



# Authenticity

A guide for teachers



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# Acknowledgements

This guide was commissioned by Ofqual, the regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. It was written by PlagiarismAdvice.org – a national body, founded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), which provides advice, guidance and training on measures to ensure authentic work from students to universities, colleges and schools in the UK and Europe.

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## Context and introduction

You cannot have failed to have noticed the amount of recent press coverage on the issue of plagiarism. This issue is being taken so seriously that all of the major UK awarding organisations (AQA, City & Guilds, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC; better known as exam boards) now have access to computerised plagiarism detection systems to enable them to investigate any potential malpractice in coursework. The outcome is that, now more than ever, students in secondary schools need to know about producing authentic coursework and need to learn and apply study skills that they may not have encountered previously in relation to their work.

A report commissioned by the QCA in 2006 by Jean Underwood observes that key to preventing dishonest practice is the development of a culture of honesty that encourages and promotes original work:

**“... reducing the opportunities to cheat, developing environments where cheating is unacceptable and reducing the acceptability of cheating within any institution should be the foci of a programme to reduce malpractice.”**

(Underwood, 2006, p1)

Teachers’ concerns relating to the authenticity of students’ assessed work also illustrate that this issue is not one that is confined to higher education. Over half of the teachers questioned in a 2008 survey carried out by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers indicated that plagiarism was a problem in student work, and a similar percentage felt students lacked the skills to determine between legitimate research and plagiarism (ATL, 2008).

Indeed the issue of appropriate use of technology for researching coursework by students at all levels and the need to develop key information handling skills are arguably key to discouraging a cut and paste culture. A recent report by the British Library and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) encourages the development of these skills at an early stage in students’ academic careers:

**“We think these [information] skills need to be incubated during the formative years of childhood: by university or college it is too late to reverse engineer deeply ingrained habits.”**

(Information behaviour of the researcher of the future, 2008, p32)



You may also have noticed the proliferation of essay banks and essay-writing services aimed at GCSE and A level subjects. These websites offer to provide students with coursework for a fee. It is important to inform both staff and students about these sites and also monitor student work for this type of abuse.

Higher education has been investigating and addressing the issue of plagiarism for several years. In 2002 the JISC set up a national body, now known as PlagiarismAdvice.org, to coordinate a strategy to address the issue. Ofqual, the regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England, has commissioned PlagiarismAdvice.org to develop guidance for teachers, parents and students on measures to ensure authentic work by students.

The purpose of this guide is to provide teachers with a framework for building upon the concepts of authenticity and attribution at the secondary education level to help equip students with the educational foundations required for further study.



## What is plagiarism?

It is important to start with a common understanding of the term before we look at the methods to help address these issues.

Unfortunately there are many definitions of this term and universities in the UK tend to vary widely in the guidance they provide in their student regulations. The example given below derives from the key concepts that most universities include in their definitions:

**“Plagiarism occurs when an author attempts to misrepresent as original, existing and unacknowledged material or ideas from another person, source or (in the case of self-plagiarism) their own work.”**

(PlagiarismAdvice.org, n.d.)

This is a valuable definition for teaching students about the concepts of integrity and academic honesty as cases of plagiarism often hinge upon intention to deceive and the extent of the infringement. However in public examinations the JCQ (2008) observes an unambiguous view to enable enforcement as part of the assessment process:

**“Unacknowledged copying from published sources (including the Internet) or incomplete referencing.”**

(JCQ, 2008, p28)

The concept of only taking credit for one’s own work also extends to collusion, which deals with students working with others on work that they are supposed to carry out individually:

**“Working collaboratively with other candidates beyond what is permitted”**

(JCQ, 2008, p26)

Because teachers often ask students to work collaboratively this area can be confusing, and teachers should give students guidance about what is or is not acceptable in such circumstances. Students can avoid being accused of plagiarism and collusion by developing some basic writing and research skills:

- finding authoritative sources and using those sources appropriately in their work (including paraphrasing)
- giving credit to other authors
- managing their time effectively in relation to coursework.

Underwood's 2006 report recommends an approach to malpractice and plagiarism based around the following three Es:

- **Ethics:** creating a culture of honesty.
- **Engineering:** teaching the skills and designing opportunities for plagiarism out of coursework.
- **Enforcement:** identifying inauthentic work, and applying appropriate penalties.

(Underwood, 2006, pp.12–15)



## Creating a culture of honesty

**It is important to talk to students about the value of carrying out their own work and the benefits of giving credit to others. Often students do not understand the significance of producing their own work. Scenario-based activities can help students understand what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable in relation to plagiarism, collusion, collaboration and academic writing. The following are key points to consider when developing this educational culture:**

- students' coursework should be in their own words unless they are quoting from a referenced source. If asked to explain what they mean by a certain phrase or paragraph they should be able to do so.
- students should always acknowledge, by referencing, any words, ideas or concepts that were originally produced by another person and that they have incorporated into their work.
- students should not let other people see their coursework. It is often considered good practice to share information. However in coursework this is not acceptable. It can lead to students being accused of collusion, which in turn could mean that students lose marks or have to undertake an additional piece of coursework. Even lending coursework to a friend, not knowing it may be copied, may also attract a penalty.
- if a student asks for help other students/friends/family/teachers should only help them to understand, not tell the student what to write verbatim. You can also find more information in *Authenticating coursework: a teacher's guide* (QCA, 2007).
- students should also be informed that the use of essay banks, essay-writing services and sharing of work on social networking sites is not acceptable even as a source of research, as the ability to carry out research is often part of the assessment process (for example type 'cheat essay' into a search engine to find websites offering these services).
- setting expectations is an important step in helping students to understand the academic standards required. It is important for students to understand that when they sign the declaration of authenticity they are confirming the work produced is their own and that they have correctly acknowledged any ideas or words belonging to another author.



# Why do students plagiarise?

It is helpful to understand why students might resort to plagiarism. PlagiarismAdvice.org (2006) has identified the following possible reasons:

- ignorance on the part of the student because they do not know about plagiarism
- time-management issues for students – they may be unaware of how much research and effort should go into coursework, and may leave work until the last minute and then panic when faced with an imminent deadline
- striving for better marks with the aim of gaining a better overall result for the whole subject
- choosing the wrong subject (particularly at AS/A level) – arguably this is a management issue for schools/colleges, which must ensure that students enrol on the right course from the outset
- poor teaching
- cultural differences – in some cultures people consider it disrespectful not to copy verbatim the words of others
- an out and out desire to simply beat the system.



Often plagiarism occurs because of a lack of understanding by the student about academically acceptable practices and techniques for acknowledging the work of others (unintentional plagiarism) rather than a premeditated desire to cheat (intentional plagiarism).

Most students know that the following activities are considered cheating:

- buying a paper from an internet site (also known as an essay bank or a paper mill)
- getting someone else to do the work for them
- giving false information about a source used in coursework.

However students may not be aware that the following activities are also unacceptable and will be penalised:

- copying sections of work from a friend
- having a friend/family member dictate something to them (often this will occur because students know what they want to say but can't find the words themselves)
- copying and pasting from the internet without citing the source



- copying directly from a textbook without citing the source
- omitting quotation marks from quotations
- paraphrasing without including reference to the source of the paraphrase.





# Encouraging authentic work

## Enhancing coursework supervision to reduce plagiarism opportunities

Before signing the declaration of authenticity associated with a piece of work teachers need to be confident that the student has completed the work themselves. The techniques listed below can help build teacher confidence by providing evidence of the authenticity of the student's work prior to hand-in.

- ask students to provide an annotated bibliography. (Writing a sentence or two on how useful the source was can act as an aide memoire for students to cite where the information came from)
- make sure that the students know exactly what is required in their coursework. Teachers are able to provide general guidance on the drafting and development of coursework to students; however 'detailed advice' (JCQ, 2009, p2) on possible improvements is not permitted. Instructions for constructing coursework (JCQ, 2009, p2) provides a list outlining 'unacceptable assistance'
- ask the students to interview an expert related to the topic under assessment (Harris, 2004)
- carry out part of the assessment under classroom conditions

- ensure that students come to see you with work in progress or, alternatively, ensure that they complete sections of coursework by an expected date and arrange due dates for each section of the work. If seeing students individually ask them to bring (preferably) annotated copies of research/background materials that they have found with them
- if possible try to design coursework so that it is relevant and personal to the student rather than setting the same coursework for the whole class. This will allow students to draw on personal experience and make their work unique. Students can also easily download generic coursework titles from an essay bank.

## Designing plagiarism opportunities out of coursework

Where teachers have the ability to set a coursework task make use of the following approaches:

- change the topics/questions from year to year. This means that there is less likelihood that students will be able to 'borrow' an essay from someone who has already written on the same subject in previous years

- throughout the academic year engage the students in a peer-review process where they mark each other's non-assessed work and provide feedback to the students on both the quality of their own piece and the quality of their feedback to others. This will help to prepare them for the final assessed piece of coursework
- ask the students to include exact components in the coursework. Throughout the academic year it may be useful to use some of the following suggestions. Although these are designed for much more advanced study, they will allow students to develop effective research and citation skills and promote original work as identified by Harris (2004):
  - require students to provide at least one source from the past year, in order to prevent work being drawn from essay banks
  - provide students with one or more specific articles or books for use in their coursework
  - ask students to incorporate specific information you provide (for example a data set).

## Teaching the skills

It is essential to teach students the key skills they need to identify useful authoritative sources online, make use of these sources in their work and credit the original authors.

A complementary guide in this series entitled Using sources: a guide for students covers the following areas:

- finding, checking and using electronic resources
- referencing sources and using citations
- paraphrasing.

Some free student exercises are also available at [PlagiarismAdvice.org](http://PlagiarismAdvice.org).



# Verifying authentic work

## Student verification of work

Students must submit a signed declaration with any piece of assessed work proving that this work is their own. To uphold the integrity of their awards, awarding organisations take a range of measures to ensure that students' work is their own. Students who wish to continue their studies at college or university must submit original work, and their college or university tutors will also use a range of strategies to check work is the students' own. Students who submit work that is not their own at university level will be subject to disciplinary measures.

## Internal verification of work

A teacher is also expected to verify that the student has produced authentic work. This is a positive reinforcement of the capabilities of the student. If a teacher is not confident that a piece of work is authentic they cannot sign the declaration of authenticity and the student will be awarded zero for the assessment. While teachers may sign the authenticity statement in good faith, awarding organisations may take action against an assessment centre if there is consistent evidence that work carried out by students is inauthentic. Therefore it is essential that the teacher develops confidence in the authenticity of the student's work prior to hand-in of the finished piece as it may be much more difficult to achieve this at the point of hand-in.

## Strategies for verifying the authenticity of student work

There are a number of signs teachers should be aware of when reviewing student work that may highlight that the work submitted may not be the student's own.

The following sections identify a set of strategies, and for further guidance please refer to Plagiarism in examinations (JCQ no date) and Authenticating coursework: a teacher's guide (QCA, 2007).

### 1. Changes in writing style

Everyone has their own idiography (unique style of writing) which develops over time and with experience. Where the writing style of a single piece of work varies this may indicate a student is using text from several different authors, each with their own unique writing style, without acknowledgement. Similarly teachers are often familiar with the idiography of their students and can easily spot any departure from this style. Highly polished prose that differs greatly from a student's usual style of writing and level of competence may also indicate possible inauthentic work, and should warrant further investigation.

### 2. Document layout and style

Where a document exhibits a variety of different physical characteristics (such as changes in font styles and sizes, indentation and line spacing) this may also indicate that the work is not the student's own and has been carelessly cut and pasted from a range of different sources without attribution. You should investigate apparently random and unattributed hyperlinks/URLs in the document.

### 3. US spellings and phraseology

While this may simply indicate that a student has used the default US spelling check on a word-processing program, this may also signify that the student has downloaded work from a US-based website without acknowledgement. It may include American-English grammatical structures such as 'go get' and 'have gotten' as well as lexis such as 'period' (where the British English would use 'go and get', 'have got' and 'full stop').

### 4. Sources not easily accessible or available locally

Where a student cites obscure sources that are not readily available this may indicate that they have simply copied references from elsewhere to embellish a bibliography. In some cases teachers may even check to see whether a particular textbook or electronic journal cited by a student is available from the school's library.

### 5. Out-of-date sources

Most disciplines or subject areas (especially science and technology) will require that students are up to date with the most recent research in the area, so not only will out of date sources in a bibliography or reference list often mean the student may not achieve high marks, they may also indicate that the work is not the student's own. In some disciplines, however, it may be highly appropriate to draw on historical texts: a student studying psychology may be expected to consider the work of Freud, whose key texts date back to the early 1900s, so caution is required.

### 6. Use of non-UK examples

Again this depends on the topic in question. For example in a project on the US economy use of non-UK sources and examples is entirely justified. However where examples appear to be unrelated geographically to the question in hand this may indicate potentially inauthentic work on the part of the student.



### 7. Failure to answer the question

It may look as if an introductory and/or concluding paragraph directly answers the question while the main the body of the essay is made up of vague and unrelated waffle. If you are in any doubt, as in any case, ask the student about what they have written. If the work is their own then they should find it easy to justify their arguments, use of sources and their approach.

### 8. Check phrases using a search engine

Using the advanced search in a search engine and enclosing suspected phrases in quotation marks will ensure that the search engine returns pages with this particular sequence of words. Try to identify short phrases from the student's work that you suspect may not be their own.

### 9. Check coursework using plagiarism detection tools

While using search engines to identify sources of phrases can sometimes be laborious, electronic plagiarism detection software tools can compare a student's piece of work with a wide range of electronic sources often in a matter of minutes and return details of matching text in a user-friendly way. Electronic plagiarism detection tools enable you to compare a student's work with publicly available material on the internet, other students' work and also often a range of published sources such as

electronic journals. The program usually returns a report in a matter of minutes, highlighting where it has found any matching text. Most detection tools are non-judgmental so while they can highlight matching sources within a student's work they do not determine whether plagiarism has occurred, and in all cases this is a matter of academic judgement on the part of the teacher.



## Use of plagiarism detection tools by educational institutions and organisations

UK universities and colleges, and also the main awarding organisations, widely use these tools as part of the quality assurance process and as a mechanism for upholding standards and identifying potential malpractice.

One of the advantages of using these tools is that they store student work in a database, which means that an essay purchased from an essay bank or bespoke essay-writing service can only be submitted once without detection. If more than one student purchases and submits the same piece of work then both students would be identified. It also deals with the problem of sharing essays via social networking tools and selling essays on e-commerce sites.

**“All of the UK unitary awarding organisations have access to electronic plagiarism detection tools and use them to support their malpractice investigations. Where an examiner or moderator has suspicions about the authenticity of a candidate's work, awarding bodies are increasingly using electronic tools to confirm these suspicions and produce evidence to share with the head of centre.”**

(Hirst, 2009)



Use of the software varies from institution to institution, with some universities using it across all courses and assignments while others use it to investigate a small number of suspect pieces of work only. In some cases making students aware of the software may be sufficient to deter them from deliberately cutting and pasting content from the internet without attribution.

Many institutions also allow students to access the software and provide them with the opportunity to upload any draft work prior to the assignment deadline to check that they have cited sources where necessary. This formative model is arguably the most beneficial use of the software and empowers students in the learning process while helping to promote appropriate attribution of electronic sources and develop an understanding of citation methods. The following quotation from the Assessment for Learning Centre for Excellence at Northumbria University summarises the approach adopted by many UK universities:

**“Students write draft essays, which are then submitted to the detection service with the output report returned to individuals and then discussed in class sessions. This has addressed a key problem that students find difficulty in expressing their own understanding without relying too heavily on the sources they use, since the detection service highlights potential plagiarism problems in such over-reliance.”**

(McDowell, 2006)

You can find further guidance on authenticating coursework in Instructions for conducting coursework/portfolios (JCQ, 2009).

## Finding plagiarism

The JCQ (2008) policies and procedures document states that teachers can take steps about suspected plagiarism without informing the awarding organisation so long as the student has not signed the declaration of authenticity that accompanies the coursework. In such cases we suggest the following steps:

- arrange a meeting with the student
- if you have found the original source of the material keep this to hand when you meet with the student
- the most likely explanation is that the student simply hasn't understood how to correctly acknowledge the ideas of other authors in their work, and you should view this meeting as a learning opportunity for them. Often it is enough to ask the student to expand on some of their thoughts or explain where the material originated from to identify any missing acknowledgement.
- explain that there is nothing wrong with quoting from/paraphrasing other work but that they must credit such citation in an appropriate manner.

The student can then amend their work accordingly, or you can give them a different assignment to complete and remind them that they must reference

correctly. You can then authenticate the revised or new piece of work and submit it as normal. If the student refuses to revise or replace the suspect piece of work you should warn the student that if they sign the declaration of authenticity and their work is not their own they risk being disqualified from this and other exams.

## Inability to verify authenticity

If, after taking the measures above, the candidate insists on submitting the original piece of work and you still lack confidence in the authenticity of the piece, you may wish to take further steps to determine whether the work is the candidate's own. For example you could invite the student to a viva or provide them with a short test under exam conditions to provide evidence that they have produced the work themselves. If ultimately you are not able to sign the declaration of authenticity with confidence, you will then need to refer the case to the appropriate awarding organisation using the normal procedures for referring cases of suspected malpractice. In these circumstances the candidate will receive zero marks for the component and a malpractice investigation will be triggered, which could lead to the imposition of other penalties. Whatever approach you use, you must keep accurate records of any investigations including meeting notes and electronic or paper copies of any work suspected of plagiarism.



# Penalties for plagiarism

The JCQ provides guidance to the awarding organisations on how to deal with malpractice in examinations and coursework, and outlines possible penalties for plagiarism:

- loss of all marks for the section
- loss of all marks for the component
- loss of all marks for the unit
- disqualification from the unit
- disqualification from all units in one or more qualifications taken in the series
- disqualification from the whole qualification
- disqualification from the whole examination series
- banned for a number of years from taking any further examinations.

(JCQ, 2008, p28)





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## Further information

The following organisations also provide guidance on using sources and avoiding plagiarism:

- Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ): [www.jcq.org.uk](http://www.jcq.org.uk)  
The JCQ represents the seven largest providers of qualifications in the UK, including the GCSE and A level awarding organisations. JCQ coordinates common administration of qualifications between the organisations.
- JISC: [www.jisc.ac.uk](http://www.jisc.ac.uk)  
JISC inspires UK colleges and universities in the innovative use of digital technologies, helping to maintain the UK's position as a global leader in education.
- The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual): [www.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk)  
The regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.
- PlagiarismAdvice.org: [www.plagiarismadvice.org](http://www.plagiarismadvice.org)  
PlagiarismAdvice.org provides details of news, events, resources and research for teachers and students on plagiarism and ensuring work is authentic.

You can contact us at:

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Publications reference: Ofqual/10/4533  
ISBN: 978-1-84962-253-0

This publication can also be downloaded at  
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First published by The Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator in 2009.

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