

Barbara Glatt, a former college professor, has developed a software program to detect plagiarism that works as follows. A teacher who suspects plagiarism takes a passage from a suspect paper and deletes every fifth word. The teacher then requires the suspected student to fill in the blanks. The teacher then sends the original passage and the passage with the blanks filled in to Ms. Glatt, who uses her program to estimate the probability that the student has plagiarized.

Would it be morally justifiable for a professor to make a formal accusation of plagiarism against a student based upon Ms. Glatt's probability estimation? If so, under what circumstances, and why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: It would be justifiable for a faculty member to take the results of Ms. Glatt's analysis into account as one factor when deciding whether to make a formal charge of plagiarism if (a) the Professor concludes that her methodology is reliable based upon a careful examination, and (b) the probability of cheating, under Ms. Glatt's analysis in the case of a given student is high (substantially more than 0.5) It would seem highly unlikely, however, that Ms. Glatt's analysis could be sufficiently reliable for a faculty member to rely upon it as the sole basis for a formal charge of plagiarism. The Professor should also base the charge upon individualized kinds of evidence, such as how well the student was able to respond to questions about the content of her own essay, a comparison of the quality of the student's writing on the suspect paper with the writing quality of her other papers, or a comparison of the essay the student submitted with her preparatory notes or previous drafts.

Case from the February 3, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1996.