Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Conceptual Clarification of Plagiarism: Three Overlapping Relations

Lance Gentry

lcgentry@umw.edu

University of Mary Washington

Research Article

Keywords: plagiarism, conceptual stretching, patchwriting, text recycling, academic integrity, assessment

Posted Date: November 12th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11543487/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Institutional definitions of plagiarism start from a shared idea: using someone else's work without acknowledgment is wrong. They then apply the same word to acts that do not share that structure, and the disagreements that follow are usually treated as disagreements about a single concept. They are better read as decisions about which relation has been breached. The relations overlap.

Plagiarism proper is a misrepresented relation to another identifiable source. Source-use failure is a breakdown in transparent source use, and it need not be deceptive. Assessment recycling is a breach of an originality condition on the credit being awarded, and it includes a student resubmitting their own earlier work. A single submission can breach more than one of these. Copyright infringement and contract cheating sit next to the three relations without being instances of them.

The argument sets four instructional accounts — a Bowdoin College conduct page, Plagiarism.org, a 2019 ThoughtCo essay, and the University of Oxford's student guidance — against partitions already in the literature. A conduct code can keep one heading. It cannot keep one finding. The penalty has to attach to the relation that was breached.

Introduction

Jordan (2013) argued that "academic ethics" had been stretched across phenomena that empirical studies were then treating as one dependent variable, and that the stretch threatened the validity of the research. Tauginienė and colleagues (2019) made the related claim that integrity terminology is interpreted differently by field, place, and culture, and answered with a partition of terms into integrity, misconduct, and neutral categories. Taylor (2024) reopened the question of what makes plagiarism wrongful, distinguished replication plagiarism from bypass plagiarism, and argued that the usual ranking of those acts should be reversed. He also rejected the credit-misappropriation account of the wrong. Bretag and Mahmud (2009) asked whether reuse of one's own text is self-plagiarism or appropriate textual reuse, and treated the answer as a definitional task rather than as a detection task.

The purpose of this article is to take that question to the ordinary teaching concept of plagiarism, and to state the finding the literature has approached without naming. The evidence is the instructional conception, not a student survey or a detection corpus. A conduct page, a commercial explainer, and a university guidance note are the documents that stretch the concept in practice. They are what a student is given and what a board cites. A research finding that uses the word without saying which of those documents it means has not yet said what it found. The stretch is not confined to the conduct pages. It is in the dependent variable of the studies this journal publishes. Geweke, Manzoni, Schwarzenegger, and Ege (2025) note that a questionnaire has to oversimplify the complex nature of plagiarism, and they replace the single item with three vignettes: ghostwriting, a paper copied in full without attribution, and copy-and-paste with and without paraphrase. On an eleven-point scale, 2,043 students rated ghostwriting at about 8.2, full copying at 7.21, copy-and-paste without paraphrase at 6.19, and copy-and-paste with paraphrase at 5.31. Staff, in a sample of 766, kept the same order. When the acts are separated, the

finding comes apart (Geweke et al., 2025). The contrast is the study that does not separate them. Abdelnasser et al. (2026) surveyed 387 Egyptian and Saudi medical students with the 29-item Attitudes Towards Plagiarism scale and reported moderate scores on positive attitude, negative attitude, and subjective norms. The scale treats plagiarism as one construct. A moderate score on that scale is a finding about a word, not about a relation. The same study found that students tolerated reuse of their own earlier work, and the focus groups treated that reuse as not plagiarism. That is the assessment-recycling relation, recorded under the wrong name. The concept is stable at the center. It becomes unstable once it is asked to classify a missing quotation mark, a synonym-for-synonym paraphrase, a resubmitted essay, an unlicensed photograph, and an essay bought from a third party. Those acts can all be forbidden. They are not one relation among a writer, a source, and a reader, and a single submission can breach more than one of them. I argue that plagiarism proper names a misrepresented relation to another identifiable source. Source-use failure names a failure of transparent source use. Assessment recycling names a breach of an originality condition on assessment. Collapsing them into one finding is what Jordan (2013) called conceptual stretching. A conduct code that cannot say which relation it is punishing cannot say what it has found.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section states what a concept of plagiarism has to do if it is to guide both censure and research, and sets the core against Dougherty's (2018) account and Taylor's (2024) account of the wrong. The third section reads four instructional conceptions as evidence of stretch and displays the divergence in a table. The fourth sets those conceptions against partitions already in the literature. The fifth states the three-relation account, including the overlap, and applies it to contract cheating and generated text. The sixth says what a conduct code ought to print.

What the Concept Has to Do

A teaching definition of plagiarism is asked to do three jobs at once. It tells a student what must be acknowledged. It tells a conduct board what may be punished. It tells a researcher what counts as an instance. Jordan's (2013) point about academic ethics applies directly. If the same word covers unlike acts, a finding that "plagiarism" is common, or that students do not regard "plagiarism" as serious, does not yet say which act was common or which act was regarded as unserious. Tauginienė et al. (2019) make the practical version of the same point: terminology that shifts by field and setting cannot support consistent decisions.

The concept therefore needs a core narrower than the list of things institutions forbid. The core used here is taken from Fishman (2009), who proposed it in order to separate plagiarism from theft and from copyright violation. Plagiarism, on that proposal, occurs when someone uses words, ideas, or work products attributable to another identifiable person or source, without attributing the work to the source from which it was obtained, in a situation in which there is a legitimate expectation of original authorship, in order to obtain some benefit, credit, or gain which need not be monetary. Fishman treats the second element as the line between attributable material and common knowledge, and the third as the line between plagiarism and a formatting error. The fourth excludes speech-writing and other

legitimate re-purposing. The fifth, on Fishman's own reading, establishes mens rea: a purpose of obtaining unearned credit. I adopt the first four elements as the description. I do not adopt the fifth as a requirement of intent. A near-copy can meet the first four elements whether or not the writer meant to obtain unearned credit, which is the distinction Oxford's regulations already mark. Fishman also asks the question the third relation answers. If plagiarism is defined strictly, some other vocabulary is needed for what now falls under the word by default, including what is called self-plagiarism. Weber-Wulff (2020) quotes the five-part account in teaching materials. Oxford's student definition is the institutional version of the first three parts. Plagiarism is "presenting work or ideas from another source as your own, with or without consent of the original author, by incorporating it into your work without full acknowledgement" (University of Oxford, n.d.-a). Consent does not cure the presentation. Acknowledgement does.

Two limits follow, and neither is a permission. First, the core requires another source. Reuse of one's own earlier submission fails that test, whatever else it fails. Second, the core requires a misrepresented relation, not merely a missing license. An image used with attribution and without permission may infringe copyright and still not be plagiarism. An image used without attribution may be both. Tupa's (n.d.) article on Plagiarism.org is right that media raise attribution questions, and overextended when those questions are answered entirely in the language of plagiarism. The article itself defines the verb, via Merriam-Webster, as stealing and passing off the ideas or words of another as one's own. Passing off is a representation. Permission is a license. They come apart.

Dougherty's fourth condition

Dougherty (2018) offers a heuristic built for published research. Academic plagiarism, on that account, has been committed when there is a non-trivial appropriation of words, images, or formulas, with inadequate credit, that generates an appearance of original authorship, in a discrete item belonging to the scholarly record. Intent is not required for the description. Dougherty treats correction of the scholarly record as a different task from punishment of a person, and he distinguishes academic plagiarism both from copyright violation and from duplicate publication.

The first three conditions match the core used here. The fourth does not travel unchanged into a student essay, and the difference has to be decided rather than noted. A submitted essay is not an item in the scholarly record. I treat it as inside plagiarism proper nonetheless, because the instructor is the reader entitled to treat the work as original in the relevant respect. That is Fishman's legitimate expectation of original authorship, applied to the reader the assessment actually has. It is not an analogy with publication, and it is not a claim that the essay belongs to the scholarly record. Dougherty's fourth condition is the research case of the same relation: the reader entitled to rely on the work is a later researcher, and the item is the published paper. The teaching case and the research case share the misrepresented relation. They do not share the archive. What does travel, and what the teaching conceptions resist, is the separation Dougherty insists on. Duplicate publication is not academic plagiarism. Copyright violation is not academic plagiarism. The two fail in different directions. A writer can plagiarize a work that has fallen out of copyright, and can infringe copyright by publishing extensive

extracts with attribution. Saunders (2010) states the distinction directly. Plagiarism may be defined as unacknowledged copying. Copyright is the right to authorise or to prevent the making of copies, so an infringement is an unauthorised copy. The difference is between a failure to acknowledge and a failure to obtain authorisation (p. 280). The non-triviality condition is itself contested. A permissive reading confines the finding to core results. A restrictive reading extends it to a literature review, a method statement, or a footnote. The U.S. Office of Research Integrity, as Dougherty reports it, uses the permissive reading to decide which complaints to investigate (Dougherty, 2018). That is a threshold for an investigation, not a definition of the relation.

What the partition does not decide

Taylor (2024) offers a different narrowing. On his account, plagiarism is wrongful to the extent that it impedes the purpose of academic work, which is to increase knowledge and understanding, rather than primarily because it misappropriates credit. He ranks bypass plagiarism as the more serious research wrong for that reason, and he sets student writing aside because its aims are not the aims of professional academic writing. The partition below does not adopt that account of the wrong, and it does not assume the credit account he rejects. Classification is prior to ranking. A code that cannot say which relation was breached cannot say what either account is ranking. A conduct code may adopt Taylor’s ranking for published research and still need the partition, because a resubmitted essay, a close paraphrase, and a copied paragraph are not one obstruction of knowledge and not one theft of credit. The article is a theory of the concept. It leaves the theory of the wrong open, and it does not leave the concept open.

Four Conceptions, and Where They Stretch

The four texts are not a representative sample of university policy, and they are not a set of the same kind. Bowdoin and Oxford are institutional guidance. Tupa’s page is a public definition hosted by Plagiarism.org. Valdes’s essay is a popular explanation. They are conceptions in the ordinary sense: public statements of what the word is to cover, written for students or for a general reader rather than for a research literature. Their agreement is the core. Their divergence is the stretch. Table 1 reports the charge each page’s stated rule supports. A cell marked silent means the page does not state a rule for that act.

Table 1
The charge each conception's stated rule supports. Silence means the page does not state a rule for that act.

Act	Bowdoin	Tupa	Valdes	Oxford
Verbatim copy of another's prose, no quotation marks, no citation	Direct plagiarism	Plagiarism, framed as fraud	Plagiarism	Plagiarism
Close paraphrase, source footnoted	Mosaic plagiarism; the footnote does not save it	Not the uncredited-structure charge; the majority rule is separate	Mosaic if marks or attributions are missing	Acknowledgement may meet the definition
Own essay resubmitted, no permission or citation	Self-plagiarism	Not covered by the theft-and-lie definition	Not listed	Plagiarism, as reuse without citation
Purchased essay, no copied source	Not specified as direct plagiarism	Turning in another's work	Direct plagiarism	Not incorporation of an identifiable source
Attributed image, no license	Not the core charge	Discussed with copyright and permission	Not listed	Acknowledgement meets the plagiarism definition
Unauthorized generated text that reproduces no protected source	Silent	Silent	Silent	Plagiarism under the artificial-intelligence clause

The core they share

Bowdoin College (n.d.) does not offer a single sentence. It classifies direct plagiarism as word-for-word transcription without attribution and without quotation marks. Tupa (n.d.) calls plagiarism "an act of fraud" involving "both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward," and lists turning in another's work, copying words or ideas without credit, and omitting quotation marks. Valdes (2019) defines it as "the practice of taking credit for someone else's words or ideas." Oxford requires full acknowledgement of work or ideas from another source, published or unpublished, in manuscript, print, or electronic form (University of Oxford, n.d.-a). On verbatim copying of another's prose, the first row of Table 1, there is no conceptual dispute.

Mosaic plagiarism and the footnote that does not save it

The first stretch appears as soon as the wording moves. Bowdoin calls mosaic plagiarism, “sometimes called ‘patch writing,’” the borrowing of phrases without quotation marks, or the substitution of synonyms while the structure and meaning remain. It holds that this paraphrasing, “whether intentional or not, is academically dishonest and punishable—even if you footnote your source” (Bowdoin College, n.d.). Valdes (2019) splits the ground. Paraphrased plagiarism is a cosmetic change passed off as original. Mosaic plagiarism mixes verbatim and reworded pieces without marks or attributions. Ideas that are not common knowledge still require citation when no words are quoted. Tupa (n.d.) states the structural point without the label: changing words while copying sentence structure, without credit, is plagiarism. Tupa adds a proportional point that Bowdoin does not: copying so many words or ideas that they make up the majority of the work is plagiarism whether credit is given or not.

These are not four descriptions of one act, which is what the second row of Table 1 records. A footnote that accompanies a near-copy is a partial signal. A missing citation on a genuine paraphrase is a different failure. A paper that is mostly quotation, even when attributed, may fail an originality condition on the assignment without misrepresenting the source. Bowdoin’s rule treats the footnote as irrelevant to the charge. Tupa’s majority rule treats attribution as irrelevant to a different charge. Using one word for both rules hides the difference. The disagreement is about classification. Jamieson (2016) records that the term patchwriting is not fixed, and that cited patchwriting is treated by some teachers as misuse of sources and by others as plagiarism. Common knowledge is the other unsettled boundary. A point that is common knowledge in the relevant field need not be cited; a point that is not must be, even when no words are quoted. A close paraphrase with a citation is a defective signal. A close paraphrase without a citation conceals the source. An attributed paper that is mostly quotation may still fail the assignment. Calling all three mosaic plagiarism decides the classification in advance.

Intent

Bowdoin defines accidental plagiarism as neglected citation, misquotation, or unintentional close paraphrase, and then closes the excuse: “Lack of intent does not absolve the student of responsibility” (Bowdoin College, n.d.). Accidental cases are “subject to the same range of consequences” as other types. Valdes (2019) locates the same failures in disorganized research and time pressure, and reaches the same conclusion: failure to cite appropriately is plagiarism even if credit was intended. Tupa’s fraud frame presupposes the lying that accident excludes. Oxford defines the act without requiring intent, and then limits the disciplinary offence, under the examination regulations, to “intentional or reckless plagiarism” (University of Oxford, n.d.-a).

The Oxford sentence is the conceptual clue. A definition can apply where a penalty does not. Bowdoin and Valdes refuse that distinction. The refusal is a policy choice. It is not evidence that accident and fraud are one relation. A writer who mis-copies a page number has not performed the fraud Tupa describes. A writer who submits a bought essay has. A concept that cannot say so will report both as “plagiarism,” and then be surprised that students rank them differently.

Self-reuse and the edge

Self-reuse is where the core breaks. Bowdoin defines self-plagiarism as submitting one's own previous work, or mixing parts of it, without permission from all instructors involved, including the reuse of a high-school paper and the submission of one paper to two classes (Bowdoin College, n.d.). Oxford includes "re-using your own work without citation" in the definition (University of Oxford, n.d.-a). Valdes does not list it. Tupa's theft-and-lie definition has no other author to steal from. Bretag and Mahmud (2009) already treated this gap as a definitional problem in publication, not as a detection problem. Permission, which is Bowdoin's criterion, regulates the assessment. It does not establish that the student has presented another source as their own.

Oxford extends the object of acknowledgement to code, illustrations, graphs, data, lectures, other students' essays, and downloaded web resources, and includes material "generated wholly or in part through use of artificial intelligence" unless use was authorized in advance (University of Oxford, n.d.-a). Tupa extends the charge to images, video, and music, and then discusses permission in terms that belong to copyright. Valdes folds a purchased essay into direct plagiarism. Each extension is intelligible as a rule. None of them is intelligible as a specification of the core without further argument. The last three rows of Table 1 are that argument in brief. Generated text has a source only in an extended sense. A purchased essay may have no copied source at all. An unlicensed photograph may be fully attributed.

Partitions the Literature Already Has

The stretch is not a discovery about these four pages. It is what the research literature has been partitioning for thirty years, under other names. The contribution of the present account is not a fourth typology. It is the claim that the existing partitions are partitions of relations, that the relations overlap, and that a finding which does not name the relation has not yet said what was done.

Walker (1998) ordered student behaviors rather than textual disguises: sham paraphrasing, in which verbatim material is cited but presented as paraphrase; illicit paraphrasing without acknowledgement; copying another student's work with that student's knowledge; verbatim copying without acknowledgement; recycling the same assignment; ghostwriting; and purloining another student's work without their knowledge. The order is a seriousness continuum, not a claim that the seven are one act. A later longitudinal use of that instrument found that most of the forms were engaged in knowingly, while sham paraphrasing and recycling were often naïve (Curtis et al., 2026). Knowing and naïve are predicates of persons. They are usable only if the form is already specified. Walker's list specifies them. A single institutional charge does not.

Howard's patchwriting research names the mosaic case from the writer's procedure: copying from a source and then deleting words, altering grammatical structures, or substituting synonyms (Howard, 1995; as cited in Merriam-Webster, 2018). Howard's point, and Jamieson's (2016) restatement of it, is that the classification is not fixed. Cited patchwriting can be treated as misuse of sources rather than as

ethical misconduct, particularly where the cause is inexperience. Pecorari (2008) makes the pedagogical version of the claim: some of what institutions call plagiarism is a failure to learn the expected relation between a text and its sources, not a decision to transgress. Pecorari and Petrić (2014) note that policies often omit deceptive intent and sometimes say outright that plagiarism can be unintentional, while the surrounding talk still assumes deception. Bowdoin's page uses the phrase "patch writing" and declines Howard's distinction. That is a disagreement with the writing research, not an application of it.

Weber-Wulff's typology, developed from documented thesis cases, sorts by disguise: copy-and-paste, translation, disguised plagiarism, shake-and-paste collections, clause quilts, structural plagiarism, pawn sacrifice, cut-and-slide, and self-plagiarism (Weber-Wulff, 2014). Foltýnek, Meuschke, and Gipp (2019), reviewing 239 detection papers, sort by the linguistic layer that is preserved: character-preserving literal copying, including copies that mention the source; syntax-preserving disguise and synonym substitution; and semantics-preserving translation and paraphrase. Their working definition includes self-plagiarism and plagiarism with the original author's consent, against definitions that require intent and another author (Foltýnek, Meuschke, & Gipp, 2019). Those inclusions are useful for detection. They are exactly the inclusions that stretch the ethical concept. A detector can flag all three. A concept that explains the wrong cannot treat consent, accident, and self-reuse as irrelevant and still claim to be about misrepresentation.

Publication ethics has already made the cut that student codes resist. The Committee on Publication Ethics uses "text recycling" in order to differentiate reuse of an author's own wording from "true" plagiarism, meaning use of another author's words or ideas, and separates both from redundant publication of data (Committee on Publication Ethics, 2016). Roig's Office of Research Integrity module quotes the federal definition of plagiarism as the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without credit (Office of Science and Technology Policy, 1999, as cited in Roig, 2015). The same module treats reuse of one's own prior content as a separate problem, because it misleads the reader about novelty, and names the student counterpart double-dipping: submitting work already graded in another course (Roig, 2015). In the later comment, Roig notes that a review of that federal definition yields no reference to self-plagiarism, and that the Office of Research Integrity has treated many forms of self-plagiarism as violations of journal policy that generally fail to meet its definition of misconduct unless they involve possible falsification of data (Roig, 2017). Andreescu (2013) argues that some of the hostility is an artifact of the label, and of generalizing from the goals of particular disciplines.

Horbach and Halffman (2019) prefer "text recycling" for the same reason Andreescu gives: stealing from oneself is a legal oxymoron. In 922 articles by authors affiliated with Dutch universities, they found problematic recycling in 6.1 percent, and only one case that tended toward plagiarism of another author. The rate was 14.0 percent in economics, 4.7 percent in psychology, 3.3 percent in biochemistry and molecular biology, and 0.5 percent in history. Productive authors recycled more often than less productive authors, 10.1 percent against 2.5 percent. A higher number of authors reduced the likelihood, against the hypothesis they tested. They describe the practice as a way to game the reward system of

science. That description fits a publication system that rewards output. It does not describe a student resubmitting an essay. Moskovitz (2017) argues that citation standards in the health sciences will not mirror those of the humanities, that some recycling sits clearly on the legitimate side even though no definitive line is available, and that editors need information about recycled text that readers do not. The quantity of recycled text is not, on that account, a measure of its acceptability. Roig's comment accepts limited covert reuse at the phrase level where the wording is highly technical and has no suitable substitute, and still requires quotation, attribution, or some other alert to the reader once the recycled passage is longer (Roig, 2017). None of this entails that a student may resubmit an old paper. It entails that the reason for forbidding the resubmission is not the reason for forbidding a copied paragraph.

A Three-Relation Account

The proposal is a partition, not a permission. Three relations are regularly named plagiarism. Only one has the structure of the core. The relations are not mutually exclusive. A submission can breach two of them, and the finding has to say so.

Plagiarism proper

Plagiarism proper is the presentation of another identifiable source's words, ideas, data, images, or code as one's own, by incorporation without adequate signaling, in a setting where the reader is entitled to treat the work as original in the relevant respect. For a published paper, that reader is the later researcher, which is Dougherty's (2018) scholarly record. For a student essay, that reader is the instructor. Signaling is adequate when the reader can see what was taken and can find it. Quotation marks, or an equivalent device, are required for another's wording. A paraphrase must actually leave the source's expression, and must still be cited unless the point is common knowledge in the relevant field. Intent is not required for the description. A near-copy is a near-copy if the writer did not notice. Intent, recklessness, and negligence are required for a just ranking of censure, which is the distinction Oxford's regulations already mark and Bowdoin's page declines.

This category includes Walker's verbatim copying, illicit paraphrasing, and purloining. It includes Weber-Wulff's copy-and-paste, disguised plagiarism, and translation, when the translation is presented as original prose. It includes sham paraphrasing and pawn sacrifice insofar as cited verbatim text is presented as the writer's paraphrase: the citation signals a source and conceals the manner of use. It does not include every failure of citation format. A wrong page number is a documentation error until it functions as concealment.

Source-use failure

Source-use failure is the category Howard and Pecorari made visible. The writer is in a required relation to sources and has not yet managed the relation: patchwriting from incomplete comprehension, a paraphrase that stays too close, a citation that names the author and omits the location, or a structure borrowed without the sentences. The relation to the source is defective. It is not yet, or not thereby, a decision to pass the source off. The overlap with plagiarism proper is the point Jamieson leaves

unsettled. A close paraphrase that conceals the source is both a failure of source use and a misrepresentation. A close paraphrase that cites the source and still stays inside its sentences is source-use failure, and it is plagiarism proper only if the citation conceals the manner of use. Bowdoin's insistence that a footnote does not save mosaic plagiarism decides that second case in advance. The decision should be described as a decision.

Keeping the category does not trivialize it. A degree certifies a kind of literacy. Persistent source-use failure can justify a failed assessment. It justifies a different conversation from the conversation justified by a bought paper, which is Valdes's example of direct plagiarism and Walker's ghostwriting. Contract cheating has no source string to misrepresent. Folding it into direct plagiarism, as Valdes does, is convenient for a penalty schedule and inaccurate as a description.

Assessment recycling

Assessment recycling is the reuse of one's own prior work for credit without the disclosure or permission the assessment requires. Bowdoin's permission rule and Oxford's citation rule are both rules of this kind. They regulate the relation between a submission and an assignment, not the relation between a writer and another author. Bretag and Mahmud's (2009) question—self-plagiarism or appropriate textual reuse—is the publishing version, and the publishing version is not stable across fields. Horbach and Halffman's (2019) variation by field, and Moskovitz's (2017) claim that some recycling is legitimate in the health sciences, are evidence that the acceptable amount depends on genre and disclosure. The student version is easier to govern because the instructor can state the originality condition in advance. An instructor may require new work. The requirement is a condition on credit. It is not a finding that the student has stolen from themselves. The overlap is ordinary. A resubmitted essay that also contains an unacknowledged paragraph from another author breaches assessment recycling and plagiarism proper. The finding has to name both.

Two worked cases

The partition is tested by the case in which there is no copied string. Walker and Townley (2012) describe contract cheating as the contracting out of coursework so that the purchased assignment can be submitted as the student's own, usually through the internet. Drawing on Page, they distinguish pseudepigraphy, the ascription of one author's work to another, from plagiarism as copying. The deception in the first is misattribution. The deception in the second is lack of attribution. Contract cheating, on their account, generates an original piece of work, has a single author, and will not be caught by software that looks for a copied string. They note that institutions will probably keep the plagiarism label anyway, and that not much then hangs on the terminology. The present argument is that the finding does hang on it. They also record the mixed case: work obtained through auction sites sometimes turned out to be copied from a third source. Xu and Li (2023) argue that commercial contract cheating should not be reduced to plagiarism, and should not be neutralized as a legitimate business. The structures differ. Plagiarism, on their account, is the student weaving unacknowledged material into a submission. Contract cheating is a third party producing the work, and a detector that looks for a

copied string misses an authentic commissioned piece. Take the clean case and the mixed case separately. In the first, the purchased essay copies no identifiable source. There is no misrepresented relation to a source, and there is no source-use failure. There is a substitution of authors. Ghostwriting, in Walker's (1998) list, is the same substitution when the writer is known to the student. Oxford's applicant guidance calls collusion "another form of plagiarism" and defines it as the unauthorised collaboration of students or other individuals in a piece of work (University of Oxford, n.d.-b). The named author is not the sole author. That is a failure of authorship attribution. It is not incorporation of a missing source. Reduction to plagiarism is the error Valdes makes. Neutralizing the purchase as a service is the opposite error.

In the second form, the purchased essay copies a published source without acknowledgement. The purchase remains a substitution of authors. The copied passage is plagiarism proper, and it would be plagiarism proper if the student had copied it without a purchase. The two findings are independent. A code that enters one charge has not said whether the essay was bought, copied, or both. The same split is what the vignette study measured. Students and staff ranked a purchased thesis above a fully copied paper, and a fully copied paper above a pasted passage, and the sanctions followed the ranking. For the pasted passage that had been paraphrased, nearly 60 percent of students thought a letter of reprimand or community service was enough (Geweke et al., 2025). A code that records one finding of plagiarism has erased a difference that both the students and the staff already make. The same split applies to generated text. Oxford's rule that unauthorized generated text falls under the plagiarism definition is a rule about what may be submitted for credit (University of Oxford, n.d.-a). Where the generated passage reproduces another author's protected expression, plagiarism proper may also be made out. Where it does not, the breach is the originality condition, or a disclosure condition, not a misrepresented source. That split is the prior to the policy literature. Acuyo Cespedes and Tursunkhanova (2026) report that students treat a generative system as both an aid and a means of plagiarism, and that they find existing policies unclear and inconsistently applied. In their focus groups, 18 of 23 students described the boundary of allowed use as unclear, and 20 of 23 described the enforcement as inconsistent. One student put the boundary as the question of when use will be considered cheating and when it will not. Detection tools compounded the unclarity: the same human-written passage was scored at 80 percent, 50 percent, and 0 percent by different checks. The unclarity is which relation the policy is punishing. A rule that calls every unauthorized generated passage plagiarism has answered a credit question in the language of a source question. Lund, Lee, Mannuru, and Arutla (2025) measured the same split. Of 277 students, 232 rated a generative system writing an entire paper as major misconduct, and 141 rated it writing a paragraph as major misconduct. The difference was significant. Copying another student's sentences was rated with the entire-paper use, at 205. Students already distinguish a source relation from a credit relation. A policy that does not has not described what the students described. Curtis et al. (2026) found that about 90 percent of students recognized unacknowledged verbatim copying from a generative system as plagiarism, that about 14 percent reported doing it, and that nearly all of those students also reported an older form. Their conclusion is that generative copying may not have replaced

the older forms. Recognition is not a definition. Students can recognize a forbidden act and still be using one word for two relations.

What should stay adjacent

Copyright infringement stays adjacent. Tupa (n.d.) is the conception that merges the two, by treating unlicensed images, video, and music as plagiarism and then conceding that legality depends on intent and context. Plagiarism proper survives the expiry of copyright. Copyright infringement can occur in a fully attributed reproduction. Tauginienė et al. (2019) partitioned integrity terms from misconduct terms from neutral terms for this kind of reason. A neutral term such as “reuse” becomes a misconduct term only when a condition is stated. The condition should be named.

What a Code Ought to Print

The objection to the partition is practical. A conduct board needs one charge, and “academic dishonesty” already collects the acts the partition separates. The objection is right about the heading and wrong about the finding. A code can keep one student-facing heading. It cannot keep one finding, because the penalty attaches to what was done, and what was done is not one thing. The code ought to print the heading, and then three findings: plagiarism proper, where another identifiable source was presented as the student’s own; source-use failure, where the relation to sources was defective and the manner of use was not concealed; and assessment recycling, where the submission breached a stated originality condition, including reuse of the student’s own earlier work. Contract cheating, collusion, and unauthorized generation that reproduces no source belong under a fourth finding, substitution or misattribution of authorship, rather than under the first. Copyright belongs in a different rule.

The penalty attaches to the finding, not to the heading. Oxford’s split between a definition that does not require intent and a disciplinary offence that requires intention or recklessness is the model for the first finding (University of Oxford, n.d.-a). Bowdoin’s claim that accidental cases take the same range of consequences is a choice to ignore that split. A board can still impose a severe penalty for a bought essay. It should not impose it under a finding of direct plagiarism unless a source was misrepresented. Valdes’s (2019) process advice—start early, paraphrase without the source in view, keep the citation beside the sentence—is advice against source-use failure. It is not a method for detecting a bought essay. Tupa’s claim that most plagiarism can be avoided by citing sources is true of the omitted-citation case, false of mosaic plagiarism as Bowdoin defines it, and false of recycling. A prevention claim that covers only one relation should say so.

The same requirement binds research that uses the word as a variable. Walker’s continuum and the detection typologies exist because the unmarked word is not a variable. A study that asks students whether they have plagiarized, without specifying sham paraphrase, recycling, ghostwriting, or translation, measures the stretch. Jordan (2013) warned that conceptual stretching undermines causal claims about academic ethics. The four conceptions in Table 1 would not yield the same survey item. That is the finding, and it does not require a fifth conception before it can be used.

Conclusion

Plagiarism proper is the presentation of another identifiable source as one's own, without adequate signaling, where a reader is entitled to treat the work as original. For student work, that reader is the instructor. Source-use failure is a defective relation to sources that may not be deceptive, and that overlaps plagiarism proper when the defect conceals the source. Assessment recycling is a breach of an originality condition on credit, including reuse of one's own earlier work, and it overlaps plagiarism proper when the reused work also misrepresents another source. The four instructional conceptions agree on verbatim copying. They stretch the word across the other relations, and sometimes across copyright and contract cheating, because each stretch lets a desired rule travel under a familiar name.

Taylor (2024) asked what makes plagiarism wrongful and answered by the purpose of academic work. This article asks what the concept covers and answers by the relation that is breached. The answers differ, and the second is prior to the first. A code can keep one heading. The finding has to name the relation, and the penalty has to attach to the finding. Penalties can still be severe. They have to attach to the relation that was breached, not to a single finding of plagiarism.

Declarations

Author Contribution

I am the sole author for this work.Competing interests. The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. Funding. No funds, grants, or other support were received for this work.

References

1. Acuyo Cespedes, A., & Tursunkhanova, E. (2026). Toward more sustainable plagiarism policies in an AI higher education environment: A student-informed case study. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *24*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-025-09718-9. Article 44.
2. Abdelnasser, A., Abouzeid, E., Mostafa, E. M. A., Mahmoud, M. I. H., Wasfy, N. F., & Shehata, S. A. (2026). Bad apples or bad barrels? Undergraduate medical students' attitude towards plagiarism. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *24*., Article 12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-025-09686-0
3. Andreescu, L. (2013). Self-plagiarism in academic publishing: The anatomy of a misnomer. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, *19*(3), 775–797. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-012-9416-1
4. Bowdoin College. (n.d.). The common types of plagiarism. Retrieved May 8 (2026). from https://www.bowdoin.edu/dean-of-students/conduct-review-board/academic-honesty-and-plagiarism/common-types-of-plagiarism.html
5. Bretag, T., & Mahmud, S. (2009). Self-plagiarism or appropriate textual re-use? *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *7*, 193–205. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-009-9092-1

6. Committee on Publication Ethics (2016). Text recycling guidelines for editors. https://publicationethics.org/guidance/endorsed-guidance/text-recycling-guidelines-editors
7. Curtis, G. J., Arness, D. C., Baird, M., Price, C., Thomson, S., Tremayne, K., & White, A. W. (2026). Results from two decades of five-yearly plagiarism surveys: New insights into prevalence, understanding, attitudes, knowing vs naïve plagiarism, and generative artificial intelligence (genAI). *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, *22*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-026-00215-z. Article 7.
8. Dougherty, M. V. (2018). What is academic plagiarism? In Correcting the scholarly record for research integrity: In the aftermath of plagiarism (pp. 59–89). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99435-2_3
9. Fishman, T. (2009). We know it when we see it is not good enough: Toward a standard definition of plagiarism that transcends theft, fraud, and copyright. Paper presented at the 4th Asia Pacific Conference on Educational Integrity, University of Wollongong, Australia. https://ro.uow.edu.au/apcei/09/papers/37/
10. Geweke, J. M., Manzoni, P., Schwarzenegger, C., & Ege, G. (2025). How students assess and sanction hypothetical plagiarism cases: A vignette study approach. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *23*(4), 2693–2718. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-025-09673-5
11. Foltýnek, T., Meuschke, N., & Gipp, B. (2019). Academic plagiarism detection: A systematic literature review. *ACM Computing Surveys*, *52*(6). https://doi.org/10.1145/3345317. Article 112.
12. Horbach, S. P. J. M., & Halffman, W. (2019). The extent and causes of academic text recycling or 'self-plagiarism'. *Research Policy*, *48*(2), 492–502. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.09.004
13. Lund, B. D., Lee, T. H., Mannuru, N. R., & Arutla, N. (2025). AI and academic integrity: Exploring student perceptions and implications for higher education. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *23*(3), 1545–1565. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-025-09613-3
14. Howard, R. M. (1995). Plagiarisms, authorships, and the academic death penalty. *College English*, *57*(7), 788–806. https://doi.org/10.2307/378403
15. Jamieson, S. (2016). Is it plagiarism or patchwriting? Toward a nuanced definition. In T. Bretag (Ed.), Handbook of academic integrity (pp. 503–518). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8_68
16. Jordan, S. R. (2013). Conceptual clarification and the task of improving research on academic ethics. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *11*, 243–256. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-013-9190-y
17. Merriam-Webster (2018, September 12). Words we're watching: 'Patchwriting.' https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/words-were-watching-patchwriting
18. Moskovitz, C. (2017). Text recycling in health sciences research literature: A rhetorical perspective. *Research Integrity and Peer Review*, *2*., Article 1. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-017-0025-z
19. Pecorari, D. (2008). *Academic writing and plagiarism: A linguistic analysis*. Continuum.
20. Pecorari, D., & Petrić, B. (2014). Plagiarism in second-language writing. *Language Teaching*, *47*(3), 269–302. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444814000056

21. Roig, M. (2015). Avoiding plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other questionable writing practices: A guide to ethical writing (rev. ed.). Office of Research Integrity. https://ori.hhs.gov/avoiding-plagiarism-self-plagiarism-and-other-questionable-writing-practices-guide-ethical-writing
22. Roig, M. (2017). Comment on Cary Moskovitz's 'Text recycling in health sciences literature: A rhetorical perspective'. *Research Integrity and Peer Review*, *2*., Article 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-017-0026-y
23. Tauginienė, L., Gaižauskaitė, I., Razi, S., Glendinning, I., Sivasubramaniam, S., Marino, F., Cosentino, M., Anohina-Naumeca, A., & Kravjar, J. (2019). Enhancing the taxonomies relating to academic integrity and misconduct. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *17*(4), 345–361. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-019-09342-4
24. Saunders, J. (2010). Plagiarism and the law. *Learned Publishing*, *23*(4), 279–292. https://doi.org/10.1087/20100402
25. Taylor, J. S. (2024). Reassessing academic plagiarism. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *22*(2), 211–230. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-023-09478-4
26. Tupa, S. (2026). (n.d.). What is plagiarism? Plagiarism.org. Retrieved May 8, from https://www.plagiarism.org/article/what-is-plagiarism
27. University of Oxford. (n.d.-a). Plagiarism. Retrieved May 8 (2026). from https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism
28. University of Oxford. (n.d.-b). Plagiarism. Graduate applicant policies. Retrieved May 9 (2026). from https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/application-guide/applicant-policies/plagiarism
29. Valdes, O. (2019, October 1). What is plagiarism? ThoughtCo. https://www.thoughtco.com/plagiarism-definition-1691631
30. Walker, J. (1998). Student plagiarism in universities: What are we doing about it? *Higher Education Research & Development*, *17*(1), 89–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436980170105
31. Walker, M., & Townley, C. (2012). Contract cheating: A new challenge for academic honesty? *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *10*, 27–44. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-012-9150-y
32. Weber-Wulff, D. (2014). *False feathers: A perspective on academic plagiarism*. Springer.
33. Weber-Wulff, D. (2020). Plagiarism: Definition and detection [Slide presentation]. GRACE. https://www.zrc-sazu.si/sites/default/files/debora_weber-wulff.pdf
34. Xu, Y., & Li, W. (2023). The causes and prevention of commercial contract cheating in the era of digital education: A systematic and critical review. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, *21*(2), 303–321. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-022-09457-1