8. Academic Honesty/Integrity

The subject of Academic Honesty/Integrity is addressed elsewhere in this textbook, but the subject warrants specific discussion in a chapter of its own. Included here in Section 8 is a focused explanation of what the concept of academic honesty is and what it entails.

8.1 “Intellectual property”

A good analogy to use to understand academic honesty is to think of other people’s ideas as a kind of property: just as you own things that you value and want to protect, people also have ideas they value and want to protect. The idea is that a person takes as much time and care into creating an idea as he or she takes in earning the money to purchase something. In going through this effort, the person is creating value – it becomes a valuable product.

Effort increases value.

This analogy is not a perfect one, however, for a few important reasons. For one, very practical reason, intellectual property is not a physical thing that a person can control. We have laws to protect our rights to our own property, and with intellectual property, it is different because intellectual property is not something that a person can really see or lay hands on.

More than that, it is important to recognize that a person has rights not only to his or her ideas, but also to the way his or her ideas are expressed.

Another way intellectual property is not perfectly like physical property is in the way other people use it and the access they have to it. From this, it is important to understand that, with the free access and use of others’ intellectual property comes the expectation that a person will use it responsibly.

8.2 Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the result of taking the ideas in one context and presenting them in another context without properly or responsibly documenting it.

It is possible, in fact, for one to plagiarize him or herself. This can occur in many ways, but perhaps the most common occurs when the person uses material from a previous published work without citing it. This is considered self-plagiarism because (1) it leads an unsuspecting reader to believe that research was conducted in a different context than it really was, and (2) it misleads that reader into thinking that the information the author has self-plagiarized is all he or she has (or has ever had) to say on the subject.
It is very much like the rules for “palming” or playing zone defense in basketball: one is sloppy method, and the other is so difficult to defend that it has at times been prohibited because of the unfair advantage it gives over the team using it.

8.2.1 Intentional plagiarism

Plagiarism can occur for many reasons, one of which is that the writer knew that he or she was doing something academically dishonest, but made the decision to do it anyway.

8.2.2 Unintentional plagiarism

Unlike intentional plagiarism, it can occur that a writer can plagiarize unintentionally through poor documentation or poor understanding of how the rules of academic dishonesty really work.

Writers should understand that teachers make very little room for honest mistakes and have very little appreciation for pleas of ignorance. If the topic was covered in class – and really, this goes for any subject – then the student is responsible for understanding that topic, even if he or she was absent the day it was covered.

It is noted above in Section 8.1 that “a person has the right not only to his or her ideas, but also to the way his or her ideas are expressed.” Notice the quotation marks placed around this definition. What this means is that writers who borrow others’ work have an obligation to their sources, not only to credit them for the ideas they have, but also to credit them for the words they use to express those ideas.