

Exercise 2: Discussion Questions

1. Samantha hoped that her dissertation, a biography of George Washington, would bring new insights to a familiar subject. After reading several of her chapters, Samantha's advisor noticed a number of passages that resembled sections in previously published biographies. He asked Samantha to rework the passages but, to his surprise, Samantha defended the textual similarities as unavoidable. All Washington biographers, she noted, drew on the same set of primary sources and described the same events. Although she interpreted these sources and events differently, she claimed that framing them in similar patterns and echoing previous works was inevitable. Samantha's argument convinced her advisor, and the passages remained as they were. Did they make the right decision?
2. When Kathy's seminar professor announced that the topic for the research paper would be the trans-Atlantic slave trade, she was greatly relieved. Kathy had written a strong paper on slavery the prior semester, and she hoped to use it for background. As the due date approached, however, Kathy found herself pressed for time and copied two paragraphs almost word for word from the old paper into the new. Something about reusing the passages troubled her, but she was confident that she could not plagiarize herself. Was she right?
3. Short on time to complete his paper on the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton for an undergraduate history class, Bill resorted to cutting and pasting material from Internet sites. He got caught. The professor discovered that Bill had copied at least 10 percent of his paper directly from other sources, and without attribution. Bill was penitent, but claimed the extent and kind of copying to be a mitigating factor. A full 90 percent of the paper represented his own work, Bill noted, when he could have copied the entire paper from the web. And the paper's thesis was original. He insisted that the professor consider these facts when determining his punishment. How should the professor respond? Is there a relationship between the extent and kind of plagiarism and the magnitude of the offense?
4. Connor had been a teaching assistant in a Latin American history course for only four weeks when two students handed in remarkably similar papers. Although the language in the papers was not identical, their arguments, evidence, and organization strongly echoed each other. The assignment had given students a choice of five questions to answer, and since the two students had chosen the same question, some similarities might be expected. But Connor remained suspicious. When he met with the students, they apologized for the similarities and explained that they had worked closely in the early stages of writing by brainstorming approaches to the question and outlining their answers together. Connor concluded that the similarities resulted from too close a collaboration and were probably unintentional. Were the students guilty of plagiarism? How should Connor handle the problem?
5. Why is a reputation for professional integrity valuable? What are the possible prices that a graduate student or professor might pay for the perception of plagiarism? How can you ensure that your own work avoids the ethical ambiguities explored in the questions above?