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## Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism

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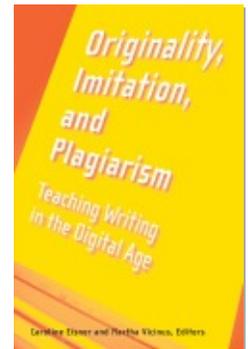
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# Insider Writing

## *Plagiarism-Proof Assignments*

Lynn Z. Bloom

*Whose words these are, I think I know . . .*

It was the best of assignments . . . . Newcomers to St. Louis in 1974, we had chosen to live in Clayton because of its excellent public schools. So my heart leapt up when I beheld the instructions for our son's very first sixth grade English assignment, "Write a poem in the manner of Robert Frost." This Laird did, refusing—as usual—to let us even see his work until he brought it home with the teacher's comments. I do not remember the poem, alas, but I do remember how all changed, changed utterly when at the bottom of the quatrains appeared, in impeccable copperplate, the teacher's only observation: "This is a very good poem—if YOU wrote it." Maintaining my customary decorum—I had yet (nor have I still) to punch any rogue and peasant slave in the nose—I suppressed my outrage and asked Laird, "May I complain to your teacher?" "Over my dead body," quoth the innocent (not his exact words), so I forbore.

This cynical skepticism reveals how even good assignments can go bad if a teacher doesn't trust her convictions, or her students. Today she'd have gone straight to the Internet, where a Google search would reveal some 32,800 hits for the combination of "Robert Frost" and "Whose woods these are" in English alone. What a waste of time, and what a displacement of intellectual energy! Laird's teacher was, in fact, on the right track and should have had confidence in the integrity of her assignment, recognizing that it was, if not plagiarism-proof, then plagiarism-resistant. For hers was a classic "insider writing" assignment.

As teachers, we need to exploit the broad spectrum of possibilities for

insider writing assignments—those that inspire originality *because* they are plagiarism-proof. To do so, we need to examine how we ourselves understand our own discipline as insiders. Whatever we take for granted as disciplinary assumptions and knowledge, norms and values; how and why we do our work; and what we consider big issues, ongoing problems, can become the basis for writing assignments that will invite students to look inside, to understand, to remember.

### **Why the Current Concern with Plagiarism-Proof Writing Assignments?**

It is far easier, more intellectually interesting, and more ethically satisfying to prevent plagiarism than to track it down. It's far more productive and a lot more fun for teachers and students alike to work in the atmosphere of trust that insider assignments engender, with their implications of collegial creativity, rather than with the suspicion adhering to more conventional assignments. Innovative assignments resistant to plagiarism are particularly important in an era when student culture implicitly condones copying software and downloading MP3 files, is dependent on Internet search engines, and believes that even copyrighted information is there for the taking. These *insider writing* assignments are original in conception; they encourage student writers to be original, thoughtful, and engaged; they can be revised and refined anew for every student in every class. They assume and operate on the assumption that students will actively participate as insiders in investigating the topic at hand, and in creating some of the issues and materials to be studied, and not simply approach topics from the outside as passive consumers of ancillary sources.

### **Insider Writing versus Outsider Writing**

#### *Outsider Writing*

Robert Scholes claims that in writing conventional critical papers students are put in the position of trying to second guess the teacher's interpretation of unassailable iconic texts. They too often feel forced to read and write as aliens, bowing in reverence before the sacred texts of the literary canon, "the best that has been thought and said," offered up by teachers serving as "priests and priestesses in the service of a secular scripture" (12–13ff.). The same obsequiousness prevails when students, novices to the subject at

hand, rely heavily on experts on any topic, in any field. Students, writing of necessity as outsiders, see themselves as pressured to consult the experts, to patch together others' ideas and words (see Howard) in the hope of coming closer to understanding the subject than they would if they depended on their own ideas. Yet as outsiders suppressing their own judgments, student writers serving as ventriloquists of published scholars are not positioned to own the primary material or to trust their opinions of it. With so little of themselves in their writing, they have little incentive to care very much about their work.

### *Insider Writing*

In contrast, when students write from *inside* the problem, issue, or literary or historical work at hand, they operate as engaged participants rather than as alien outsiders whose understanding comes through what others—sometimes centuries of others—have had to say on the subject. As I explain below, through the examples of my own literature course and those in other disciplines, teachers in all fields can construct assignments that compel their students to understand the perspectives, values, beliefs, norms, and customs as insiders. By creating dialogues, dramatizations, primary documents, or position papers in the process, students are directed to produce meaning, rather than to reproduce received opinion.

With such assignments, student authors perform have to accept and assume some authority for knowing and understanding the problem or issue at hand. Admittedly, this authority is limited by the students' actual experience with or understanding of the situation they're writing about, as it would be in most undergraduate papers. Yet these assignments have considerable integrity, and consequently, so do the students. Teachers whose courses are described below (see also Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters; Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu; Flower; Grobman) claim that because as a rule the students are heavily invested in the lively dialogues or events in which they're participating, they work harder, learn more (they generally have to buttress their insider understanding with outside sources), and write far more convincingly than with the usual routine academic exercises. Because these writing assignments are highly specific to both the courses and to the individual student's participation in them, they're more varied, more interesting, and nearly impossible to plagiarize. As the context changes every semester, so do the assignments; students have to construct their specifically nuanced topic from the ground up, every time.

## How Insider Writing Works: Model Courses

Coming of Age in American Autobiography, a course I've taught over the years to honors freshmen and a variety of upper-division undergraduates, took on new vitality when I changed the writing assignments from conventional papers of literary criticism to imaginative scenarios in which the students created or reconceived the autobiographers and significant moments in these lives. My students examine autobiographies, including those of Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass (the 1845 version), Harriet Jacobs, Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Richard Wright, and Maxine Hong Kingston, in their human, historical, and literary contexts in order to understand as readers, critics, and writers the significant issues and problems of the autobiographer's art.

The students analyze the ways autobiographers shape their self-presentations in a variety of roles: as members of a particular gender, ethnicity, or social class; as individuals in family, occupational, and other group contexts; and as people fulfilling particular destinies or roles in a specific historical context. To accomplish these aims the students "become" the characters they are writing about through employing a variety of literary forms, including monologues, dialogues, dramas, philosophical presentations, letters of job application or professional vitas, and imaginary journal entries.

Among the many possibilities for writing is an assignment that asks pairs of students to "write a dialogue between Franklin and Douglass in which they discuss, debate, and ultimately define the meaning(s) of one of the following concepts as it pertains to either coming of age as an individual or as a nation (or both): independence, self-reliance, defiance of authority, citizenship, maturity, contributions to/engagement in the larger society." Another asks student duos to

Design a twenty-first-century house for Thoreau (will it be static or mobile, rigid or free form?), in an appropriate setting (will it remain at Walden Pond? Or will you relocate it? Why?). One of you (as Annie Dillard) acts as the decorator, while the other is the environmental engineer and landscaper. Remembering Frank Lloyd Wright's dictum, "Form follows function," this dwelling and its environment should reflect and symbolize the predominant values of both Thoreau and Dillard. These characteristics are reflected in the appended list, "Writing in the Manner of Thoreau and Other Nature Writers" [see appendix]. You may include illustrations—a drawing, floor plan, sketches, photos, whatever, ad-lib.

Because the papers have to be historically accurate, characters from different times must have a plausible way of communicating with one another, one that respects the era and the ethos of each; the students may choose a contemporary or future time if they wish. One memorable presentation was that of an engineering student, who delightedly filled all the whiteboards in the classroom with diagrams of an environmentally friendly geodesic dome, from various angles, employing mathematical formulas to illustrate its ecological properties. Other briefer writings involved keeping a Thoreauvian journal; telling a joke Dillard's family would appreciate; making a list imitating Richard Wright's lists of sensory encounters with objects and phenomena; and constructing a cautionary tale analogous to "No Name Woman," which opens Kingston's *Woman Warrior*.

I consider these assignments *historical rendering* because they are embedded in factual information. My students, however, call them *creative writing*, in part because they're highly unusual in freedom, form, and voice for academic writing, and they are unique in the students' experience. Students deadened by conventional expectations revive as they reanimate their subject in a process that compels independent thought and allows them to tap wells of creativity they didn't know they had. While working with partners, they learn from one another—not so much factual information, which both have to find from external sources—but perspective, pacing, the sound and sense of sentences, dialogue, organization. Many seem surprised that such enjoyable assignments require them to work harder than they expected to, even though they are sharing the work, and at how extensively they need to revise (often, by supplying additional evidence or information) once the class has heard their intermediate version.

Of course, to fully experience autobiography as a literary form, it is essential for the students to write an autobiographical essay, thereby to understand the genre as insiders once again, in this case as real-time, real-world autobiographers. This is, perhaps, the ultimate "insider" writing, the quintessence of a paper impossible to plagiarize. Students still have to figure out ways to make accounts of first true love, recognition of life's unfairness or random chance, experience with war or exile or divorce or death meaningful in new ways to the jaded reader. Thus, about midway through the semester, when the students felt comfortable with each other and with me, I ask them to "tell a true story of your experience with an event, person or group; recognition or development of a belief or value system; or other phenomenon that was pivotal in your coming of age and/or understanding of the world." In the interests of full disclosure, I share with

them my autobiographical “Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction.” Here I use the story of discovering my twinhood, whose existence and neonatal death my parents had concealed from me (including denial, altering my birth certificate, swearing talkative relatives to secrecy) as the vehicle for exploring such fundamental issues as “Who owns the story?” “Who has the right to tell/suppress/interpret it?—for what readers?” and more. The implied message is clear: if I can do this, making myself vulnerable to readers and at the same time transforming life into art, so can they.

Although these assignments specify three to five pages, most of the students write double or triple that number, not counting revisions. They expect to be able to dash off a personal reminiscence; then artistic and philosophical and ethical issues intervene, and they revise again and again. And again. In an era when many students take writing-intensive courses simply to fill a requirement, this is surely an index of student investment. And yes, of course, I too invest a lot of time responding to these multiple drafts, but the results are worth our collective effort, say the student evaluations, enthusiastic affirmations of this writing that, as one student said, “makes me better than I am.”

My students’ class presentations stimulate lively, invested, and involved discussion. The students come alive when they read these papers, individually or in pairs, to their primary audience, the class; their discussions are energetic, enthusiastic, and engaged. When I asked the students to evaluate each assignment individually, to a person they loved “trying new modes of writing and getting into the heads of the authors we were reading.” They write, “I was pleasantly surprised with the assignments. I liked them a great deal more than the simple, mechanical, and stereotypical critical papers I was used to.” The autobiography, voted “the best paper of the year,” provided further validation of insider writing: “It gave everyone a hands-on experience with the genre. While I found writing about myself exceedingly difficult, this assignment gave me a great appreciation of the subject matter of this course.”

### **Other Sample: Insider Writing Assignments**

Two areas examined below, classical studies and service learning, are representative of the burgeoning literature on writing across the curriculum, as addressed in John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* and Art Young’s *Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum*. Many of their suggested writing assignments

(“microthemes,” peer reviews, assessment of evidence or issues in learning) can be adapted to specific disciplines, and further refined to employ an insider’s perspective.

### *Dramatizations of Classical Works*

Classical studies professors Christy Friend and Mark C. Carnes created classroom experiences comparable to my own. Desperate to liven up classes full of passive, tuned-out students, each teacher devised classroom dramatizations of classical works in which students played insider roles in the cultures they were learning about. In each course, as in mine, the students, well informed, wrote more sophisticated and longer papers analyzing the issues addressed. Friend’s students reenacted the *controversiae* on affirmative action from Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*, openly “questioning assumptions about merit and equality, and examining the political, historical and cultural factors” influencing these (9–12). In Carnes’s “Liminal Classroom” students enacted scenes from their reading, such as Plato’s account of the trial of Socrates in *The Republic* and Confucius’s resolution of disputes in *The Analects*, examining the classical works within “the contexts of the impassioned debates and dramas from which they had emerged.” Because the students in both teachers’ classes became so thoroughly invested in their subjects that they not only “spent countless hours outside of class meeting in factions and cajoling the undecided [,] they worked harder on papers and submitted more of them,” even though the assignments were “far more demanding” than they had been earlier, when students merely read the texts (Carnes B6–B8).

### *Real-World Writing: Insider Writing in Service-Learning Courses*

Service-learning courses in all disciplines put students into real-world writing situations where it is impossible to plagiarize. The students serve as aides or interns in nonprofit organizations, public schools, hospitals, prisons, homeless shelters, and other community service endeavors (see Deans, *Writing Partnerships*, appendix B; Grobman 129; Cushman, “Service Learning”). From their “insider” perspective, albeit one with limited authority, they write either in, about, or for that context. Often they cross “cultural and class boundaries by collaborating” both in writing and in “pragmatic civic action” with “community partners” who may be very different from themselves (Deans, *Writing Partnerships*, 9–10). Their writings are thus specific to both context and situation: reports, bulletins, brochures, operating manuals, position statements, case studies, reflections on programs and

the student's participation therein are among the plethora of possibilities (see Flower; Deans, *Writing Partnerships*; Cushman, "Sustainable Programs"). Service learning owes much to Freire's liberation pedagogy of "social dreaming," which assumes "that if students perform ideological analysis and critical literacy in the classroom, they will parlay that critical consciousness into concrete civic action later in their lives" (qtd. in Deans, *Writing Partnerships*, 109).

Space considerations allow only a single characteristic service-learning assignment to represent the philosophical and pedagogical rationale for such writing. Deans's textbook, *Writing and Community Action*, offers two alternative forms: either a "Community-Based Research Essay" that explores "A Social Concern or Local Problem" or an "Agency Profile Report." Both incorporate experience and comparable research methods, requiring students to interview agency personnel and community members and to do fieldwork through writing field notes and journal entries, evaluating sources, and synthesizing material from agency documents, library, and Web sources. The student's investigation might be a "prelude to community service," helping newcomers—new tutors, for instance—"understand social issues and engage in community work." Or students could use community service to "explore complex problems, and spur critical reflection" through analyzing their fieldwork in its social context. For instance, a student working in a homeless shelter could progress from the fairly literal, "How do I make sense of what I saw today?" to the broader, "What options for job training are available?" to considering the most general and most difficult, the influence of "local, national, and global economic forces" on homelessness. In addition, community-based research can be "a form of social action in its own right," if students, as they work with community members, can actually produce position papers or reports that "can help social change organizations do their work." In all assignments, students examine ethical issues: What is the project's purpose? Does it respect everyone's "rights and dignity"? Who might it benefit, and how? Might there be any "potentially problematic consequences"? (*Writing and Community Action*, 273–76).

As this assignment illustrates, writing in service-learning courses involves so many separate components, each embedded in the students' ongoing experiences, that it would be impossible to fake. Although these writings are not without problems, including what Cushman describes as the "liberal do-gooder stance" of the newly socially conscious ("Public Intellectual," 132), or the "hit it and quit it" superficiality of a single semes-

ter's involvement ("Sustainable Programs," 40), all are perforce original. Claims that exceed the authority of the students' limited experience can usually be tempered by judicious questions, to be addressed in the requisite revision, on the order of: How do you know? What's your evidence—and from what sources? Is what you say always true? Applicable in all instances?

### **Insider Assignments: They're Really Not about Plagiarism**

In the final analysis, avoiding plagiarism is fundamentally a secondary concern for teachers, whose efforts are better spent inventing writing assignments that are original, intellectually demanding, participatory—the essence of insider writing. As we have seen, such assignments can open up new ways of responding to the student's world, to the world of ideas, to issues that are relevant to contemporary life. These writing assignments promise to be exhilarating, creative, fun. Best of all, they inspire the passion that comes from investment in one's work, pride of authorship of writing one owns and loves.

#### APPENDIX: WRITING IN THE MANNER OF THOREAU AND OTHER NATURE WRITERS

Thoreau set the style and pace for 150 years of American nature writers who continue to follow in his footsteps. Among the major characteristics are the following:

- First-person perspective. "It is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (107).
- Unassuming authorial persona.
- Desire for simplicity. "My purpose in going to Walden Pond was . . . to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles" (119).
- Self-reliant and resourceful. "I lived alone . . . a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself. . . and earned my living by the labor of my hands only" (107).
- Philosophical. "To be a philosopher . . . [is] so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (116) [e.g., a natural philosopher].
- Curious.—intellectually, philosophically, existentially—about everything.

- Love of solitude. "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time." (See "Solitude" chapter.)
- Compulsion to march to a different drummer. "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely to be my good behavior" (113).
- Sensitivity to the natural world, all things under the sun, great and small. "For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms" (118).
- Cosmic awareness, a vision of infinity, eternity. "Walden has become situated not only in Massachusetts but in the heart of America and in the center of the universe" (116).
- A desire to live fully in the moment. "In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time . . . have been anxious . . . to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment" (117).
- Sense of moral superiority and physical well-being. Uses the natural setting as the basis for providing a critique of society (including the entire world), and sets up his corner of the universe as a model for the world to follow.

This is a partial list, to which we can add. (See also Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1995).) Your Thoreauvian notebooks should exhibit some of these characteristics in each entry; try in some entries to imitate Thoreau's style of writing, as well. Feel free to disagree with Thoreau's opinions, as you wish.

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