



Original Assignments To Avoid Plagiarism

One of the best ways to avoid student plagiarism is to assign unique topics that rely on the student's own voice and opinions and feel deeply integrated with the work of the class. As an added bonus, such assignments can lead to essays you're more excited to read and students are more excited to write.

Original Assignments At Their Best

"Refer to Points from Our Class Discussion..."

Consider the difference between "What were Thomas Aquinas' opinions on revelation?" which is easily found online and will result in similar essays from every student, and "How do Thomas Aquinas' opinions on revelation connect to one topic of last week's class discussion? Refer to specific points from our conversation in class to prove your argument." The latter topic requires some individual connection to the material and has the added benefit, if you share the prompt with students in advance, of making them more attentive to the class conversation and better note-takers. The latter topic similarly requires knowledge of the material you wish students to know, but, by adding the extra step, you will receive a broader range of responses and lessen students' opportunities to simply copy the answers from a website or book.

...Or "Choose one sentence..."

Alternatively, you could say, "Choose one sentence that you think best exemplifies Thomas Aquinas' opinions on revelation." Again, students must demonstrate their knowledge of the topic, but they do so within a choice-based system that gives them more agency over their work. That their choice matters makes them more likely to engage in the work. If you add, "Let's work in pairs for ten minutes to start choosing quotes," students leave class with something written already, easing the process without relying on outside material. That jumpstart helps all but the most hardened cheaters avoid plagiarism.

Learning From My Own Mistakes

Identifying Plagiarism In My Class

Despite my emphasis on original assignment writing, I sometimes get lazy and mess up. Recently, I caught three students plagiarizing towards the end of the year after having experienced zero instances of plagiarism during the rest of the year. Of course, I



immediately realized that this happened because my assignment – “write a book review with one paragraph of summary and one paragraph of analysis” – was terrible.

Recognizing Why It Happened

For me, the importance of this minor unit was that students read the book. The writing was an afterthought simply to ensure that students completed the reading. Naturally, students rightly sensed my attitude towards the writing, and three of them simply copied the summary paragraphs from online sources. They may very well have read the book – their analysis paragraphs suggest that they did – but they intuited the “busywork” nature of the assignment and reacted accordingly.

Pivoting My Prompt

Of course, the majority of the class didn’t plagiarize, and the students who did faced the school’s plagiarism penalty. But I do believe that part of the onus lies on me: I used the writing assignment as a placeholder for more meaningful learning and unintentionally opened a door for students to plagiarize. Granted, three students chose to walk through that door, but I needn’t have opened it in the first place. Since then, I have offered a better prompt, asking students to create – in writing or video form – an interview with a character from the book. What questions would they ask, and how do they imagine the character would answer? Students have not plagiarized that more imaginative assignment both because they feel motivated to write a piece that asks for more of themselves and because finding relevant online information for that unique prompt is much more difficult.