

Writing and academic honesty

Let's talk a little about writing and academic honesty. A number of recent studies point to an increase in the number of cases of plagiarism occurring on college campuses across the country. And according to the results of various, recent student surveys, between one-third and nearly one-half of all undergrads admit to having knowingly copied at least a few lines in an academic paper at some point in their time in school. And more students than ever—nearly one-third—believe copying and using a few lines in a paper without proper documentation constitutes a minor offense—or no offense at all.

The rise in plagiarism is usually attributed to a number of reasons: Students who grew up with the World Wide Web, file-sharing, and social networking sites may have a somewhat hazy view of the line separating scholarly authorship and the public domain; or perhaps the internet has made the ability to copy and paste temptingly easy; or maybe students simply enter college without a basic knowledge of what actually constitutes plagiarism—or of the need and the means to avoid it.

Then again, some experts believe that plagiarism itself isn't necessarily on the rise; instead, the number of cases being *reported* has increased because just as the internet has made it easier to copy and paste, it has also made it easier to detect passages in a paper that have been lifted from somewhere else.

Regardless, the fact is that plagiarism simply cannot be tolerated in an academic setting, where scientific research—and the reporting of results—play such large roles. It's not feelings of intellectual ownership or propriety that prohibit plagiarism; it's the *research* itself that drives the need for academic integrity. New studies build on past research, and the need for proper documentation is paramount for the historical scientific record.

If you copy and paste a few lines every now and again, you may feel that's it's not really that big of a deal—that it's not really cheating. But the truth is that it is—and you're primarily cheating yourself. Not only do you jeopardize your grade, your transcript, and possibly a career, but you're cheating yourself out of the opportunity to truly study and internalize the information, which then allows you to discuss it in your words—with your own learned take on the subject.

And finally, next time you're tempted to lift a line or two, just remember that the word “plagiarism” comes from the Latin word for “kidnapper.”