4 From Rules to Judgment: Exploring the Plagiarism Threshold in Academic Writing

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Before You Read: *Consider a page or two of something you've written that incorporates outside sources. Using different color highlighters or pens, identify those passages that are (a) your own ideas and own voice, (b) the ideas of someone else but expressed in your words (paraphrasing or summarizing), and (c) someone else's words (quotations). Do any patterns emerge? What do they suggest about your own writing?*

It is not uncommon to experience confusion and even fear when first attempting to incorporate the ideas or wordings of others in academic writing.[1] This is perhaps because many of us initially understand writing with academic integrity as simply a matter of demonstrating correct technical form, such as the accurate use of a specified citation system when quoting and paraphrasing from sources, or paraphrasing with words sufficiently different to those used in an original source. A preoccupation with technical form alone, however, can obscure the role of authorial judgment in producing academic writing that can withstand accusations of plagiarism. Writing with academic integrity involves more than just scrupulous management of information through strict adherence to rules and conventions. It also requires that authors operate as architects of analysis and argument who lead with independent critical judgment. This authorial judgment is particularly evident in the way academic writers construct a balance in their texts between an 'executive voice,' which presides over the flow of discussion throughout the whole text, and various 'expert voices' drawn from outside sources to lend support.

After establishing a basis in research for the confusion about plagiarism in academic writing, this article guides students and teachers through a series of citation examples that progressively build into a short passage of academic discussion. This progression not only allows us to interrogate the threshold separating plagiarism from legitimate borrowing but also reveals the important role of authorial judgment in managing the necessary uncertainty of original analysis in academic writing. A three-point criterion is subsequently proposed for producing academic text that can withstand accusations of plagiarism. The criteria prepares the way for an audit protocol we can use to investigate how this judgment has been applied in published academic texts from particular fields of study.

Mystery and Contradiction

Educational research has shown that academic writing, and plagiarism in particular, is often poorly understood by those entering higher education for the first time. Without explicit instruction in the scholarly values, assumptions, and practices of the Western academy, beginning students commonly experience academic writing as mysterious (Lillis 76). They can find themselves left alone to "invent the university" in their writing, slowly piecing together an understanding of scholarly expectations through a combination of osmosis, imitation, and guesswork (Bartholomae 134). Given the severe penalties associated with plagiarism, much of this effort may be spent puzzling over the boundary separating the legitimate use of borrowed ideas and wording from cheating. Empirical evidence has been available for at least a decade that suggests the majority of undergraduates are uncertain about this plagiarism threshold, especially with regard to adequate paraphrasing, and as a result, many plagiarize inadvertently (Roig, "Can" 113, 121). This problem is generally attributed to ignorance of convention or poor technical skills. Yet, the fact that even college and university professors can disagree about what constitutes plagiarism (see, for example, Roig, "Plagiarism" 313, 321) implies that the uncertainty is also conceptual in nature, which brings us back to the question of how academic writers first come to understand plagiarism.

The notion of plagiarism is likely to appear contradictory to those unfamiliar with the ways professional scholars use academic writing to analyze and test the propositions or "knowledge claims" made in published research (Penrose and Geisler 509–14). Academic writers perhaps experience this contradiction most acutely in relation to the Western academy's expectations of originality and corresponding disdain for imitation. Academic writing is expected to be "original" work, and yet a large part of its production ostensibly involves reproducing the views of established authors (Levin 4–7). Moreover, while it is recognized that imitation plays an important part in academic learning (Jensen and de Castell 325), particularly in a foreign language (Pennycook 225–26), the value of imitation for learning academic writing is undermined in an environment where copying from texts is strictly prohibited.

To move beyond these apparent contradictions and begin to demystify the plagiarism threshold it is useful to examine in turn the technical and conceptual considerations involved in writing with academic integrity. In so doing we will shift our understanding of plagiarism from questions of rigid compliance to those of delicate balance.

Citation Systems and Text Matching Tools

Since plagiarism places the reputation of an educational institution at great risk, the most common methods of informing students about how to use sources appropriately tend to be those that encourage the most visible compliance. Assessment by academic writing will almost certainly require that students demonstrate proficiency in one or more systems of referencing or citation. To this end, institutions will quickly direct beginning students to citation style manuals and perhaps also training sessions. With the growth of the Internet as a tool of plagiarism, many institutions have also begun to implement text matching software tools to scan student assignment submissions, sometimes on a mandatory basis, for text copied from electronic sources. We will now consider what these systems and tools tell us about what counts as plagiarism in academic writing.

Producing an Academic Audit Trail

The most apparent function of citation systems in academic writing is to provide readers with an audit trail of research sources. Credited sources need to be documented with consistency and precision so that an independent assessor (such as an essay examiner) can, potentially, locate and verify the information cited. While the preferred format for information varies with each system or "style," all provide conventions for three basic aspects of citation that scholars must observe to avoid plagiarism in their academic writing: citing ideas from outside sources by quoting select text from the original; citing ideas from outside sources by expressing those ideas in different words, that is by paraphrasing; and presenting the corresponding bibliographical details for each source in a list of works cited. These three aspects are modeled below in a manner similar to many style manuals. Such resources will often demonstrate each mode of in-text citation with isolated sentences, and also present samples of the bibliographical format to adopt for different types of publications. In this example, the bibliographical format of an academic journal article is presented in the Modern Languages Association (MLA) style used throughout this volume.

In-text citation for quotation:

> Hendricks and Quinn conclude from previous studies of student academic literacy development that it is by "knowing when and how to reference that students demonstrate their ability to integrate, in their writing, knowledge they have gained from their reading with their own ideas" (448).

In-text citation for paraphrase:

> As suggested by previous studies of academic literacy development, students' capacity to create in writing a synthesis of their own thinking and the evidence of published sources is apparent in the decisions they make about referencing (Hendricks and Quinn 448).

Bibliographical entry in list of Works Cited (Journal Article):

Hendricks, Monica, and Lyn Quinn. "Teaching Referencing as an Introduction to Epistemological Empowerment." *Teaching in Higher Education* 5 (2000): 447–57.

Many academic libraries now provide citation management software that can automate these formatting operations while we write, which highlights the essentially mechanical nature of citation systems. Compared with the complexities of subject content and compositional subtleties of academic writing, the rigid and predictable nature of these systems may be relatively comforting. Indeed, when combined with the authoritative and procedural presentation of many style manuals, such qualities can create the impression that plagiarism is simply the crime of failing to properly observe the formal "rules" of a citation system. Yet, as will be shown in later examples, it is possible to properly apply citation conventions to incorporate outside sources, but still produce academic writing that risks being accused of plagiarism.

Producing "Novel" Academic Text

While citation systems provide a means to expose the content of academic writing to external validation by manual means, text matching software tools have been developed to automatically audit the technical novelty of the wordings used in paraphrases and in portions of text presented as original writing. These tools measure novelty of linguistic form in purely differential terms, checking whether any portions of text in electronically submitted work reproduce exactly (or, with some tools, approximately) portions of text in existing electronic works available to their search engine. To illustrate, if the journal article by Monica Hendricks and Lyn Quinn quoted above was available to the search engine of a text matching tool and Text 1 below was tested for novelty of form, the tool would identify the text in italics as having originated in that journal article.

Text 1:

> By *knowing when and how to reference students* show the capacity to combine in their essays *knowledge they have gained from their* research *with their own ideas* (Hendricks and Quinn 448).

Judgment must be applied to determine if such data provides evidence of plagiarism. While the source has been correctly cited, Text 1 would arguably constitute plagiarism on the grounds of insufficient paraphrasing. Portions of exact wording from the original source, the text in italics, have been seemingly "passed off" as paraphrased text. This is possibly because paraphrasing accrues greater academic merit yet is more difficult to produce than direct quotation. What this shows, in other words, is that the feedback provided by text matching software is only meaningful if we already have some understanding of what can count as plagiarism in academic writing. Moreover, these tools currently only highlight "verbatim copying" (Warn 201) of the kind illustrated on a small scale in Text 1. The following two examples serve to illustrate this limitation.

Text 2:

> By understanding at what times and in what ways it is appropriate to cite, learners show they are able to combine in their essays information obtained from research sources with insights they develop themselves.

Text 3:

> Students' capacity to create in writing a synthesis of their own thinking and evidence from published sources is apparent in the decisions they make about referencing.

In Text 2, the plagiarized text identified in Text 1 has been replaced with synonym words and phrases. The in-text citation has also been removed. An examiner would almost certainly regard this as a clear case of plagiarism due to the lack of citation and superficial paraphrasing. Although Text 3 offers a more substantial paraphrase that alters the structure of the original sentence (from active to passive voice), the lack of a citation means this unattributed paraphrase still constitutes plagiarism of ideas if not words. Yet, because the configuration of text used in both these examples of plagiarism is technically "novel," neither would be identified by text matching software. We can thus see that the feedback generated by text matching software needs to be approached with a critical appreciation of how the software functions.

While submitting assignment work for automated feedback can encourage authors to pay closer attention to their writing and academic skills (Green, et al.), this feedback does not in itself provide a complete picture of what can count as plagiarism in academic writing.

The Balancing Act of Authorial Judgment

These standard methods of identifying what counts as plagiarism in academic writing have taught us two principles. Plagiarism is avoided if we (a) produce a reliable audit trail by correctly using a recognized citation system, and (b) ensure also that the text of our assignment work is novel in the sense that it does not reproduce any existing written text, except where properly identified as direct quotation. However, by applying these principles somewhat literally and in the extreme, as writers are sometimes prone to do, it is possible to see that a crucial element is still missing from the criteria. In Text 4 below, the by now familiar quotation from Hendricks and Quinn (448) has been supplemented with citations from two new sources[2] to form a paragraph of discussion. The paragraph reads coherently and complies with criteria (a) and (b), but does this place it safely outside the realm of plagiarism? The predominance of cited material over original wording from the writer may be cause for doubt, particularly if large sections of an assignment were composed in this way.

Text 4:

> By "knowing when and how to reference [. . .] students demonstrate their ability to integrate, in their writing, knowledge they have gained from their reading with their own ideas" (Hendricks and Quinn 448). In so doing students approximate the judgment of professional academic researchers who cite previous work partly to acknowledge "a debt of precedent" but also "to display an allegiance to a particular community or orientation, create a rhetorical gap for [their] research, and establish a credible writer ethos" (Hyland 342). There is a preference for paraphrase over direct quotation in expressing this judgment. This is perhaps because we demonstrate a deep understanding of unfamiliar subject matter by writing about it rather than just copying verbatim. As Uemlianin argues:
>
> > [P]araphrase is more than simply a test of or a result of understanding; paraphrase is part of what it is to understand. In practice attempts to understand often take the form of attempts to paraphrase: one attempts to understand something by trying to articulate it in different words, or to explain it to someone else. (347)

Text 5 is likely to raise similar concerns. While direct quotation has been replaced with paraphrase, arguably achieving greater coherence, this paragraph could still be accused of lacking a strong authorial "voice" that presides over the three cited sources.

Text 5:

> Students' capacity to create in writing a synthesis of their own thinking and evidence from published sources is apparent in the decisions they make about referencing (Hendricks and Quinn 448). In making these decisions students approximate the judgment of professional academic researchers who, as Hyland observes (342), cite previous work partly to give due credit but also to position themselves and their work to contribute to the ongoing discussion of knowledge in their academic community. There is a preference for paraphrase over direct quotation in expressing this judgment. This is perhaps because we demonstrate a deep understanding of unfamiliar subject matter by writing about it rather than just copying verbatim. As Uemlianin argues, it is not so much that the ability to paraphrase ideas follows from a prior understanding of those ideas but rather that ideas are fully understood or absorbed *through* the process of their paraphrasing (347).

These reservations about whether or not Text 4 and 5 cross the plagiarism threshold suggest that a third criterion is at play. The technical demands of compliance with criterion (a) and (b) can obscure an additional expectation to demonstrate 'authorial judgment' in academic

writing. That is, effective academic texts communicate the author's control or authority over meaning in the text. This judgment, which we can label criterion (c), is strongly reflected in the way these texts are composed to achieve a balance of independent analysis and carefully staged citation of outside sources. By performing this balancing act in their writing, academic authors show they can confront and inhabit a space of uncertainty that requires intellectual work beyond the simple compliance with citation rules seen in Text 4 and 5. Academic research and learning are precisely about engaging with the boundary between what is known and what is unknown. The task of academic authors, both student and professional, is to manage this uncertain boundary by actively reviewing, positioning, and harnessing previous research in their writing to produce independent insight: an outcome that might otherwise be termed "originality" of meaning or interpretation.

To observe how this independent insight can be expressed in academic writing we will now examine a longer example of discussion. In Text 6, the sources cited in earlier examples have been supplemented with new material to build a more sustained discussion of the topic that extends across two paragraphs. While reading this example, consider the concerns about weak author voice raised above in relation to Texts 4 and 5. Does this new version seem more likely to resist the concerns about plagiarism raised by these previous examples?

Text 6:

> The expectation that students reference appropriately in their academic writing needs to be understood as more than just a matter of acknowledging and authenticating outside sources. While it is necessary to give due credit when borrowing text in Western cultures that have evolved a "sense of the private ownership of words" (Ong, qtd. in Pennycook 205), referencing also plays an important role in the kind of learning students are expected to engage in by writing research papers. This is perhaps most apparent in higher education where students develop independent judgment by writing critically with and about the knowledge produced by their academic discipline. Hendricks and Quinn specifically highlight the place of referencing in this nexus of academic learning, knowledge, and writing. They draw on studies of university student writing to argue that in making decisions about "when and how to reference" in research papers, students develop their capacity to create a synthesis of their own thinking and evidence from published sources (448).
>
> By applying referencing conventions in this way to integrate individual insight with established knowledge, writers approximate the authorial judgment of professional academic researchers. This learning has both social and cognitive dimensions. First, in social terms, writers gain the right to "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave and Wenger 29) in the intellectual projects of academic "communities of practice" (Wenger 45). As Hyland observes in his study of referencing practices across different disciplines (342), academics cite previous work not only to give credit but also to position themselves and their work to contribute to the ongoing discussion of knowledge in their academic community. Second, the preference for incorporating the work of others through paraphrase rather than direct quotation is believed to enhance a writer's intellectual engagement with that material. It is assumed that a deep understanding of unfamiliar subject matter is better achieved by writing about this material than by just copying it verbatim. There is support for this view in Uemlianin's finding that the paraphrasing process engages students in basic analysis of source information. His results suggest the ability to paraphrase ideas in writing does not simply derive from a prior understanding of those ideas but rather that ideas are understood or absorbed *through* the process of their paraphrasing (347).

We can address this question through a more systematic analysis of the text's structure. Figure 4.1 presents the balance of author voice and supporting citations in Text 6 in the form of a diagram. Sentences and phrases containing citations have been separated into circles to reveal that the remaining sentences, shown as boxes, form a chain of controlling statements that spans the two paragraphs: the binding voice of

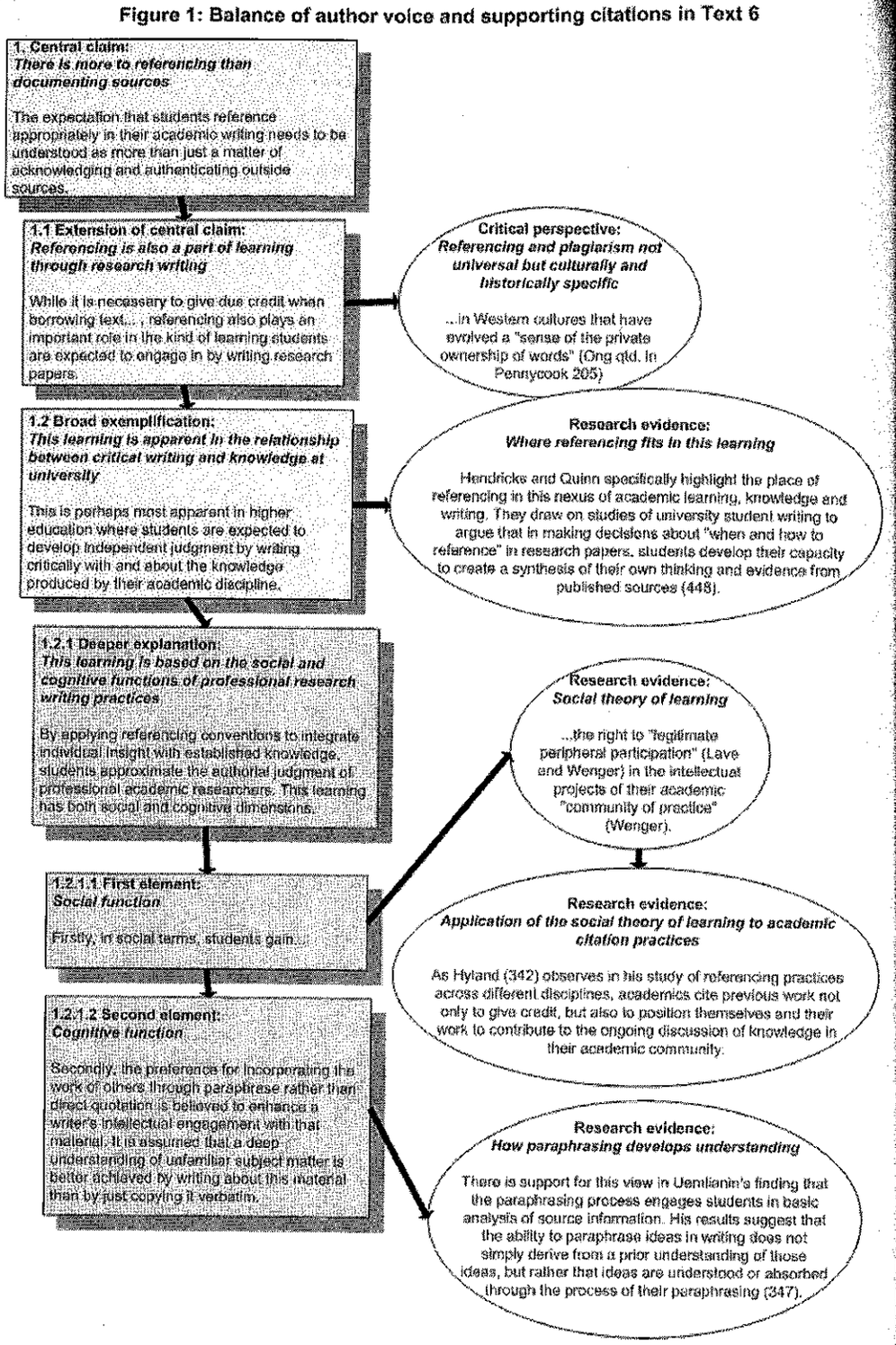

Figure 4.1: Balance of author voice and supporting citations in Text 6.

the author. In addition, each controlling and supporting element has been labeled with the function it performs in the text. From this view, it is possible to test the extent to which Text 6 meets the criterion of authorial judgment. If all of the citations were removed, the words that remain should still tell the basic "story" of the whole text. Ignoring the circles we can see that the linked sequence of controlling statements and functions shown by the boxes can indeed stand alone in this way. The chain begins with the topic sentence of the first paragraph, which also presents the central claim developed across both paragraphs (1: "There is more to referencing than documenting sources"); then proceeds to extend the central claim (1.1: "Referencing is also part of learning through research writing"); and finally closes the paragraph with a broad exemplification of where and how that extended claim occurs (1.1.1: "This learning is apparent in the relationship between critical writing and knowledge in university"). The topic sentence of the second paragraph continues to advance the central claim of the whole discussion by announcing two theoretical explanations for the extended claim (1.1.2: "This learning is based on the social and cognitive functions of professional research writing practices"). Finally, each of these perspectives (1.2.1: "Social function" and 1.2.2: "Cognitive function") is introduced and outlined in turn.

Returning now to the circles, Figure 4.1 also allows us to observe how, in stark contrast to Texts 4 and 5, these outside voices serve a secondary and supporting role in developing and substantiating the central chain of reasoning. At 1.1, the first expert voice is brought in to challenge the assumption that plagiarism is a universal concept. Next, the voice of Hendricks and Quinn is called upon to report research findings that elaborate on the meaning of 1.1.1 and also link to the new subtopic at 1.1.2. The controlling idea at 1.2.1 is first explained broadly with reference to concepts from Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, before Ken Hyland is used to link these concepts to the academic context. Finally, the author summarizes the research findings of Ivan A. Uemlianin to provide some evidence for the assumption outlined in 1.2.2.

This simple analysis of structure in Text 6 has highlighted that the "multivoiced" nature of academic writing (Angelil-Carter, qtd. in Hendricks and Quinn 456) makes the balancing act of authorial judgment a necessary third component of maintaining a comfortable distance from the plagiarism threshold. If academic writing can be shown

to have an "architecture" (Swales and Feak 122) of the kind illustrated by Figure 4.1, in which borrowed content is subordinate to the larger purpose of the argument, and this content has been cited accurately and with appropriate novelty of form, then this writing is very likely to withstand accusations of plagiarism.

Following an Academic Audit Trail to Develop Authorial Judgment

We can gather more specific data to inform our judgments about the plagiarism threshold in academic writing by actively researching and analyzing the citation and composition patterns favored in the work of published academic authors. This data will be more relevant if we choose examples of work published within our field of study. Hyland has shown (346–62), for example, that patterns of citation and attribution vary between academic disciplines in ways that reflect different approaches to knowledge.[3] In "hard" disciplines like the natural sciences and engineering, knowledge is acquired through the accumulation of unproblematic facts generated by research methodologies widely recognized by the discipline's community to remove human bias. As the following example illustrates, the dominant tendency therefore is to present citations in a form that is subordinate and structurally separate from the content of the statement. Moreover, it is very rare to see any use of direct quotation in these disciplines.

> The ability to paraphrase ideas in writing does not simply derive from a prior understanding of those ideas but rather ideas are understood or absorbed *through* the process of their paraphrasing (Uemlianin 347).

By contrast, so called "soft" disciplines like the humanities and certain branches of social science often treat knowledge as contingent upon particular theoretical perspectives and the application of these by individual scholars. To this end, there is a far greater tendency to cite in ways that acknowledge not only the source of the information reported but also the role of the originating author in producing this claim to knowledge. It is therefore common to find citations of the kind shown below in which the originating author is integral to the structure of the statement (in this case the grammatical subject of the sentence) and

the controlling agent of a tentative reporting verb. Consider how the type of knowledge represented here would change if the tentative verb "argue" were replaced with a more definite verb like "find," "show" or "report." Finally, the greater value these "soft" disciplines place upon capturing knowledge in unique linguistic expressions means that we are more likely to see direct quotation of the author's original words, albeit very sparingly.

> *Hendricks and Quinn argue* that by "knowing when and how to reference [. . .] students demonstrate their ability to integrate, in their writing, knowledge they have gained from their reading with their own ideas" (448).

If set readings have been provided as part of a course of study, these texts should provide examples of citation and composition that are typical of that discipline. After locating suitable texts, we can select two or three and submit them to the following audit procedure:

> 1. Find a short passage in the text that contains several citations and make a photocopy. To ensure there is sufficient information to analyze, it is useful to examine a passage of discussion that spans at least two paragraphs, like Text 6 above. At this point, it is also useful to photocopy the list of works cited and attach this to the photocopied passage.
>
> 2. Identify all the sentences and phrases in the passage that cite outside sources and mark this text with a pencil or highlighter. Now answer the following questions about the passage:
>
> Does the unmarked text that remains function primarily to communicate the controlling voice of the passage? If so, in what ways is this achieved?
>
> What is the balance of controlling and subordinate voices in the passage? How does this balance relate to the author's purpose?

Are the cited sources linked to controlling statements, or to each other? What does this say about the function of each citation in the passage?

Do some citations seem to carry more weight or importance to the argument or flow of the passage than others do? How can we tell?

How has language been used to integrate each citation into the passage?

3. Select some of the citations from the passage. If the text includes both paraphrase and quotation, aim to select examples of both, including quotations of various sizes if these are available. Follow each citation to the bibliographical details of the source text presented in the list of works cited that was photocopied earlier.

4. With this information, visit an academic library to locate copies of the original source texts. Ask the librarians for assistance if these sources are difficult to locate.

5. Finally, compare the paraphrases and quotations that were selected from the passage with the corresponding content of the original source texts. Focus on the following in particular:

How much information from each original source has been cited in the passage?

Is there a relationship between the mode of citation in the passage, paraphrase, or quotation, and the amount of information cited from the original source? For example, do paraphrases in the passage correspond to specific sentences or phrases in the original source, or do they summarize larger sections or even main arguments that are developed throughout the whole source text?

A Matter of Research and Discussion

We have seen in this chapter that an important part of understanding what can count as plagiarism in academic writing is understanding when and how rules give way to judgment in the composition of academic texts. This authorial judgment is best learned by actively investigating and confronting the uncertainties of process in academic writing practice. By going beyond sentence-level examples to analyze progressively larger passages of academic text, it has been possible to observe how academic authors do more than comply with citation systems and produce technically novel text to keep their work clear of the plagiarism threshold. They also assert authority and control over the meaning in their texts by performing a careful balancing act of independent analysis and reference to outside sources. Moreover, by following the audit procedure outlined in the previous section, we can equip ourselves with data to better gauge where the plagiarism threshold manifests in particular fields of study. Textual research of this kind allows us to make more informed choices when incorporating outside sources in academic writing and to initiate a dialogue among students and teachers about the plagiarism threshold, and about where and how academic values and writing practices might be made more explicit. When student writers and their teachers approach the plagiarism threshold as a target of mutual inquiry (Haggis 530), that threshold is transformed from an arbitrary expectation or 'hidden curriculum' into a vehicle for critical engagement with academic learning.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my colleagues Ros Martins and Maria Inglis for their valuable feedback during the drafting and revision of this article.

2. Bibliographical details for sources cited in the text examples appear in the list of Works Cited.

3. For detailed taxonomies of citation options and their rhetorical functions in academic discourse, see also Buckingham and Nevile, and Thompson and Tribble.

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Questions for Discussion

1. Paul Parker discusses the difficulties students have with understanding academic writing, pointing out that "[a]cademic writing is expected to be 'original' work, and yet a large part of its production ostensibly involves reproducing the views of established authors (Levin 4–7)." Take another look at the highlighting activity you did before you read the chapter. How has your ownership over your own ideas (alongside, or compared to, those of the "authorities" you have cited in your work) factored into your perceptions of plagiarism? How do you perceive it playing out in your own work?

2. Locate a journal article within your discipline, and then identify a few passages that mix the writer's voice with other sources. Follow the same process with the different-colored pens that you did on your own writing in the "Before You Read" section. What patterns, if any, emerge? What insights did you learn about the way authorial voice and judgment are used in your discipline? How does this insight challenge your thinking about your own writing in the discipline?