Best Practices: Kamenitsa Teaches Students to Avoid Plagiarism

Lynn Kamenitsa—in Political Science and Women’s Studies—chooses prevention over punishment regarding plagiarism. She takes several steps to instruct students against it.

Defining Plagiarism. First, she includes a statement in all syllabi that defines plagiarism as “presenting the thoughts or words of others as if they were your own.” She refers students as well to the definitions of plagiarism in the NIU Undergraduate Catalogue and the Student Judicial Code 3-3.1.

Identifying Preferred Style of Citation. Kamenitsa makes a point of identifying which documentation style she expects students to use (MLA). In her syllabus, she often reminds students of the conventions of in-text citation (including brief cues about punctuation, parenthetical reference, format, and placement on a “Works Cited” page). She also expects students to cite all material taken from course lectures and texts. If students have questions, she encourages them to seek assistance from the Writing Center.

Setting Exam Policies. When Kamenitsa provides students with an exam study guide, she includes a statement that sets protocols for exam seating, inaccessible placement of all belongings (e.g., backpacks, books, electronic devices, hats), and behavior. She writes the protocols on the exam as well.

Tailoring Assignments. Perhaps Kamenitsa’s most important advice is to tailor written assignments so students relate their research to reading assignments, arguments, evidence, or theoretical frameworks that come directly from course discussions and materials. This approach helps assure that students can’t purchase or copy papers easily from the Internet. She also asks students to write a mandatory, paper proposal later in the semester, so she can supervise their work and check to see if they are going in the right direction.

Investigating concerns. When Kamenitsa senses that a student has plagiarized, she also investigates. Sometimes students aren’t fully aware that they are plagiarizing, and she warns them. If, on the other hand, she finds an intentional case of plagiarism, she feels the worst thing she can do is ignore it. She consults the Judicial Office to determine how to proceed.

Using Resources. Kamenitsa recommends several websites that provide helpful information about academic integrity:

- “Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity”—http://www.oic.id.ucsb.edu/Resources/Teaching/Integrity.html
- “How to Avoid Plagiarism”—http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html
- “Eight Cardinal Rules of Academic Integrity”—http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/8cards.html


NIU faculty and students will soon have an online tutorial to help them define and avoid plagiarism. The Office of Faculty Development and Instructional Design wrote a CIUE grant to set it up. Watch for news on this valuable resource.

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Assignment Design Can Help Prevent (or Encourage) Plagiarism

Faculty can minimize the likelihood that students will plagiarize by designing assignments that connect to course material and give students support. The following comparison of assignments clarifies what “support” means.

Q. How does this assignment invite plagiarism?

Write a 10-page paper on a topic relevant to this course. Use APA documentation. Your paper is due April 27. You must use the University Writing Center.

A. Notice how generic the directions are. Students receive no instruction other than length, citation style, due date, and a directive to “use the Writing Center” to police their work.

Q. Why is this next series of assignments better?

On each of the following dates—1/27, 2/24, 3/24, and 4/27—turn in a 250-word critique of an article that relates to the list of class topics that is on your syllabus. Summarize the article in 3-4 sentences. Explain how it adds to, contradicts, or provides a different perspective on the topic, as we’ve covered it in class. If you quote, do so briefly, and cite in APA style. Choose your articles from the list provided on our class website. Study the sample paper on the syllabus.

A. In this assignment, students learn the professor’s definition of a critique. They recognize that they must write concisely and not pad their papers with quotations. They are reading articles that the professor has selected. Continued practice on the same format suggests that students’ writing will improve, and they have a model of a successful paper for reference.

Q. How is this series of assignments even more instructive?

- For 1/27: Choose a statement from the list on the syllabus. In about 150 words, explain why you agree or disagree (e.g., “Scientific study is inconclusive about causes of global warming.”)
- For 2/24: Choose 2 articles from the list on the syllabus that relate to the topic you chose on 1/27. In 250 words, summarize each article and critique it (i.e., explain how each adds to, contradicts, or expresses a different perspective from yours). Cite and document in APA style. Study the student example on our class website.
- For 3/24: On your own, find 2 print or Internet articles on the topic you chose. Each article should balance fact and informed opinion. Briefly summarize and critique each (250 words). Attach copies of articles to your critique. On the due date, two classmates will comment on your critique and check your use of APA documentation. Check the rubric on the syllabus to see that you meet all criteria.
- For 4/12: Turn in a 400 to 500-word reflection on how you have a more informed opinion of your topic. Cite all 4 sources in APA style. Address the following questions: Why has your opinion changed—or not? What specific information from your reading affected your opinion—and why? How do you know this information is reliable? What questions or doubts do you still have about this topic? How would you respond reasonably to people who contest your opinion? NOTE: You may have to revise if your reflection is incomplete, poorly written, or incorrectly documented. Consider going to the University Writing Center, and show the tutor this assignment.

A. This research paper is broken into easy-to-grade segments. Students learn to read sources critically. Documentation style is specified. The professor shows what kinds of sources she values, so students can find similar ones—which the professor might even use in future classes. Students can consult a sample paper and a rubric. The questions for reflection not only demonstrate how students should process information, but also what criteria will be used to assess their efforts. Drafting is encouraged, and students have a specific instructions which Writing Center tutors can check, to help students revise.

Why do Students Plagiarize?

Although a few students will try to plagiarize simply because they don’t care to do the work, it’s best to assume that most do so because of poor planning, lack of understanding, or cultural backgrounds where intellectual property is an odd concept. Faculty should keep in mind that:

- Students can be taught to budget time well if faculty require assignments to be done in stages
- Citation practices are different in various disciplines, and faculty need to familiarize students with what’s typical in their own area of specialization
- First-year composition introduces only a portion of students to academic protocols in citing sources (mainly MLA style)—many other students come to NIU as transfers
- Students get mixed messages from faculty regarding citation practices—some classes are very strict, while others provide no policies at all
- Classroom instruction about plagiarism significantly reduces its occurrence and affects students’ attitudes in favor of avoiding it (see “Teaching about Plagiarism in a Digital Age,” http://www.ncte.org/pubs/chron/highlights/122871.htm)
- Students from other cultures sometimes have radically different citation practices than those in American post-secondary education
- Handbook publishers continually change citation styles, sometimes year to year—and styles of citation for new kinds of electronic sources only add to the confusion
- Assigning end-of-term papers prevent faculty from catching problems until it’s too late