



Grad Skills Seminar

Academic Plagiarism, Ethics, Reproducibility & Related Topics

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Outline

"What if" Ethics Scenarios

- Plagiarism in Courses / Education
- Plagiarism in Research / Publications
- Data Reporting & Reproducibility
- Software License / Intellectual Property

Formal Policies / References

- ACM/IEEE Ethics for Engineers & Algorithm Transparency
- IRB / FERPA / HIPAA



“What if” Scenario #1

Sally has been swamped with TA work. She didn't have time to do her homework for a required theory class. Note: Her research focus is not theory!

A classmate sent her a website with solutions to all problems from the course textbook. Everyone has the link. She copy-pastes from the solutions, carefully fixing a few errors she finds in the math, and submits the assignment.

What if the syllabus permits referencing online solutions?

The syllabus is a key document outlining the course's rules and expectations. If the syllabus explicitly allows students to reference online solutions, then Sally may not be in violation of any rule. However, most academic syllabi require original work for homework assignments unless otherwise stated.



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What if the syllabus permits peer collaboration or teamwork on the homework?

If the syllabus allows for peer collaboration or teamwork, Sally should still ensure that her submission reflects her understanding and should contribute to the group's work, not just copy from a solution. Ethical collaboration means engaging with peers in the problem-solving process, not just sharing answers.



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What if the assignments are only for studying, and 100% of her grade will be based on test scores?

If homework is not graded and solely for practice, some might argue that using online solutions doesn't directly affect her grade. However, this practice can impact Sally's learning process and her exam preparedness. Additionally, it can create an unfair advantage if others are not using the same resources or if the use of such resources is against the course policies.



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Who does this hurt?

Plagiarism can hurt multiple parties:

- **Sally:** It undermines her own learning and integrity.
- **Classmates:** It sets an unfair academic playing field if they are following the rules.
- **Instructor:** It can misrepresent the effectiveness of their teaching.
- **The Institution:** It can tarnish the institution's reputation for academic excellence and integrity.



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What should you do as a TA if you notice probable plagiarism or academic dishonesty by your students?

- Confirm the suspicion with evidence.
- Follow the institution's academic integrity policy—typically involving reporting the incident to the course instructor or the relevant academic committee.
- Maintain confidentiality and treat the student with respect throughout the process.



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What are the appropriate consequences?

This depends on the course policies, which might include:

- A warning
- A zero on the assignment
- A reduction in course grade
- Enrollment in an academic integrity workshop
- Suspension or expulsion in severe or repeated cases



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Does it matter if it's a first offense or a repeat offense?

Yes, most academic institutions have a tiered approach to academic dishonesty:

- **First Offense:** Often results in a less severe punishment, perhaps a learning opportunity.
- **Repeat Offense:** Typically leads to more serious consequences, possibly affecting the student's academic standing.



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Does it matter if it's an undergraduate student or a graduate student?

The expectations of academic integrity often increase with the level of study.

- **Undergraduate Students:** May be given more guidance and educational resources after a first offense.
- **Graduate Students:** Are expected to understand and uphold high academic standards, so consequences might be more severe even for a first offense.



“What if” Scenario #2

Tony is writing a paper after months of work developing a complex networked parallel simulation. His results are solid -- it's a clear improvement over the work of Smith et al.

However, he's having trouble writing the paper introduction. He's always hated writing.

He re-reads the introduction to Smith et al. and likes how they phrased the problem statement. He pastes a couple of paragraphs from their introduction into his Latex document. He plans to rephrase those sentences before submission.

How many words do you need to change in a sentence in order to make it not plagiarism?

There is no specific number of words that can be changed to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism is not about how many words are changed but about the originality of the content and the proper attribution of the ideas or words borrowed from another source.



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Is it enough to cite the original paper in the bibliography?

Simply including the original paper in the bibliography is insufficient to avoid plagiarism if you have directly copied parts of the text. Any direct quotes or paraphrased ideas must be appropriately cited within the text, not just in the bibliography.



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Is it enough to put a reference [Smith et al. 2015] at the end of the mostly borrowed paragraph?

If most of the paragraph is borrowed, then this is not adequate. You need to clearly indicate which parts are direct quotes by using quotation marks and a citation. If you are paraphrasing, the paraphrase must be in your own words, and the ideas must still be attributed to the original source with a citation.



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Can you put the entire paragraph as a block quote?

Yes, you can use a block quote for longer passages taken directly from a source, but this should be done sparingly and only when necessary to convey the original author's meaning. Even with a block quote, you must provide a citation to attribute the source.



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Is it ok if the original author is one of your advisor's close friends or one of your advisor's former students?

The relationship between your advisor and the original author has no bearing on the ethics of plagiarism. Regardless of the connections, any use of another's work must be properly attributed to avoid plagiarism.



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Is it ok if the original paper is in another language and you translated it?

Translating work from another language does not make it your original work. The ideas and expressions still belong to the original author, and thus, they must be cited just as if they were written in the same language.



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**Do you have to write an introduction?
Can you just put “See [Smith 2015]” and
jump straight to technical stuff?**

While it might be tempting to bypass writing an introduction, academic papers generally require an original introduction that frames the context of your work. Referencing another paper for the entire introduction is unacceptable because it does not represent your contribution to the topic. The introduction is where you set up your argument, establish the significance of your research, and outline the structure of the paper.



“What if” Scenario #3

Justine is writing a review article for her research qualifier. She’s learning state-of-the-art research that will be the foundation for her thesis. And her advisor introduced her to the star researchers in the field at recent conferences. They plan to submit the review article for publication later this year.

She’s hoping to include diagrams and data tables from the original articles. Her fellow grad student says it’s fine to reprint the original material in a review article.

Is it ok if you cite the original author?

Citing the original author is always required when using their work. However, citation alone is insufficient to legally or ethically use someone else's figures or tables. You must also ensure that you have the right to use the material. You will need to get explicit permission in writing.



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Is it ok if you have permission from the author to reuse their figures/tables?

Having the author's permission can be helpful, but often, the rights to the figures or tables are owned by the publisher, not the author. Therefore, permission from the publisher is usually necessary.



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Is it ok to redraw/recreate the figure? Or run your own simulation to produce and plot a similar dataset?

- **Redrawing/Recreating the Figure:** Redrawing a figure may be acceptable if the redrawn figure is significantly different from the original and the source is cited.
- **Running Your Own Simulation:** This is usually the best approach if feasible because it means you generate original content. If you can produce a similar dataset through your own research, then the data and resulting figure or table would be your own work, which you can use freely.



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Should you trust your officemate or advisor who says it’s “fine”?

While respecting and listening to colleagues and advisors is important, verifying their advice is also important. Guidelines for material reuse can be complex and vary between publishers and academic fields. What might be “fine” in one context might not be in another. Always check the publisher’s policies on material reuse and seek explicit permission when in doubt.

You must be responsible for your own academic ethics and decisions.



“What if” Scenario #4

Felix is presenting the selected paper at his research group’s reading seminar next week. It’s on a topic just outside his current research, but someone suggested it might be a direction he should explore and consider for his future work.

He’s found the slides online from the original author’s conference presentation. Can he use those slides for his presentation to the group?

Does it matter if he does or does not modify the slides?

It’s generally okay and encouraged to reuse academic material for educational purposes. Researchers put materials online to disseminate their work! However, Felix must be clear that this work is not his own to the group, and he must still give full credit to the original author.



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Does it matter if the seminar materials are archived on a private Dropbox for students who miss the meeting?

If all the participants are clear about the intended use, this should be okay.

However, please note that even if the materials are stored in a private space like Dropbox, Felix must still respect the intellectual property rights of the original author. The private nature of the Dropbox does not waive the requirement for permission or proper citation. Archiving the materials without proper authorization could be seen as creating an unauthorized copy, even if access is restricted.



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What if the seminar materials are published on a public website on a university server?

This increases the visibility and potential impact of any copyright infringement or misattribution.

Publishing the materials on a public website without permission is a clear violation of copyright laws and academic standards unless the material is explicitly licensed for public use or such use falls under fair use criteria, which is often not straightforward to determine.



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Should he contact the authors for permission?

Generally not necessary for classroom or private seminar use. Make sure you cite the author and publication/source of the materials.

If you’re presenting as part of a conference tutorial or other public forum, please do ask for author permission.



Contacting Authors

- Contacting the authors is not only about **legal compliance** but also about **professional courtesy**.
- Requesting permission is a good practice and may also provide an opportunity for you to engage with the authors and **establish a collaborative relationship**.
- It's worth noting that many researchers are happy to share their slides for educational purposes, especially if they are **properly attributed**.



What about Fair Use?

The use of copyrighted material for purposes such as:

- Criticism
- Comment
- Scholarship
- Research

Still, this is context-dependent and often requires legal advice.



Creating Your Own Slides

- This is often the best option if permission is not granted!
- You can summarize the paper and create your own presentation based on your understanding, which is usually a good exercise in grasping the material.
- You would still cite the original paper and any figures or direct quotes.



“What if” Scenario #5

Bernadette has written a half dozen conference/journal papers with her advisor and a couple other grad students. She's first author on most of the papers and can claim one or more technical contributions from each of the papers.

She's ready to write and defend her PhD thesis. Her advisor has approved her thesis outline -- four key chapters of contributions that will draw heavily from these papers.

Can she start writing by copy-pasting from the Latex source of these papers into these thesis chapters?

What if Bernadette wrote the first draft, her advisor gave limited edits/feedback, and Bernadette did the revisions?

Yes, this is ok.



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Can she start writing by copy-pasting from the Latex source of these papers into these thesis chapters?

What if it was a group effort where everyone contributed paragraphs that were shuffled and edited to fit into the page limit?

What if no one remembers who wrote any specific sentence?

Should rewrite



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Can she start writing by copy-pasting from the Latex source of these papers into these thesis chapters?

What if Bernadette wasn't involved in writing one of these papers, but her algorithm was used (and saved the day), so she was thanked with a co-author spot?

Should definitely rewrite



“What if” Scenario #6

Chris is frustrated with his research, but is pressured by his advisor to prepare a paper for an upcoming conference. He’s run his simulation against the standard set of 10 benchmarks.

One benchmark does not compile (he doesn’t have time to debug it right now). Another benchmark runs 2X slower under his system. But the remaining benchmarks show a 5-10% performance improvement with his system. However, he later finds a bug in his implementation that will negatively impact a few of his results. And unfortunately, he still uses a hard-coded mystery constant in the code he cannot explain.

How should he write up his results?

How should you handle missing data? (e.g., did not compile).

Is it ok to make an educated guess for the value?

No, this is data fabrication!



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How should he write up his results?

How should you handle erroneous data? (e.g., flaw in testing environment)

Is it ok to publish the collected data without documentation of the collection flaws?

No, this is data falsification!



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How should he write up his results?

**How should you handle bad data?
(e.g., outliers that don’t support
your hypothesis)**

Is it ok to simply omit them?

No, this is data falsification!



Responsible Research Reporting

From ACM Conference Review Forms:

- “Can the work be reproduced from the information in the paper?”
- Are all important algorithmic or system details discussed adequately?
- Are the limitations and drawbacks of the work clear?”



“What if” Scenario #7

Keith just returned from a machine learning summer internship at Softbookzon. He's motivated to finish his degree, get a respectable salary, and use his skills to make positive contributions to both industry and society!

Over the summer he wrote software to target ads to users based on private and proprietary data. He sometimes worked on his personal laptop (no one explicitly said he couldn't) and he never deleted the data.

That data would be helpful right now as he develops a machine learning algorithm for his research (unrelated to Softbookzon or advertising). Can he use this data?

What if he only uses the data for development and debugging?

No, this is not okay!



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That data would be helpful right now as he develops a machine learning algorithm for his research (unrelated to Softbookzon or advertising). Can he use this data?

What if he only publishes performance scaling results based on the data? Of course, he'd never publish any details of the dataset!

No, this is not okay!



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That data would be helpful right now as he develops a machine learning algorithm for his research (unrelated to Softbookzon or advertising). Can he use this data?

What if the data includes personal medical records?

What if the data includes educational records?

What if the data includes financial information?

NO! This is NOT OK! See HIPPA! And FERPA!



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What if he puts his manager as a co-author on the paper?

No, this is not relevant or ok!



Use of Private Data in Research

You should **always** get approval before collecting or using private user data in your research.

See RPI's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for application information.



“What if” Scenario #8

Allison is polishing her resume by getting a masters in computer science before she and her roommate (an MBA) plan to launch a software-hardware hybrid security startup. Allison will be the tech lead for the project, initially writing code, but eventually transitioning that work to a team of new developers they plan to hire.

If Allison studies the source code from the Linux kernel in one of her classes, will this cause any problems?

What if Allison’s research group attends a presentation by a company working on a related topic and the company asks all attendees to sign a non-disclosure agreement?

- **What is open-source vs. copyright vs. copyleft?**
- **Can a closed-source software product produced and sold by a for-profit company include, use, distribute, and/or be based on open-source software?**

There are many different open-source licenses.



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What if Allison’s research group attends a presentation by a company working on a related topic and the company asks all attendees to sign a non-disclosure agreement?

- **Is a developer tainted if they have done similar work at another private company?**
- **What’s a non-compete clause?**
 - **seen similar source code in open-source or proprietary software?**
 - **signed a non-disclosure agreement in order to attend a company presentation?**

Always fully read paperwork before signing. Consult a lawyer.



Formal Policies / References



What data has privacy concerns?

Covered by federal laws:

- Academic records
- Health records

Covered by institutional policies:

- Corporate secrets
- Personal finances
- Personal location



The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>

- Students/parents can inspect & review educational records
- Students/parents can request a correction to their record
- Schools may disclose, without consent, "directory" information
 - @RPI: name, address, photographs, phone #, e-mail, date/location of birth, major field of study, academic load, participation in officially recognized activities and sports, weight and height of members of athletic teams, dates of attendance, degrees, honors and awards received, class year in school, and most recent previous educational institution attended
- *However, schools must allow students/parents to opt out of directory information disclosure*
- Students/parents must be regularly informed about their rights



Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)

<https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/index.html>

Long Title: "An Act To amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to improve portability and continuity of health insurance coverage in the group and individual markets, to combat waste, fraud, and abuse in health insurance and health care delivery, to promote the use of medical savings accounts, to improve access to long-term care services and coverage, to simplify the administration of health insurance, and for other purposes."

- Unintended negative outcomes
 - Reduced retrospective chart-based research (responses dropped from 96% to 34% in one study on heart-attack follow-up surveys)
 - Legalistic details on privacy preservation techniques have made informed consent forms even longer and less user-friendly
 - Stiff penalties for violations lead doctors to withhold information (even sometimes from people who have the rights to see it!)
 - Expensive to implement
 - Requires training healthcare providers



Institutional Review Board (IRB)

<https://research.rpi.edu/compliance/irb>

- All institutions conducting human subjects research are mandated to have an IRB
 - Researcher training
 - Research plan review & tracking
- Privacy, Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Informed Consent
- Reduce risk (physical/mental/privacy) to the participants engaged in research



National Science Foundation (NSF) Reviewer Conflict of Interest (COI)

<https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/forms/nsf1230p.pdf>

- Family (spouse, child, sibling, parent)
- Business or Professional partnership
- Thesis advisor or thesis student (forever)
- Collaboration on book/paper/report in the last 48 months
- Co-editor of a journal in the last 24 months
- Close personal friendship

Similar rules for conference/journal reviewing



Other Relevant Professional Organizations

- ACM/IEEE Code of Ethics for Software Engineering
 - <https://ethics.acm.org/code-of-ethics/software-engineering-code/>
- ACM Statement on Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability
 - https://www.acm.org/binaries/content/assets/public-policy/2017_joint_statement_algorithms.pdf
- Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics
 - <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
- Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence
 - <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/30/fact-sheet-president-biden-issues-executive-order-on-safe-secure-and-trustworthy-artificial-intelligence>



Accessibility

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute is committed to providing access to our educational programs and services for those with disabilities. This includes physical access and access to Rensselaer websites and electronic information.

- <https://studenthealth.rpi.edu/disabilityservices>
- <https://info.rpi.edu/statement-of-accessibility>

This includes website accessibility!



Inclusivity in the Classroom

Inclusivity in Academia

Inclusivity in the Workplace

- Different and diverse learning/working side-by-side
- Value different and unique contributions
- Everyone can feel safe and have a sense of belonging
- Separate is not equal
- Inclusive curriculum – themes, and contributions from or relevant to marginalized groups

<https://info.rpi.edu/diversity>



Any Questions?

Please feel free to:

- Email me at senevo@rpi.edu

