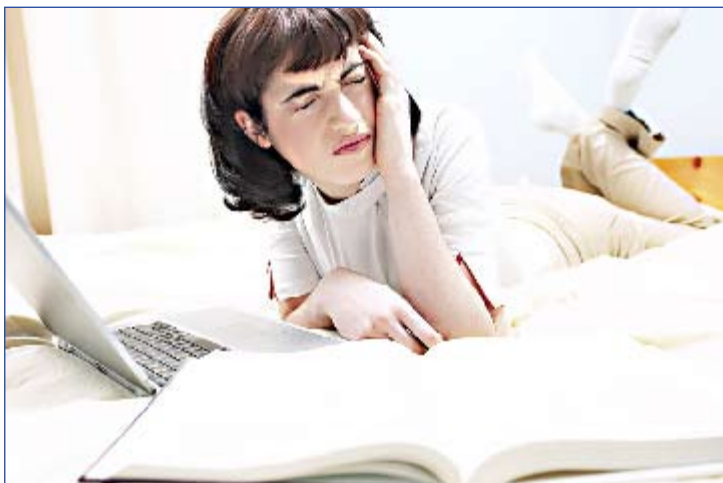


The pain and principles of plagiarism

By Debbie Mieszala, CG



It was a sucker punch that I never saw coming. Browsing a local newspaper online, I opened an article on an obscure topic of personal interest. I developed a rather sickening feeling while reading. The words were very familiar, and it wasn't a case of déjà-vu. Examination of an article I had written on the topic four years earlier revealed the story in black and white. I'd been robbed.

Entire phrases were copied verbatim; sentences were rearranged, but not enough to make them original. Not enough to disguise them. It was obvious that my article, shared with a local museum as historical information and for possible publication, was the sole source of the "author's" research on the historic detail. The only acknowledgment given the mystery source was "according to research compiled for the X museum...". Wrong. It was personal research I shared with them, not work done for them. They did not own the results, or my words. The local newspaper did not either.

Hopping mad aptly describes my reaction. With the anger comes pain. It hurts to learn you can't trust people, and here was a stranger, messing up my words, calling them his own, and getting paid for half-heartedly rearranging them. I know it needed an edit, but this was ridiculous.

A survey of associates on how to handle the matter resulted in a wide variety of responses. Don't burn bridges. Approach the reporter. Approach the museum. Let the editor know, no matter what. Write an article on plagiarism. Publish the original article in a different publication, directly challenging the newspaper or the reporter to respond—or to show those who read it where the information really came from. Definitely tell the editor, but be prepared to tell him/her what you want. Wow. What did I want done? Why was this so fuzzy, so gray, so like something a person with a law degree would better understand? I just understood that it was as wrong as it felt.

Dictionary.com defines plagiarism as "1. The unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work. 2. Something used and represented in this manner."

I contacted the reporter and told him that I did not appreciate being plagiarized. His response was to say sorry; he didn't know it had been published. What? Since when is publication the start of copyright, the end of free words for the taking, the beginning of an adherence to ethics? And do copyright and plagiarism always ride in the same boat? I shot a note back saying copyright began with creation and certainly he learned that in journalism school. He tried the next logical thing. He tried to butter me up. The work I do must be interesting, would make a great story, and could he talk to me about it? That effort did not justify a response.

Shortly after my communication with the reporter, I heard from my museum friends. The reporter contacted them. As I suspected, they shared past research on the topic, not expecting it would not be credited, or that he would not contact me about the work or topic. I had information on sources he could have checked, the tools he

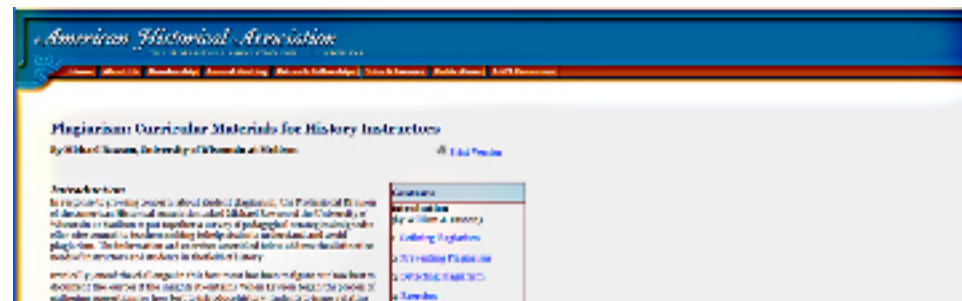
needed to research and create his own written work. The museum had no control over what was done with a resource in their collection. The culpability, the choice to do it the ethical way or the far easier but unethical way was strictly in the hands of the reporter. That he contacted the museum gave me a tiny bit of satisfaction. He either thought I was insane or was worried about what was coming next. Perhaps he wondered who would learn about his ethical lapse. Maybe he was hoping that the museum staff would pat him on the head and say no harm done.

We are all reporters when we write. We may not write for a newspaper, but we are gathering, compiling, and creating an end result. How do we stay on the proper side of the ethics line when using a source, when finding an online database that says what we are trying to say in a way superior to our words, or when that long-lost Smith line is revealed in someone else's online family tree? How do we avoid becoming that reporter who crossed the line, who entered a territory that was certainly unethical? How do we avoid plagiarizing others?

We use a variety of sources in our work, some more heavily than others. One good way to stay out of trouble is to work as much as possible with original sources, and compile your own results and findings, rather than rely on the compilations of others or derivative sources. That is sometimes easier said than done.

I am not an attorney and will not attempt to give legal advice. While a law degree would certainly come in handy, it would not guarantee knowledge of all of the changes to and intricacies of copyright law. That is an article for a different author. For now, let's stick to ethics.

Thomas W. Jones, PhD, CG, presents a lecture titled "Honesty, Courtesy, and Confidentiality: Ethics for Family Historians." The lecture is available on CD through [JAMB Productions](#). Tom covers a variety of issues and principles in his talk. In it he mentions scholarly ethical guidelines in writing, and the rule of three. Tom's explanation of the rule of three is easy to remember: when copying more than three (sequential) words, use quotation marks; if copying more than three paragraphs, get permission from the author or copyright holder.



He says to always give credit when using another person's "words, ideas, or findings."

Tom suggests the [American Historical Association](#) (AHA) as a good resource for further information on plagiarism. A recent search there for the term plagiarism yielded 143 results.

In an article on the AHA site, "Plagiarism: Curricular Materials for History Instructors," by Michael Rawson, plagiarism and copyright infringement are discussed. Rawson explains that while there is "... overlap, two fundamental differences distinguish them. First, plagiarism is most often an ethical offense, while copyright infringement always carries the potential for legal consequences." He further defines plagiarism as not attributing copied material, while copyright infringement involves using significant portions of another's work without permission.

The AHA Web site even has exercises in citing sources and properly acknowledging resources. A list of useful links includes one to an online plagiarism tutorial at the [University Libraries, The University of Southern Mississippi](#). The tutorial includes a plagiarism knowledge pre-test, definition, information on citing quotations, paraphrasing and summarizing, and a post-test. If you are unsure about the plagiarism issue, a run through the tutorial might help.

Plagiarism is not always done intentionally. However, that does not excuse the offense.

When an author writes for professional publication, he/she should recognize that a fact-checker might work to verify facts and sources. Shame on authors who have crossed the plagiarism line! The fact-checker might detect their slip. Their ethical lapse will be duly noted, the piece will be pulled, and chances are good that publication will no longer accept

their work. That is a high price to pay for being careless. It is a fair price to pay for being unethical. Authors must strive to always adhere to good ethics when compiling and writing, and care must be taken to avoid accidental crossing of that ethics line.

A number of offenders lifting the words of others have been caught with the use of an Internet search engine. If a previously published source is online, chances are good a particular phrase in an author's "new" work can be put into a search engine, and the original piece will be found.

Just because something is online does not mean it is up for grabs. An author should question who owns the material, the idea, and the words. Are the words as found essential to the work being compiled? Is there another way to say things to avoid plagiarism? If not, give credit to the author or Web site where the information was found. Remember the definitions of plagiarism, the rule of three, and to ask permission if using too much of a good thing. And give credit. It is the right thing, and it is most certainly due.

I haven't decided how to handle my errant reporter case. Communicating with him was unsatisfactory. I am not prepared to tell his editor what I want. Is an apology enough? Is notifying the editor that he has a lazy reporter sufficient? The subject matter is one of narrow interest, and it certainly wouldn't make me a rich woman through articles or book offers. But the offense is still there, the line was crossed, and I am on the other side, waiting to push back. **DG**



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