

Plagiarism in a Mash-up Culture

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies reworks one of the most familiar opening lines in literature: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains” (Austen and Grahame-Smith 1). Released last year, the *New York Times* bestseller combines Jane Austen’s original text with flesh-eating zombies created by Seth Grahame-Smith to put a fresh spin on the story. This novel is just one of the recent re-imaginings of Jane Austen. Others include *Sense and Sensibility and Sea-Monsters* by Jane Austen and Ben H. Winters (2009); *Mansfield Park and Mummies* by Jane Austen and Vera Nazarian (2009); and *Emma and the Werewolves* by Jane Austen and Adam Rann (2009).

This revision of Jane Austen indicates we are living in what has been termed a “mash-up” culture. Early on, mash-up was used to describe musical remixes—the art of blending two or more songs to create an entirely new composition. The term and the practice of mash-up expanded to include video, web design, art, and written word, and a new culture of appropriation was born. However, is a mash-up creative recycling or is it plagiarism?

Many of our students grew up in the mash-up culture and are very familiar with creative recycling. They use Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube (to name a few) to express themselves, and these sites all encourage a cut-and-paste mentality. If they like a video, they re-post it. If they like an image, they borrow it. If they like a particular song, they upload it to their personal website. If they like what someone says, they repeat it as a way to establish their own identities. This creates an attitude of “if they find it, it belongs to them.”

For educators, this mash-up attitude poses a new challenge we faculty need to address. We often assume that our students understand what plagiarism is and know how to avoid it. We believe our students are already aware they need to provide a citation for each source they use, and if they borrow an idea from the Internet or cut and paste a line or two, they must acknowledge that source. Thus, when we find student work that is a mash-up of various sources without proper citations, we immediately accuse them of plagiarism. What we may fail to realize, however, is that—for our students—the line is blurry between building it and writing it. For some of our students, plagiarism may be unintentional, and we must clarify for them what constitutes valid scholarship.

To make clear to our students that plagiarism is not tolerated, all professors need to be more focused in their approach to the problem—particularly in a mash-up culture:

- Make certain to include a plagiarism policy on your syllabus and explain exactly what that means. Don’t assume your students will understand: clarify that any time they borrow an idea or statement from anyone else, they need to provide a citation.

- Inform your students that citations are important across disciplines. Clarify for your students how to appropriately document sources in your discipline; tell them what you expect in your class.
- Encourage your students to keep track of all their sources and to seek help if they are in doubt whether they need to provide a citation or not. Tell them that if they are unsure, it is better to provide a citation than risk plagiarism.

And as discussed in a previous *Ethical Professor* “Tools for Combating Plagiarism/ Cheating,” you may want to present this information to your students:

- Remind your students of the Santa Monica College Student Conduct Code they agreed to when they attend SMC. The SMC Honor Council website at [http://www.smc.edu/apps/comm.asp?\\$1=156](http://www.smc.edu/apps/comm.asp?$1=156) provides valuable information.
- Share with your students these sources that explain plagiarism (compiled by Brenda Antrim, Faculty Librarian)
 - The Online Writing Lab at Purdue University
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/2/>
 - Indiana University's plagiarism site
<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>
 - Cal State San Marcos' Plagiarism Prevention for Students
<http://library.csusm.edu/plagiarism/index.html>,

By the way, the prequel to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* has a release date of March 30, 2010. Called *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, it details how Elizabeth Bennet becomes a zombie hunter.

Work Cited:

Austen, Jane, and Seth Grahame-Smith. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009.