

Conquering plagiarism in nursing education

By Linda S. Smith, PhD, MS, RN, CLNC

PLAGIARISM is a serious concern in academic settings and has derailed many careers. The following article describes what nursing students and educators need to know about plagiarism, including who's likely to plagiarize and why, and explores strategies for avoiding plagiarism.

This is the first installment in a three-part series on plagiarism in nursing. The next two articles will address plagiarism in clinical and research settings.

What is plagiarism?

Though definitions vary, plagiarism is uncredited use (whether intentional or unintentional) of somebody else's intellectual property.¹ It's essentially the theft of someone else's ideas or work. Students must avoid unethical writing by acknowledging every source they use, whether they paraphrase, summarize, or quote that material.²

Plagiarism isn't confined to the written word. It includes all media formats (such as electronic documents, websites, images, music, lecture slides, and spreadsheets) when

content is used without acknowledgment.³ Using the work (in whole or in part) of other students and professional ghost writers is included in this definition.³ Persons who allow others to plagiarize are also plagiarizing; for example, by providing exam answers or papers to peers.⁴

Academic dishonesty in nursing education is a reality, and plagiarism is considered the most common form.⁵⁻⁸ As a form of cheating, plagiarism is the act of being dishonest—to oneself and others—about the knowledge the author professes to have.⁹ (See *Examples of student plagiarism*.)

Plagiarism is often accidental and unintended, but it's highly preventable. *When in doubt—cite* is a great mantra to have.⁸ Paraphrasing incorrectly is a common form of accidental plagiarism. More than just changing or rearranging a few words (which is called mosaic plagiarism), paraphrasing is the process of putting others' ideas and information into your own words and voice with attribution.¹¹ Paraphrasing correctly entails adding your own ideas, perspective, and conclusions as they

apply to the paper's purpose.¹¹ (See *In your own words* for an example of proper paraphrasing.)

Though unintentional plagiarism may be related to a knowledge deficit, intentional plagiarism is the intent to defraud and deceive readers and institutions.¹² Intentional plagiarism, as a demonstration of falsified records and unprofessional conduct, violates professional ethical standards and potentially the student's state nurse practice act.^{13,14}

Plagiarism prevalence

McCabe surveyed 2,100 nursing students and 200 nurse educators within 12 U.S.-based nursing programs and found that, across programs, over half of the undergraduate nursing students engaged in some type of cheating behavior.⁴ A good portion (43%) of undergraduate nursing students admitted to "collaborating with others when asked for individual work" and "copying a few sentences from a written source without citing it."⁴ Theart & Smit also noted the prevalence of these behaviors when they surveyed 550 nursing students in South Africa and just 12% said they'd never cheated.⁶

Some international students may be more likely to plagiarize because the concept of intellectual property (and therefore plagiarism) isn't universal.¹⁵

Giving in to temptation

Theart and Smit found that the most commonly reported reason for plagiarism was a perceived pressure to achieve high grades. Getting caught, however, and suffering severe consequences, was students' greatest deterrent.⁶ Nursing students

Examples of student plagiarism^{4,6,8,10}

- copying material without quotes, in-text citations, and/or referencing
- paraphrasing content without in-text citation and/or referencing
- copying ideas, words, answers, exams, or shared work from others when individual work is required
- using another's paper in whole or in part
- allowing another student to use one's work
- claiming someone else's work is one's own
- resubmitting one's own coursework, when original work is required (self-plagiarism)
- falsifying references or bibliographies
- getting help from another person without faculty knowledge or approval
- purchasing, borrowing, or selling content with the intent of meeting an academic requirement for oneself or others.

carrying heavy academic loads and those with multiple personal and professional responsibilities may feel the need to plagiarize.⁴ Nursing students unable or unwilling to carefully plan ahead and schedule large assignments may also feel pressure during deadline crises.⁹

Students are more likely to plagiarize assignments they classify as “busy work.”⁴ Others who decide to plagiarize may be poorly prepared for rigorous nursing programs or decide to take shortcuts when they see other students cheating without penalty.^{6,9} Unfortunately, 72% of nursing students in one study said they wouldn’t report peers for plagiarism.⁶ Furthermore, with fingertip technology and instant access to a plethora of resources, assignment plagiarism is easy and tempting.^{16,17} However, checking for plagiarism using sophisticated software and websites designed to detect plagiarism is also easy and readily available to faculty and students.

Preventing plagiarism

To combat all types of plagiarism, faculty, nursing programs, and schools need to implement plagiarism-defeating policies, procedures, and strategies. Penalties for plagiarism need to be exact, clearly written, and universally applied and enforced. Honest students perceive unpunished plagiarism as unfair, and it implicitly encourages the behavior.⁶

Nursing students who actively participate in the creation of honor codes, honor contracts, and academic dishonesty policies and procedures feel greater commitment to them.⁶ Therefore, faculty should invite student representation at all levels of the creation and review of plagiarism policy.

Significantly, students who have a clear understanding of plagiarism and their faculty’s policies, procedures, and penalties are better pre-

In your own words

Here’s a good example of paraphrasing for a paper on culturally competent nursing care of patients with communicable diseases. The paraphrased content doesn’t just rearrange the quote; it includes the author’s own ideas and interpretation, as well as a citation for the original source.

Original quote

“Unsafe nursing care occurs when patients feel disrespected, stereotyped, and shamed. Culturally competent care improves healthcare access and quality for all persons and decreases health disparities and poor health outcomes.” (Smith, 2013)

Paraphrased content

Applying principles of culturally competent care when working with patients is essential but potentially challenging. For example, the very nature of isolation and quarantine practices in some settings may lead to feelings of seclusion and shame and potentially impede a patient’s access to quality healthcare. Health outcomes could, therefore, be negatively impacted (Smith, 2013).

Source: Smith LS. Reaching for cultural competence. *Nursing*. 2013;43(6):30-37.

pared to identify when and how plagiarism occurs.^{5,18} Any educational intervention must teach students when and how to reference standard written materials such as books and journal articles; how to use and cite primary and secondary sources correctly; and how to cite online blog posts and forums, podcasts, music, e-mails, class lectures, and slide presentations.⁶ (See *Defeating plagiarism: Strategies for nurse educators* for more suggestions.)

Besides education and positive role modeling, one of the most important faculty deterrents to plagiarism is the socialization of students into the nursing profession.⁴ Unethical nursing students may evolve into unethical nurses.^{4,7} Success on NCLEX and success as a professional nurse depend on the knowledge and professional standards students gain while in school. Faculty need to help students understand that diligent, ethical work will reap years of benefits for students, their patients, and their employers.

Plagiarism remedies for students

Students should master writing skills by attending additional writing

courses, workshops, and skill-building sessions. They need to learn how to discriminate among sources and then cite and reference those sources in the format required by their school and faculty. The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/>) is an excellent and free referencing resource.

If they’re ever in doubt, students should ask faculty for clarification and help, use their school’s writing lab and writing tutors, and study their school’s plagiarism policies and procedures. As members of the nursing profession, students need to maintain the highest possible ethical standards for themselves and their peers. This includes a personal zero-tolerance policy for creating, sharing, or contributing to any plagiarized material. Students can also use online plagiarism detection mechanisms to self-check all written assignments prior to submission.⁸

Students should implement time-management strategies such as creating four or five self-imposed deadlines for progress on all writing assignments. Adhering to a carefully crafted assignment calendar from the

beginning of each semester or term may help. They should also keep an organized file system for each major project. For example, they should keep any identified reference information, and their own notes, questions, thoughts, and opinions on the information.²⁰ Being organized and prepared will improve writing competence and help prevent unintentional self-plagiarism. Self-plagiarism refers to recycling one's own work among assignments or courses without faculty knowledge or permission.²

It's important for students to examine the required workload of their nursing program against their own ability to accomplish that work with minimum stress and anxiety. Whenever possible, they should decrease the extracurricular activities that negatively impact their ability to accomplish nursing program goals.¹⁴

An ethical education

Nurses and nursing students know that writing is important work that reinforces nursing competencies. Good writing simply can't occur without careful consideration that includes the analysis and synthesis of information shared and passed on by others. This takes time and dedication, but the ultimate reward is a project that the student will be proud to submit. ■

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Defeating plagiarism: Strategies for nurse educators^{4,6,7,14,17,19}

- Add plagiarism information to course syllabi and orientations.
- Regularly review plagiarism policies and procedures with students.
- Include a signed plagiarism-free declaration with each assignment.
- Change assignments' foci and formats between terms or semesters.
- Ensure easy access to face-to-face and online writing labs and tutors.
- Implement clear writing rubrics and requirements for each assignment.
- Implement peer monitoring processes.
- Require students to submit work product, or notes that demonstrate student effort and thought processes for each assignment.
- Require benchmark work papers, or outlines, summaries, and bibliographies before the paper's due date.
- Consistently implement plagiarism screening software for all written work.
- Consistently apply a clearly defined plagiarism penalty appeals process. There should be no statute of limitations on plagiarized work.
- Incorporate a zero-tolerance policy and a skeptical attitude toward potentially plagiarized student assignments.
- Carefully monitor students during online examinations and assignments.
- When testing, use computers that have plagiarism-preventing hardware and software.
- Be sure all exam questions are rotated frequently; use questions that require high levels of critical thinking.
- Reduce or omit nonproctored online essay examinations.
- Implement oral examinations whenever possible.
- Teach and encourage good time management, writing, and study skills.

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