

# Web site helps educators detect student plagiarism

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WESLEY CHAPEL — Paula Berry grades a lot of English papers, and she likes to think she can recognize ripped-off writing when she sees it.

But there's a big difference between *thinking* something has been plagiarized and *knowing* it. At times, the Wiregrass Ranch High teacher said, "I felt like I was losing the battle in terms of being certain that students were accountable for their own work."

This year, she has an Internet ally. After months of research, she persuaded her principal, Ray Bonti, to allow her to require all papers be submitted electronically through [turnitin.com](#), a plagiarism-detecting Web site for educators.

So impressed was Bonti with the idea that he decided to have all teachers at Wiregrass Ranch use the site to review all student writing assignments. Although several Pasco County high schools have used the system to a small degree — often to check the originality of senior projects — this marks the first time a district school has adopted it for all its students.

Teachers greeted the news with enthusiasm, cheering as Berry introduced the idea during a back-to-school workshop last month.

"As part of math courses that I teach, I do writing assignments," said geometry teacher Linda Sherwood, who has used the program sporadically in the past. "I'm not specifically trained in how to look for plagiarism. ... This gives me ideas of what to look for. I love it as a writing tool."

Universities increasingly are using [turnitin.com](#) or similar programs, making it even more valuable for high school students to understand early, Berry said.

Count the University of South Florida among them.

Although professors are not required to use it, USF has many classes where students must submit their papers through Safe Assignment anti-plagiarism software.

"We want to grade for content. We want to grade for writing ability. We want to grade for critical thinking skills," said Glen Besterfield, USF associate dean for undergraduate studies. Using a program that identifies copied prose and pinpoints where it came from, he said, "makes it easier for the professors, so they can really grade an essay."

Some academics, however, question the value of these programs.

Teresa Fishman, director of the Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University, suggested that mandating the use of [turnitin.com](#) or other such programs for all students sets the wrong tone.

"There is no reason to suspect that the students have cheated yet," Fishman said. "To set that environment up where there is a presumption of guilt sets up an unhappy situation in the classroom."

She proposed that plagiarism detecting software should be used to investigate suspected cases of cheating only.

Besides, she added, many students often learn to get around the system as they see what the sites detect as plagiarism. That's not the right solution, she said.

Rather, schools should be teaching students how to use other writings properly, Fishman said.

Rebecca Moore Howard, associate professor of writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University, agreed.

"The kind of things that (the programs) look for is not the thing that teachers should be worried about," Howard said. "Student issues

in learning how to write responsibly are a lot more complicated than looking for whole-text plagiarism."

Teachers should help students to comprehend texts, evaluate them critically, synthesize concepts and meld them into arguments they can use themselves, she said.

"If students and teachers are fetishizing copying of strings of words, they're not paying attention to the more complicated issues," Howard said. "For everybody to be obsessed with correct citation and full citation can turn us into cops and robbers instead of mentors and students."

Some students at Wiregrass Ranch had such worries.

Senior Serena Pawlus, for one, doesn't mind the idea turning in papers online. In many ways, she said, that makes her work easier.

But "if you do it (plagiarize) by accident you will still get a punishment, and it's not fair," Serena said. "That's the only reason I wouldn't want my paper to go through it."

Freshman Alex Brown said, he too, found the prospect of being accused of cheating "scary."

"I don't think I would copy," Alex said.

Berry stressed that teacher discretion is key in the implementation. Teachers need to learn to use the information that turnitin.com provides and use it as a teaching tool, not an end in itself, in order to create the best learning environment.

The point is not to catch someone cheating and punish him for it, she said. It's to show the students how to properly use material, just as the academics stated, giving students the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and fix them.

Once students and teachers become accustomed to the process, Berry predicted, it won't seem intrusive or unfair at all. She said that was her experience when the entire district where she taught in southern California used it.

"There was never a sense of not trusting," she said.

Wiregrass Ranch freshman Rebecca Baker figured the program offered quite a bit of good.

It makes it more convenient to turn in papers, avoiding losing a printout altogether, she said. Plus, she added, it will force students to take responsibility for their writing.

"Kids will have to actually do the work instead of just taking it," Baker said.

And that outcome, Berry said, is critical: "We really want to make sure we're holding them accountable."

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