Patchwriting

Patchwriting became a commonly used term in plagiarism scholarship with the publications of Rebecca Moore Howard in the mid-to-late 1990s, notably her article "Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty" (*College English* 57.7 [Nov. 1995]: 788-806) and her book, *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarisms, Authors, Collaboration* (Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing, 1999). Howard defines patchwriting as "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes" ("Plagiarisms" 233). In her book *Academic Writing and Plagiarism: A Linguistic Analysis* (NY: Continuum, 2008), Diane Pecorari defines patchwriting as "a type of plagiarism which is characterized by the lack of deceptive intent [where] the language from one or more source texts is not only adopted, but also woven into the student's text, mixed with parts that have been written more autonomously" (4-5).

Form of Patchwriting

Although the question of intent is still debatable, most who study patchwriting agree about its form. Clearly, patchwriting is a form of paraphrasing plagiarism. Here is an example of plagiarism that is NOT patchwriting:

Source passage. (This passage and the following patchwriting come from Miguel Roig's Plagiarism Knowledge Survey.)

> Since subjective and objective tests of imagery ability have not resulted in predicted performance differences, the only way to determine if a person thinks visually or nonvisually is to ask that question directly. . . . One important finding is that many nonvisual thinkers have rather vivid imagery, but they can state with confidence that they do not think in pictures.

Plagiarized passage, taken from the original
NOTE: I have bold-printed and italicized exact language shared by the original and this plagiarized passage.

> According to one researcher, ***subjective and objective tests of imagery ability have not resulted in differences in performance*** and therefore, ***the only way to determine if a person thinks visually or nonvisually is to ask that question directly. One important finding is that many nonvisual thinkers*** who ***state with confidence that they do not think in pictures*** nevertheless experience ***rather vivid imagery.***

There is little weaving of source language and original language from the writer. In fact, the writer has added little to the new passage, other than a few words and a bit of moving phrases around.

On the other hand, here are examples of acceptable and unacceptable paraphrasing of a source passage. In both cases, I have **_bold-printed_** and italicized exact language shared by the texts and <u>underlined</u> words that have been only changed slightly or simply replaced by words meaning the same thing.

Source passage from Atkinson, M. (2002). Fifty million viewers can't be wrong: Professional wrestling, sports-entertainment, and mimesis. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 9 (1), 47-66.

> "Where mainstream sports typically refrain from displaying unapologetically violent acts, professional wrestling dives in head first. A large portion of wrestling's cultural appeal is generated by the psychological arousal/excitement provided by witnessing highly aggressive and violent forms of physical interaction in this sphere. Wrestling takes that which is pushed behind the scenes of social life and places it in the center ring" (Atkinson, 2002, pp. 62-63).

Acceptable Paraphrase:

> Most **_sports_** do not encourage <u>blatant</u> **_acts of violence_** while **_professional wrestling_** embraces the same behaviour. Wrestling **_appeals_** to audiences because people enjoy <u>watching</u> **_aggressive and violent acts_** in the ring. What is normally not condoned in **_social_** life is made acceptable in wrestling (Atkinson, 2002, pp. 62-63).

Unacceptable Patchwriting:

> **_Mainstream sports refrain from_** <u>showing</u> <u>unremorseful</u> **_violent acts_** while **_professional wrestling unapologetically_** revels in the same type of **_violence. A large_** <u>part</u> **_of wrestling's appeal is generated by the_** *very* **_aggressive and violent interaction in this_** sport. While such violence is usually **_behind the scenes of social life_**, it is the **_centre_** of wrestling's existence. (Atkinson, 2002, pp. 62-63)

We can see differences that distinguish the above acceptable paraphrase and the unacceptable patchwriting:

- Most of the shared language used in the acceptable paraphrase is isolated vocabulary. Sentence structures generally differ from the original. Not so with the patchwriting, where the sentence structures are much the same.

- Most of the shared vocabulary in the acceptable paraphrase includes words that are commonly used. One could argue that the phrasing "aggressive and violent" ought have quotation marks around them. On the other hand, the amount of shared vocabulary and of grammatical structures used in the patchwriting is considerably more than in the

paraphrase. The patchwriting shifts words and phrases around but does little to actually provide new language.

It is important to note that patchwriting does not require the use of exact wording. Consider the case of patchwriting below. (Once again, the source passage and the patchwritiing come from Miguel Roig's Plagiarism Knowledge Survey.)

Source passage

> Since subjective and objective tests of imagery ability have not resulted in predicted performance differences, the only way to determine if a person thinks visually or nonvisually is to ask that question directly. . . . One important finding is that many nonvisual thinkers have rather vivid imagery, but they can state with confidence that they do not think in pictures.

Unacceptable patchwriting

> Research has shown that <u>instruments designed to measure</u> whether a person is a <u>visual or nonvisual thinker</u> have not proven to be reliable in <u>predicting</u> ***differences*** in ***performance.*** Thus, *the only technique **to** make this determination **is to ask** the individual **directly.** An interesting **finding** has been the fact **that** even those who <u>confidently</u> claim they are <u>not visual</u> **thinkers** will **think in vivid imagery.**

Notice that, while the patchwriter has attempted to weave the shared language in different ways than that in the source passage, he or she has only changed some parts of speech and provided synonyms for other words. The structure of the passage remains the same.

Formative Functions of Patchwriting

Both Howard and Pecorari come to a very provocative conclusion about patchwriting. Pecorari writes, "Patchwriting, according to Howard, is virtually inevitable as writers learn to produce texts within a new discourse community, and is a beneficial part of the learning process . . ." (5). The implication here is that, in fact, patchwriting can function formatively. Here are at least some of those formative functions:

1. As a form of paraphrase, no matter how inadequate, to help the writer better understand the source passage;

2. As a drafting strategy (what Pecorari calls the "I'll Change It Later" strategy) to help the writer avoid perceived risks in paraphrasing, such as excessive quotation, distortion of the meaning of the source, and inferior expression in comparison with the source;

3. As a way of learning the vocabulary, phrasing, sentence structure, level of formality, and other conventions of a target discourse community;

4. And thus, as a stage in writerly development, in the transition from community outsider to community insider.

Patchwriting and Intent

Listing those formative functions above begs the question of intent, for several of those functions appear to involve conscious, intentional patchwriting. And Pecorari found in her interviews with non-native English-speaking students that they often did recognize that patchwriting in the abstract was unacceptable in their academic writing, but they either misunderstood what constituted patchwriting and plagiarism more generally (something that even native English speakers often misunderstand) or they simply did not have the language skills to avoid patchwriting when trying to paraphrase.

- Erden worked from a rule that copying one sentence is okay.

- Ingrid had absorbed a different fallacious rule: that writers don't need to cite source material if it is background information, because she believed all background information was considered common knowledge.

- Graciela had learned somewhere that when paraphrasing, you need to retain key words and keep them in order. That way, you would not accidentally change the meaning of the source.

Each of these students clearly intended at some level of conscious awareness to patchwrite, even if they did not believe what they were writing was patchwriting. They did not intend to cheat; they simply viewed the patchwriting they were producing as run-governed composition strategies.

Addressing Patchwriting Pedagogically

Pecorari offers the following teaching strategies both for helping students learn not to plagiarize:

1. Assign students to read and respond to each other's texts, focusing on source uses;

2. Make sure to respond yourself, letting students know how you formulate the assumptions they seem to be making that are leading to the way they are paraphrasing or patchwriting;

3. Teach citation;

4. Provide students with lots of opportunities to practice synthesizing, summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, and citing sources in a safe environment where their writing is assessed formatively, so that they are not punished for patchwriting;

5. Make assignments that don't lend themselves to plagiarizing;

6. Make assignments where students' source use will be plainly visible, such as assigning them writing that draws "on a narrow range of sources" (p. 145); and

7. "[A]sk students to provide their sources, or at least some of them, and either hand them in together with a writing assignment or bring them to a writing conference" (p. 145).

Given the potentially formative functions of patchwriting, I developed an assignment that encouraged patchwriting—and then, reflection on and discussion of patchwriting, as well as the writing skills of note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, and source integration with citation.

1. Provide notes on multiple sources on the same subject matter, which students will be assigned to write on.

2. Assign students to role-play a writer taking over a writing task from another writer—thus, requiring her to read and understand the notes and to synthesize the source material found in the notes.

   An example of such assignment would be having students write the text for a pamphlet to accompany a natural history museum exhibit on the disappearance of the dinosaurs. (It is worth noting that, in addition to highlighting patchwriting, this assignment also begs the question of whether or not such writing promotes institutionalized plagiarism—that is, plagiarism that is, in fact, acceptable.)

3. After students have submitted their texts, provide them with a definition and examples of patchwriting and have them write a one-paragraph reflection on whether what they produced for this assignment was patchwriting and, if so, whether they ought to go back and revise it so as to purge the patchwriting—and how that might be done.

4. Finally, assign students to discuss their reflections in small groups and then, in a full-classroom discussion.