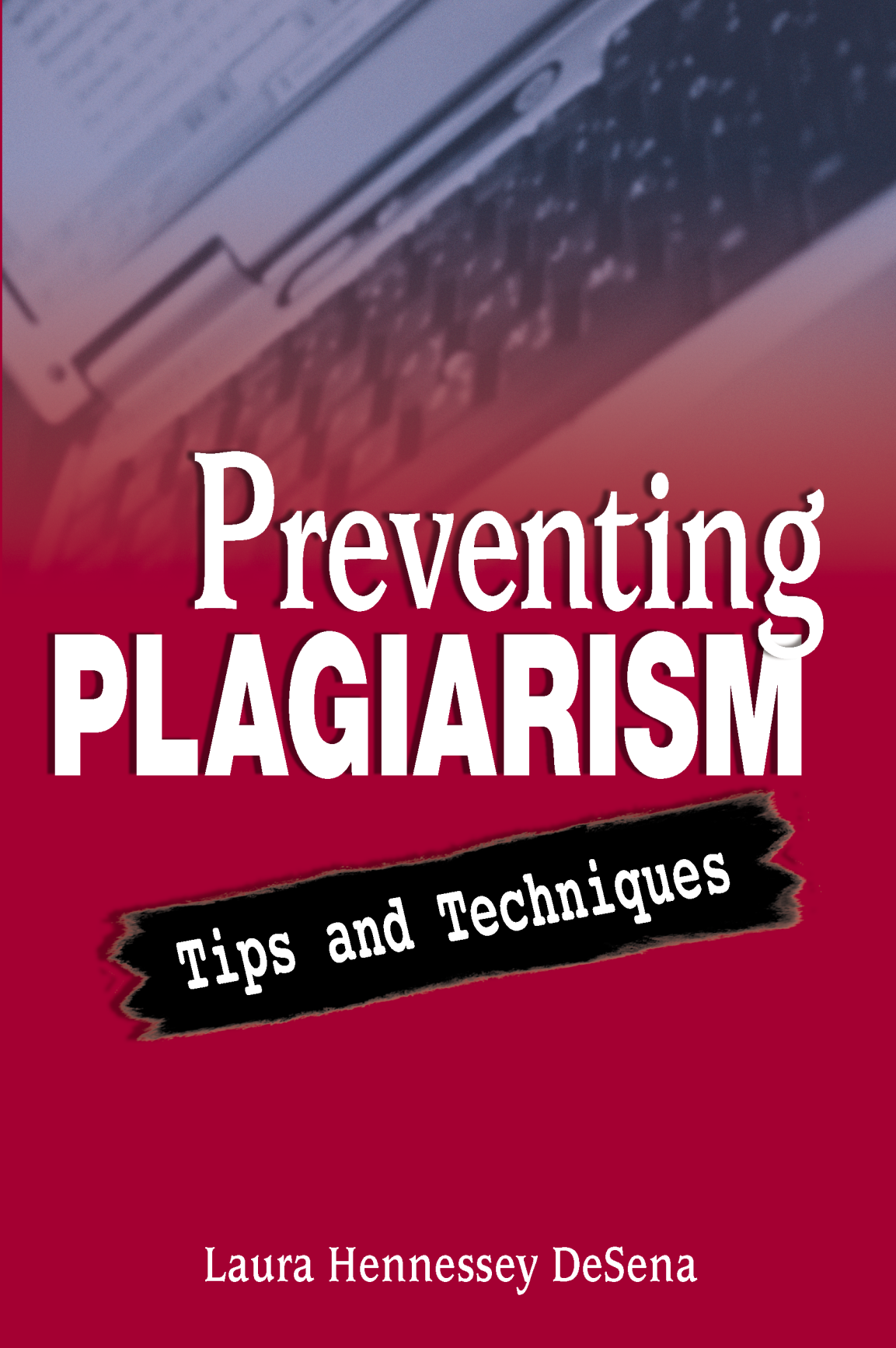
Preventing
PLAGIARISM
Tips and Techniques
Laura Hennessey DeSena

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The Rewards of Original Thinking

Writing Is a Dialogue

Writing is not merely a form of communication—a vehicle for the transference of ideas from writer to reader. The act of writing is a study of self: a process that moves inward, the pen like a divining rod; then outward, in the stream of ideas selected to be shared with others.

Research is not simply the acquiring of information: it is the assimilation of information. It requires the researcher to have a voice in the world that first satisfies self. Research combines the process of self-discovery with external discovery—through the lens of point of view, in an examination of information outside of self. Cacophony becomes dialogue. It is the job of the writer of research to modulate the voices of the outsiders through the subjective eye/I.

Research writing is a contribution to academia. It should not be mere regurgitation of the facts and ideas of scholars and specialists. As educators, we must teach students to realize that they are required to have their *own* insights into source materials. They must engage in a dialogue with the sources they consult. Without this dialogue their research is meaningless and becomes a mere exercise of collecting and organizing.

We must make the distinction between reporting and researching. Writing a report is objective writing; writing a research paper is subjective writing. Research is not simply finding information: it is processing information. Researching a topic requires a filtering of sources through a unique point of view. Research is a dynamic cerebral activity; reporting is a mechanical one.

Reporting is a retelling of ideas found; it is not an analysis of ideas found. Although reporting involves the gathering of infor-

mation, it does not require a response; it does not require engagement. Often, for the student writer, reporting is a mere transcribing of information. And it can be, in this electronic age, a mere cutting and pasting: students may not even read the information they are incorporating into their "reports." More disconcerting than this is what Thomas Mallon reasons in his afterword to the new edition of *Stolen Words:*

> For students, especially, the Internet may sap the very need to create. *It's all there already*, or so it seems; all the knowledge on a given subject, and all the competing viewpoints, in a machine you can carry around like a book. What's there to add—and why dig a well instead of turning on the tap? (246)

The Internet becomes the authority students will not question—perhaps because they do not recognize a need to, but mostly because of lethargy: why exert the effort to track down legitimate scholarly sources and why bother to think at all? Tomes, authoritative texts, always inspire confidence—knowledge in hard copy, something solid and real. But now, with the dissemination of information (not all of it truth/knowledge) over the Internet, as Mallon points out, there is a sense of the paradoxically definitive in the apparently infinite. With hyperlink text there is an impression of the depths of a topic already plumbed. The vastness of the Internet becomes more intimidating to a student writer than the solidity of a book. It was hard enough to challenge the concrete in a print-based world, but how can a student possibly challenge the infinite and abstract world of the Internet?

To teach students how to write an authentic research paper, we have to inspire in them a confidence to find a point of entry—this point of entry is an opening through the primary source(s): Alice should go down the rabbit hole, rather than pass through the looking glass of reflection, one that *represents* the environment for her. The experience must be a journey, if it is to be worthwhile.

All too often teachers emphasize the content (the information) students will cull and hopefully learn. But it is our obligation as teachers to encourage them to respond to the expert or

scholar, to answer his or her underlying claim, to affirm it or to deny it. Or, in a more sophisticated paper, embrace the complexities, the subtleties of the text(s) under consideration. Students are so used to receiving information (from television and other electronic sources); they are constantly taking in—we need to teach them how to interpret and respond.

In student research papers, there should be some tangible base grounded in the primary sources. There should be some hypothesizing from primary materials, before secondhand information is read and accepted like a handout to those in desperate need. Secondary source information is better appreciated and better understood when students have worked hard to arrive at understandings of their own, when students have struggled with the firsthand information. Give students some experience of the authentic process, not the rotely conventional one that moves from grabbing up secondary sources into note taking, from there into organizing a mere report—stale because in it information went unchallenged, unprocessed by the student.

I recognize that students are often given assignments to which they cannot relate, topics about which they have no desire to write. They come from a place far away from interest in the topic, and yet the parameters are set for them. We must encourage them to see how they are involved in the subject *through the act of writing alone*. By fully exploring the research materials, by analyzing, by recognizing a topical reaction for what it is, just that, they will be forced to delve more deeply inside themselves to find a way into the subject. Research will reveal their ideas even as the ideas of others are revealed to them. This is the tension that makes the experience authentic. If research moves in one direction only, it is not successful.

If research is productive, researchers are finally confronted with themselves—their innermost thoughts, their belief systems, their moral values, their aesthetic values. Through research students learn content: it is, after all, a journey through unfamiliar territories: the subject matter and the subjective eye. Research is not successful unless students receive knowledge about both.

CHAPTER 1

The Dubious Book Report v. the Authentic Literary Analysis Paper

In requiring students to read, we ask them to demonstrate, to document that they have read. Often we become obsessive about proving to ourselves, as teachers, that all students have completed the reading assignment. We ask for the book report. What is the classic book report? It is pure plot summary, regurgitation that ultimately encourages plagiarism in that it asks for no insights from the students. We place them in this mode early on. Unfortunately, this retelling of the text is useless for several reasons—foremost among them is that it is a shabby mimicking of the original. No one can write Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" as well as Poe, nor should another writer attempt to.

I call this the dubious book report. What has been gained by the assignment? Little in the way of engagement, and in this technological age when students can cut and paste information, they may be completely disengaged through use of online study guides. Even if they are working from the literature itself, in a book report, they are retelling the story, reciting it and, therefore, not responding to it. Their papers will be narrative in structure because they are following the author's organization. This means, of course, that they are not shaping an argument—that they are not analyzing the text. In the conventional book report template, the only place for student evaluation of text is in the final paragraph, which is typically a general recommendation of the novel to other students because it is "good." What teachers should encourage, instead, is that students attempt to understand the literature through the process of writing. My recommendation is going to be an emphasis on freewriting as a way to engage in a dialogue with the novel/play/poem.

We must require students to write a critical analysis of the literature, so that they begin to understand subjective writing as a dialogue, in which the crucial conversation is between the student and the primary source(s). If research is required by the teacher (this assignment is usually called the term paper), other voices will be joining this central exchange of ideas.

Writing a subjective paper requires students to pull something out of themselves, to search through their own ideas on a subject. They may dredge up their preconceived notions about a topic and compare them to or contrast them with credible sources of information; they may find they disagree with a literary critic's interpretation of a primary source because they did not fully comprehend the text, and so they have been forced to study it again; they may have fully comprehended the primary source and find that the critic has taken too great an interpretive risk with the evidence. All of these are positive results of responding to the information. The student will be challenged because he or she is required to have a voice in the midst of these heavyweights—the experts and scholars. How can what students have to say about a primary source be valid? We must teach them to be meticulous readers but also teach them to craft arguments, to ground their understandings in the evidence (primary, as well as secondary source evidence).

Obviously, we understand that various critical positions can exist in the world; they are not mutually exclusive: this is critical discourse. Students often do not understand that they can take a position with respect to the information they uncover in sources—that a stance is required. We are not necessarily creating scholars, but we are trying to develop critical thinking skills. Students' thesis ideas are original (even if scholars have long ago arrived at them) because they come from places inside themselves.

There is also a confidence issue here that I encounter in another form when they arrive in a college composition course: this sense that they are not scholars, and, therefore, that their criticisms hold little value, as though they have no right to assess the text in any meaningful way. Embedded within this is a palpable fear of being wrong. Students want to be told how to understand a text, rather than wade through it on their own and make discoveries about it. These students are afraid of risk, for fear of being incorrect. As teachers, we must tell them that writers aspire to critical discourse and an original interpretation from among the myriad possibilities, so that they know there is room for diverse views.

Clearly, Shakespeare was not writing for the Harvard scholars (indeed, we are told that the groundlings reacted most volubly; clearly, they got it)—an anachronistic argument—but students understand my point. Scholars do not own the literary canon, though, of course, they can offer specialized understandings of it. Novelists, playwrights, poets are attempting to reach a larger audience, to share their insights into the human condition, so readers (audience) can take away something from their original work. Student writers begin a dialogue with the text—they answer the authors back—*yes, I see it your way, but* . . . And it is in this conversation that they "research" their thoughts, discover their voices, their vision, distinguishing a common and a unique experience of the world.

Teaching Students to Think Originally

In teaching students how to write, we ask students to think for themselves. We require use of the imagination in early student writing, which is generally more creative and informal. As students move up in grade level, we begin to demand more formal writing of them, and this is where we sometimes move away from creativity into the stilted regurgitation of the ideas of others. Culling facts from a text or several texts is certainly an admirable skill, but it must be set apart in the process and, ultimately, secondary to the process, as part of the process and not an end in itself. If we purport to create critical thinkers out of our college-ready student population, then we have to require the higher level of thinking that is achieved through the simultaneous processes of analysis and synthesis.

We need to help them *originate* thesis claims. They may encounter the same thesis in a critical essay (written by a scholar), but if they arrived at this central idea through a dialogue with the literature (*King Lear*, *Beloved*), then it is their own: it is their contribution to an understanding of the novel, poem, play. If they do encounter a thesis in a scholarly work that is a mirror of their own central idea, they need not panic. Obviously, others before them have arrived at a similar understanding of the litera-

ture. It should be flattering to see that they have a valid understanding of the text. The scholar's work may now be used to enhance their own central argument. As long as they arrived at it firsthand, directly, then they need not be concerned. They can produce their freewriting to exonerate themselves. If, however, they read the critical/indirect/secondary sources first, they have arrived at a thesis secondhand: it is not of their own generating; this is clearly plagiarism. We must encourage them to move from responding to primary source to freewriting original responses to researching of secondary sources (in that order).

Students need to break down the texts for details, recognize them as relevant to their focus on a particular topic, and then pull them together under the all-encompassing thesis idea. The paper itself is a balancing act of interpretation and evidence. We are not asking for opinion separate from evidence. We are not asking for evidence separate from what we no longer call opinion, but interpretation. An academic argument is an interweaving of both evidence and interpretation. Many student essays are heavy on one side or the other: that is, they are either largely opinion without any grounding in sources of information, or they are merely literal, factual restatement of source material without any insight. These imbalanced essays need to be discussed with students so they recognize the favoring of one over the other in their own writings.

Certainly, writing is a means of communication, a way of sharing ideas. Research requires that students gather in the voices of others: the scholars, specialists, experts. We need to teach students to synthesize secondary materials within their own interpretative arguments: now the field of discourse has widened to encompass voices beyond the primary sources. What chaos—what noise—what frenetic energy to be controlled on the page, harnessed (so that it does not pull the paper in a hundred different directions) for the framework of the student's own construction. No wonder students are overwhelmed. Look at how many voices threaten to submerge that of the student writer. Even an experienced researcher wrestles with the voices and ideas of the outsider. We must begin to teach them how to exert control over the chaos—how to shape an academic argument.

Clearly, the student voice must be the predominant voice. It is her or his paper after all. Teachers of English can help by teaching paraphrasing and summarizing skills. Students do not realize that they should quote only with a purpose in mind—when there is poetry and elegance in the phrasing; when there is power in the prose; lastly and most simply, when they cannot say it better than the original author. Quotes should be saved for the eloquent and profound. We must advise students that they should quote primary sources more often than secondary ones. They should quote the poem or the play because they should ground their readers in the text; this is where most of their evidence should come from. It is the artistry of the original that should resonate in their papers—the language of the primary—the words of the play, poem, novel. It is Proust's, Dickinson's, Dostoevsky's, Joyce's, Woolf's words that should linger in the minds of the student writers and the readers of the student essay.

Students should be encouraged to overcome the temptation to simply copy information from secondary sources, because comprehension is more likely to be accomplished if they paraphrase and summarize. If they can put information into their own words (paraphrasing and summarizing), they are demonstrating understanding of that information. Paraphrasing and summarizing require more engagement than quoting. Copying is easy. Students often copy entire pages (which they could have photocopied and pasted into their note journals more easily and with the same amount of success in terms of increasing their understanding of content). Obviously, in this electronic age, cutting and pasting is a simple task. If, in haste, a student forgets to cite the source of the quotes (cut and pasted materials), they are plagiarizing.

The secondary sources bolster a *student's* central argument; they should not overwhelm it. The primary sources should be quoted more often than the critical secondary ones, which are easily paraphrased and summarized (after all this is a critic, not a Shakespeare, not a Churchill, and his or her intriguing understandings of Shakespeare can be put into the student's own language more easily). Students need to know when it is appropriate to summarize, paraphrase, and quote. We need to encourage them to make these distinctions.

In integrating secondary source materials, students should have made selections based on their own interpretive positions. They should know how useful the reference will be—how relevant, in terms of the framework they are constructing. They must not make the error of believing that the secondary sources create this framework: if they do, they have failed the research assignment: the paper will come from somewhere outside of themselves—they will be distanced from the subject, disengaged from the project. If we as teachers accept this as research, we will have failed them in the process.

Why We Do Research

Research writing maintains the contact between accepted knowledge even as this knowledge is filtered and challenged through a unique point of view. It offers communication of ideas, a chance to respond, to confirm, to deny what is written. Through these reactions, researchers contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the subject matter. *Re*search is inherently unending: answers to research problems are often acknowledgments of complexities and are not fully resolvable. It is innate human curiosity that we want to engage. Students want purpose and meaning when they are sent off to find information. We must make the experience meaningful for them. We must whet their appetite to know and to understand. It is not merely the opening of doors to knowledge: it requires focusing the discerning eye and stimulating the logical brain.

Teaching students to respect the process of research prepares them not only for the global experience, but the individual one. It defies ignorance; it breaks through preconceived notions and moves them toward enlightened understandings. We must teach them to value the process as much as we have encouraged them to value its product—knowledge. Research can engender dialogue across centuries, across oceans, through infinite cyberspace. It represents a human desire to move forward, to discover new places and fathom the nature of "self" in the process. It breaks through isolation to dispel ignorance, prejudice, fear of the unknown; to

challenge the untestable and blindly believed, corruption, and manipulation. In its expansive nature (because it is an endless journey and simultaneous journeys at once though time, space, and self), it protects against threats to human liberty. Research is at once accepting of the individual voice and tolerant of multitudinous voices. It imposes further questioning, generating hyperlinks that descend through layers of space.

The "show me, don't tell me" nature can be tapped into to encourage students to explore knowledge and arrive at understanding. The lethargic self remains tied to long untested beliefs. Teach students to shed that skin, leave it behind, and embrace the human need to understand.

Research is never a rote process. If we lose sight of its significance, how can we expect our students to embrace the process willingly?

Through pursuit of knowledge, and I do mean *pursuit* (not a *handout* of information), we can find both answers and questions. If you take exploration of self out of the research process, you limit your students to reporting. Exploration involves questioning, challenging, testing—not merely absorbing information. This desire to understand beckons us further; it synthesizes the past to the present and future. It embodies the creative as well as the logical processes of the mind. We cannot encourage students to remain fixed to the page of information without questioning, challenging, engaging, responding. If students respond in subjective papers, then they are equal to the task: they face it eye to eye and are not afraid of the truths it holds, or does not hold, for them.

Preventing Plagiarism: *Tips and Techniques*

For many teachers, identifying and combating plagiarism in students' writing has become a frustrating and time-consuming process.

In this practical guide, Laura Hennessey DeSena seeks to help alleviate some of this frustration by offering teachers effective strategies for heading off plagiarism at its sources.

DeSena argues for creating assignments that emphasize students' original thinking through freewriting and the use of primary sources. In doing so, we can help build their confidence and critical thinking skills so that they are less likely to rely on online paper mills or copy and paste from other sources.

In this book, you'll discover how to:

- Generate research topics across the content areas
- Identify electronic and print-based plagiarism in student papers
- Design a three-part research paper assignment that emphasizes the subjective eye/I in the research process
- Provide models of literary criticism that demonstrate how professionals use solid research and organization to support their arguments
- Avoid plagiarism in a multicultural context, including strategies for working with second language students who may have been taught different approaches to composition and research writing

NCTE National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096
800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870
www.ncte.org

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