

Visual plagiarism: How to prevent, educate and detect

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Introduction

The definitions of academic integrity and academic misconduct are often the same for text and non-textual work. However, proper attribution when using visual properties in academic and non-academic contexts can be different (Simon, 2016) and is further complicated by the differing ethical, legal and professional standards across disciplines (Blythman, et al., 2007). This interactive presentation will focus on case studies of visual plagiarism as a way to discuss how participants and their institutions can prevent, educate and detect visual plagiarism.

Recently, the Ryerson Academic Integrity Office and the Ryerson Learning and Teaching Office led a group of faculty members from the Faculty of Communication and Design to develop a ‘best practices’ guide to prevent visual plagiarism. This document is aimed at instructors and faculty to assist them in supporting student use of visuals in their assignments and work (e.g., photographs, maps, screenshots, artworks, digital creations, videos).

During this session, through the use of current case studies, we will demonstrate practical ways to preemptively approach this topic (e.g. academic statements on artistic creation, how to design assignments to prevent visual plagiarism); the current state of the digital world regarding citation and copyright as well as speaking to the latest detection methods. The structure of this session will encourage and provide an opportunity for attendees to share how they are addressing visual plagiarism in their institutions.

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

- Identify and describe visual plagiarism;
- Assist faculty in educating on the topic and in detecting visual plagiarism;
- Support students in avoiding visual plagiarism.

All attendees will receive the “Preventing Visual Plagiarism Best Practices” resource. Below we describe some of the aspects of preventing visual plagiarism that are described in this document and will form the basis of this session.

Academic Statements on Artistic Creation

For each discipline, Blythman, et al., (2007) suggest developing a statement on the tradition of artistic creation within that discipline and reviewing this with students. The following statement serves as one such example.

Historically, some artists/designers have used copying as an analytical approach to learning. Investigating how an image/artefact was created involves a close reading of which media and methods were used, in which order, and how each was applied. By doing so, you gain material and compositional sensibilities resulting in a technical exercise but not an original work. This practice will recreate the look and feel of something, but it is considered copying.

It is often unavoidable to use another artist/designer's work as a starting point and it is acceptable to be inspired by their work, but students need to understand that for their work to have been "inspired" by something, there must also be "departure". They must move forward in significant ways. A golden rule to follow is that a source image/artefact used for initial inspiration should be changed in several (five to eight) significant ways so that the resulting work is identifiably original and different from the source of inspiration.

Students can do this by changing several areas from the list below: (choose appropriate terms for your discipline from the list below, or add any subject specific terminology). Colour, Composition, Content, Context, Cropping, Fabric, Feeling, Intention, Juxtaposition, Layout, Lighting, Materials, Meaning, Method, Motif, Pattern, Placement, Positioning, Process, Proportion, References, Scale, Selection, Setting, Transformation.

Assignment Design

Good assignment design can help prevent visual plagiarism. For example, by designing assignments that faculty can track from beginning to end, it is possible for the instructor to identify signs of problematic usage of source materials, or copying rather than inspiration. In the words of Blythman, et al., (2007) "if a student must first sketch out an idea, or start with a source and develop an idea from it, or create a mood board, they can be guided away from imitation and copying through questions and suggestion."

Assignment features that prevent visual plagiarism include:

- Scaffolding the assignment by requiring multiple drafts documenting progress. For example, faculty can require that students include pictures (screenshots or photos) of various stages of their visual project, to demonstrate a creative process. This would not be conclusive evidence that something is an original work, but it does make cheating more costly in terms of time and energy as students have to reverse engineer what they are copying.
- Adding a personal reflection component where students discuss the evolution of their ideas and/or a description of the process of creating their image (Academy of Art, 2015).
- Requiring evidence of research, including citations. Faculty can invite a librarian come to

- class to review image searching databases and citation practices.
- Specifically mentioning in assignment instructions that all third-party images must be properly attributed and cited. Explicitly stating in the assignment description the penalty for lack of image citation and attribution.

Citing Images

Just as students are expected and required to attribute and cite the source of quotations and ideas they use from others in their written assignments, so too must students properly attribute and cite any visuals they use in their academic work if they were not created by the student. Students must understand that visuals must be cited even if they are clipart, stock photography, royalty-free, open media, or available under a Creative Commons license.

Types of student work where visuals must be cited include: essays, reports, presentations (i.e. slide decks), digital media (e.g., blogs, websites, social media posts, apps). Students don't often realize that they are required to properly attribute all the creators of the visual, which is not necessarily the source from where the student found the image. For example, citing Google for an image found in their image search engine is not sufficient. Also, it is not uncommon with social media posts, for visuals to be shared by people even though they are not the original creator of the visual work. A reverse image search engine can help track down the creators.

Academic styles vary in how and where to cite images, so students should be directed to consult their department's academic style guide, librarian, or their instructor. If there are particular types of visuals that come up often in your assignments, faculty should consider providing specific resources to students to assist them.

Permission to Reuse Images and Copyright

It is important for all to be aware that there are different rules and laws that apply for reusing visuals within academic-only contexts (e.g. in-class or for assignments) versus work created or available for the general public. For academic work, reusing images (with proper attribution and citation) may be allowed without the creator's permission under fair use/fair dealing provisions. If students are creating work that is available for the public to see (such as a website, application, blog, social media post, poster), copyright and trademark laws prevent them from using other people's work without first attaining the explicit permission of all the visual work's creators. Best practice in such situations is to get such permission in writing, such as a via a signed permission form.

In instances of public-facing work where students are unable to discern and receive permission to use a visual from all the image creators, they should be advised to not use such images.

If students are creating any public-facing project using other people's images that may be public beyond the duration of the course or from which they may make money, they should be advised to consult a copyright lawyer.

References

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