences you listed, which do you think most affected the consequences each writer faced?
3. In your opinion, has each writer generally been treated fairly or unfairly? Do you tend to believe or disbelieve the explanations given by each girl?

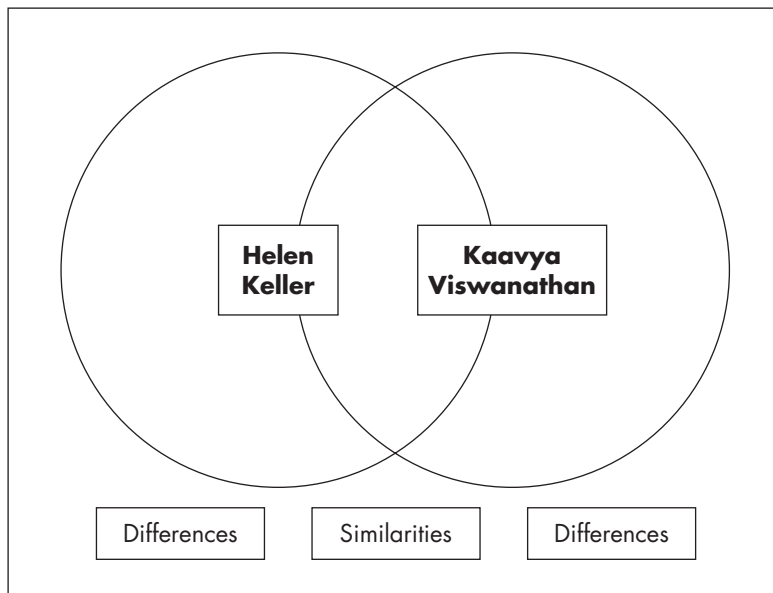


Figure 1.1