Strategies for Detecting Plagiarism

1. **FORMATTING** - Strange formatting may indicate material cut and pasted from a web document or a paper from a paper mill.
   - Is the formatting what was required by the assignment?
   - Are there line breaks or page breaks at odd places?
   - Is there a URL or article number at the end of the paper?
   - Are there odd or out of place sentences such as "click here" or "graphic omitted" that might indicate a former incarnation as a web page or online journal article?
   - Are the title page, font, references, format, or layout of the paper inconsistent?
   - Are there grayed out letters or words?

2. **CITATIONS** - Citations can be a big clue to plagiarized work.
   - Are all of the citations old? Online paper mills often include old papers with even older citations.
   - Are the citations consistent with the content? Does the bibliography match the citations or footnotes in the text?
   - Do the citations look "stuck on"?
   - Does the paper lack citations?
   - Are there lengthy, well-written sections without attribution?
   - Are there mixed citation styles?

3. **STYLE** - These style questions might also point to poor or exceptional writing skills, but style can be a good indicator of a plagiarized paper.
   - Is the writing style and level consistent with the student's previous work?
   - Is the level of writing far below or above the writing of others in the class? (This can, of course, indicate an exceptional student. However, it might indicate plagiarizing of a published article, or a high school-level paper from a paper mill.)
   - Are past events referred to in the present tense or as if they are recent?
   - Is the style of the paper (exposition, argument, etc.) what the assignment required?
   - Does the student's paper contain complex or specialized vocabulary, jargon, technical terms, or other words and expressions beyond what would be expected from a student at that level.

4. **CONTENT** - Content can be very revealing. It can be difficult for the plagiarizing student to find a paper that really meets the assignment.
   - Does the paper match the assignment?
   - Did the student ask for a last-minute change of topic? This could be an indication of intention to submit a plagiarized paper.
   - Does the paper seem pieced together? This could indicate that a student is plagiarizing a paper by piecing together multiple, uncited sources.
   - Is the student's relevant information appended to less relevant or overly general content? This could indicate a student's attempt to adapt another person's work to fit the assignment.
   - Are sentences suspiciously long? The average sentence length of a first-year college student is about 15 words.

What you can do if you suspect plagiarism:
- Ask the student to summarize verbally her or his paper for you.
- Search unique phrases from the paper using internet search engines and article databases. Note that web search engines vary and do not index databases, so it is not a conclusive test. Note: some plagiarism checking websites are listed on the Plagiarism 101- Faculty libguide.
- Have the student describe her or his research process.
- Visit any URLs cited as sources.

Sources: