Design out plagiarism

When setting individual assignments
- Avoid well-trodden ground
- Encourage a personal focus
- Give it a topical angle

When setting group assignments
- Reward individual effort
- Encourage peer-marking
- Monitor group milestones

When writing learning outcomes
- Focus on skills not information
- Necessitate classroom involvement
How to... “design out” plagiarism

When setting individual assignments
Avoid subjects for which “ready-made” information is easily available. Whenever possible require students to approach the subject from a personal angle, using evidence or data from their own situation or experience, so although their essay covers the important and well-trodden ground, it also has a unique element to it. Alternatively you can achieve the same aim by introducing a local, topical or controversial dimension to the assignment.

The same principle applies even if you want students to set their own topic or title: make sure that at least an element of the assignment is narrow and personal in focus, thereby avoiding the potential for a student to use ready-made information such as a pre-written essay.

When setting group assignments
Ensure that marks are allocated so that individual contribution is recognised. You can have marks for both group outcomes and individual outcomes – and give them weight in accordance with whichever is more important to the task – but reduce the desirability of copying work by rewarding individual effort. Additionally, introduce an element of peer-assessment to ensure that work within the group is varied, whilst improving feedback and understanding.

Make sure that progress is monitored. This doesn’t need to be assessed or even closely monitored. Requiring students to keep a record that you can quickly check – whether through a log book or a video diary – should be enough to encourage groups or project teams to take a more staged, professional approach.

When writing learning outcomes
Avoid writing learning outcomes that are information-based and could as easily be learnt independently of the classroom via textbooks or searching the web. Focus instead on outcomes that relate to skills, values and processes, so that the emphasis is on learning in an active way, making full use of teachers and peers.


Tip: Shortly after the submission deadline, ask students to write a summary of their assignment in class to be submitted for consideration alongside the actual assignment. Allow 10-15 minutes. Ask them to focus on their “thesis statement” or “big idea”. Make summaries available to the whole class, if appropriate.

Tip: Make sure topics and assignment titles change so that work from previous years can’t be reused.

Tip: Avoid last-minute copying and purchasing by requiring students to submit a draft or a plan.