

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the act of stealing someone's ideas or words and passing them off as one's own. The explosion of electronic content and the growth of the Web have made it easy to cut and paste paragraphs into term papers and other documents without proper citation or quotation marks. To compound the problem, hundreds of online "paper mills" enable users to download entire term papers. Although some sites post warnings that their services should be used for research purposes only, many users pay scant heed. As a result, plagiarism has become an issue from elementary schools to the highest levels of academia.

Plagiarism also occurs outside academia. Popular literary authors, playwrights, musicians, journalists, and even software developers have been accused of it. Despite codes of ethics in place that clearly define plagiarism and prescribe penalties ranging from no credit on a paper to expulsion, many students still do not understand what constitutes plagiarism. Some students believe that all electronic content is in the public domain, while other students knowingly commit plagiarism either because they feel pressure to achieve a high GPA or because they are too lazy or pressed for time to do original work. A recent survey reported that 55 percent of university presidents felt that plagiarism has increased over the past decade in spite of increased efforts to combat the practice. Plagiarism by students has become so widespread that one professor felt compelled to post a request for his 39,000 students to stop the practice after many of the students complained about their fellow students. Some instructors say that being familiar with a student's style of writing, grammar, and vocabulary enables them to determine if the student actually wrote a paper. In addition, plagiarism detection systems allow teachers, corporations, law firms, and publishers to check for matching text in different documents as a means of identifying potential plagiarism.

Turnitin, a software product developed by California-based iParadigms, supports 15 languages and is used by over 10,000 educational institutions around the world. It uses three primary databases for content matching with over 24 billion Web pages, some 300 million archived student papers, and 120 million articles from over 110,000 journals, periodicals, and books. iThenticate is available from the same company that created Turnitin, but it is designed to meet the needs of members of the information industry, such as publishers, research facilities, legal firms, government agencies, and financial institutions. Interestingly, four high school students brought a lawsuit against iParadigms, accusing the firm of copyright infringement. The basis of their lawsuit was that the firm's primary product, Turnitin, used archived student papers without their permission to assess the originality of newly submitted papers. However, both a district court and a court of appeals ruled that the use of student papers for purposes of plagiarism detection constitutes a fair use and is therefore not a copyright infringement. A U.S. court of appeals ruled that such use of student papers "has a protective effect" on the future marketability of the students' works and "provides a substantial public benefit through the network of institutions using Turnitin.