Turnitin.com, duplachecker.com, plagtracker.com, plagiarismchecker.com, dustball.com—the list of online systems for finding out whether students have used the writing of others without appropriate citation continues to grow. The anxiety that drives this need to find instances of plagiarism is heightened as students get most of their (often decontextualized) information from Wikipedia and Google. And the Common Core State Standards’ emphasis on having students write about research compounds the concerns.

This Brief offers alternatives to inventing ever-better plagiarism detection systems and prohibiting students from using online resources. First, it is worth considering writing in the 21st century. The development and application of new technologies for writing both within and outside of the classroom are changing the nature of writing. In particular, writing is becoming increasingly collaborative and multimodal. Students can become more effective at using materials from the Internet when they have access to standards and guidelines that enable them to become critical consumers and producers of diverse textual and hypertextual resources. In addition, considering questions of authorship, engaging in critical analysis of specific websites, and participating in authentic research endeavors can sharpen students’ ability to discern creditable sources.

It is also worth acknowledging, as research tells us, that students actually do have difficulty identifying plagiarism and are not always able to distinguish between texts that contain proper citation and unattributed copying. Students’ problems with citation are often the result of factors other than dishonesty, such as a lack of familiarity with content, difficulty with reading comprehension, uncertainty regarding citation conventions, insecurity in establishing an authoritative voice, and, perhaps the most significant, inability to integrate evidence into writing.

Perspectives on Evidence

Evidence plays a key role in writing, especially in argument. In fact, calls for evidence-based arguments have become so common that few have stopped to define what exactly counts as evidence. Most agree that evidence can include direct quotations, paraphrases, and summaries. Because evidence-based arguments are so often connected to research writing, it is not uncommon for opinions, support, reasons, facts, details, and specifics to be used as synonyms for types of evidence. Some distinguish logical from factual evidence. Others differentiate primary from secondary sources. But evidence-based arguments are not exclusively associated with particular genres, purposes, or types of sources. Writers develop arguments using evidence from print and non-print sources, but they also develop arguments using evidence for purposes and audiences that vary across disciplines. Furthermore, writers’ background knowledge, prior experience, and practice with sources, as
well as motivation for the task, also influence their ability to choose and justify evidence; this background or contextual knowledge may include familiarity with discourse and disciplinary ways of constructing arguments and contributing new knowledge to ongoing discussions within a particular field.3

Research tells us that the assessment of whether evidence “counts” also depends upon how a writer uses evidence to support an argument. Writers carefully select evidence based on their chosen stance, purpose, and audience. Then writers use their chosen evidence to warrant, or justify, their stance. In literary analysis, for example, evidence from a literary text counts when citations include specific details that support a particular argument about the literature and when the writer sufficiently connects the textual evidence with his or her stance. In historical writing, too, determining the quality of evidence is equally about how well the writer analyzes and interprets its significance. A series of checks that both writers and audiences use to weigh the quality of evidence and how well writers use that evidence in support of an argument can facilitate this process. These checks may include determining:

- Relevancy—Assessing whether the evidence is appropriately topical and timely
- Sufficiency—Accounting for all evidence, including counterarguments, alternative perspectives, and/or conflicting reports
- Sourcing—Noting the author (including his or her intentions) and context of the evidence
- Credibility—Considering whether the source of the evidence offers expertise on the subject
- Accuracy & Verifiability—Judging whether the evidence is valid and trustworthy

Another challenge student writers face in integrating evidence into their writing is learning to respond to disciplinary patterns. In particular, they are often unfamiliar with how evidence is valued, used, and analyzed differently in various disciplines, such as in science or in history. Different disciplines have different “ways of knowing” and “ways of thinking” that subject-area teachers need to make explicit for students. Research has consistently found that students invariably develop stronger and better-supported arguments when the teacher has a deep knowledge of the written argumentation model within their discipline and provides scaffolding for students in the individual steps of finding evidence and developing their arguments. Some steps in the process of incorporating evidence include:

- Finding and interpreting sources
- Evaluating the quality of the sources and data
- Analyzing the data
- Making connections between the source and the argument
- Incorporating a wide range of evidence into the argument
- Structuring the argument
- Distinguishing strong arguments from weak arguments

When teachers scaffold discrete strategies, students—especially lower-performing students—tend to develop stronger academic literacies, produce stronger arguments, engage in more critical thinking, and show deeper understanding of the content material.5

Teaching Strategies

Research offers a number of effective approaches teachers can use to help students do a good job of incorporating evidence into their writing. Explicit teacher modeling of complex thinking processes has gained attention in the research on reading strategy instruction. Recent research suggests that modeling should be extended to writing tasks, as well. Explicitly modeling complex thinking tasks such as incorporating evidence into a piece of writing enables students to both view and internalize the process, as opposed to memorizing abstract rules related to this process.6

*Patchwriting* is a term used to describe writing that is not copied word for word but “restates a phrase or clause or one or more sentences while staying close to the language of the source.” It offers a teaching opportunity because it demonstrates a misuse of evidence rather than actual plagiarism. Too often misuse of evidence is framed entirely in terms of plagiarism or theft, but the more frequent misuse of evidence results from carelessness, difficulty in comprehending the source, or lack of knowledge about the content. Teachers who deal with examples of patchwriting can help students develop a more nuanced and thorough understanding of what it means to misuse evidence.7

Effective strategies for teaching students how to use evidence in writing include:

- Modeling the search for and appropriate use of evidence from many types of sources (both print-based and Internet) and in different disciplines
- Using patchwriting as a site for critical investigation of questions surrounding the use of evidence
- Replacing punishment-based reactions to naïve student misuse of evidence with instruction-based ones
- Attending to the needs of English language learners who are dealing with the dual challenges of language acquisition and incorporation of evidence
Involving students in authentic research endeavors in an effort to facilitate discussions of the creation of bodies of research and principles of academic integrity

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, students’ effectiveness in incorporating evidence into writing will be directly influenced by the professional development opportunities afforded to their teachers. Teachers who have access to the following will be well prepared to teach students how to do an effective job of incorporating evidence into writing:

- Provide training and/or workshops that give teachers in all subject areas the opportunity to reflect on their disciplinary practices and identify discrete writing skills that students will need in order to develop well-supported arguments.
- Provide in-depth training in the writing process for teachers, which will foster self-awareness of the ways they write and how to meet their students’ needs through scaffolding.
- Make space in the curriculum for teachers to spend more classroom time on explicit writing instruction and guided writing practice.
- Encourage all subject-area teachers to provide their students with primary sources, whenever possible, which has been shown to increase the amount of evidence students use in their writing.

Endnotes


