



Best Practices

Preventing Visual Plagiarism



Best Practices in Preventing Visual Plagiarism - A Guide for Ryerson Instructors



Plagiarism is a familiar concept to instructors, however, the material below seeks to clarify details regarding plagiarism as it pertains to students' use of visuals in their assignments and work. This guide clarifies issues regarding students' use of other people's visual properties in both academic and public-facing contexts and provides assistance to instructors in discouraging visual plagiarism and reducing attribution and citation issues in their classes.

Visuals in this context can include:

- Photographs
- Maps
- Screenshots
- Graphs
- Charts
- Tables
- Logos
- Artworks (e.g., paintings, sketches, designs, sculptures, etc.)
- Digital creations (e.g., graphics, illustrations, collages, memes, etc.)
- Videos
- Animations

At Ryerson, the same rules about plagiarism apply for visuals as they do for textual material. Please see "[About Academic Integrity and Misconduct](#)" on the Academic Integrity Office's website for more information.

For questions regarding copyright, reach out to the [Ryerson University Library](#) for support.

Addressing It Preemptively

One way of preventing visual plagiarism is to address the topic preemptively through class discussion and activities.

Review the topic in class from an ethical, legal, and professional standpoint, and the "difference between academic, commercial, and public expectations and regulations," both nationally and internationally (Blythman, Orr, & Mullin). Students should know their responsibilities as professionals as well as their own rights (Academy of Art). Students should know about "professional standards, copyright organizations or national regulatory bodies that mediate disputes about ownership." It should be especially impressed upon them that the university "has even less tolerance for copying since degrees are awarded on the understanding that they are assessing the student's own work and that students are in higher education to develop their own, singular vision" (Blythman, Orr, & Mullin).

Blythman, Orr and Mullin suggest the following checklist of issues to discuss with students:

- The tradition of artistic creation
- What “originality” means in your field
- Ways in which source material can be used in your discipline
- What is regarded as common currency in your field and available to be used without attribution and how that has varied across time and culture
- The difference between copying and interpretive/original vision
- The difference between academic, commercial, and public expectations
- How and when to cite visual references (see below for tools that students can use to develop citations)

These questions can be addressed with discipline-specific activities. Have students work through case studies (see below for examples) in class, ask them to argue from different perspectives or think through implications (Academy of Art). Blythman, Orr, and Mullin provide additional suggestions for discussion activities in photography, interior design, textiles, and fine art.

Academic Statements on Artistic Creation

For each discipline, Blythman, Orr, and Mullin suggest developing a statement on the tradition of artistic creation within that discipline and reviewing this with students.

Sample Statement

The following statement was developed by Colleen Schindler-Lynch and Grahame Lynch, School of Fashion:

Historically, some artists/designers have used copying as an analytical approach to learning. Investigating how an image/artefact was created involves a close reading of which media and methods were used, in which order, and how each was applied. By doing so, you gain material and compositional sensibilities etc. resulting in a technical exercise but not an original work. This practice will recreate the look and feel of something, but it is considered copying.

It is often unavoidable to use another artist/designer’s work as a starting point and it is acceptable to be inspired by their work, but students need to understand that for their work to have been “inspired” by something, there must also be “departure”. They must move forward in significant ways. A golden rule to follow is that a source image/artefact used for initial inspiration should be changed in several (five to eight) significant ways so that the resulting work is identifiably original and different from the source of inspiration.

Students can do this by changing several areas from the list below: [choose appropriate terms for your discipline from the list below, or add any subject specific terminology.]

- | | | |
|---------------|------------------------|------------------|
| • Colour | • Juxtaposition Layout | • Positioning |
| • Composition | • Lighting | • Process |
| • Content | • Materials | • Proportion |
| • Context | • Meaning | • References |
| • Cropping | • Method | • Scale |
| • Fabric | • Motif | • Selection |
| • Feeling | • Pattern | • Setting |
| • Intention | • Placement | • Transformation |

See Blythman, Orr, and Mullin for more examples of statements of artistic creation.

Assignment Design

Good assignment design can help prevent visual plagiarism. For example, by designing assignments that you can track from beginning to end, you can keep an eye out for signs of problematic usage of source materials or copying rather than inspiration. In the words of Blythman, Orr, and Mullin, “if a student must first sketch out an idea, or start with a source and develop an idea from it, or create a mood board, they can be guided away from imitation and copying through questions and suggestion.”

Assignment features that prevent plagiarism include:

- Scaffold the assignment by requiring multiple drafts documenting progress. For example, require that students include pictures (screenshots or photos) of various stages of their visual project, to demonstrate a creative process. This would not be conclusive evidence that something is an original work, but it does make cheating more costly in terms of time and energy as students have to reverse engineer what they are copying (Cody, S.).
- Add a personal reflection component where students discuss the evolution of their ideas and/or a description of the process of creating their image (Academy of Art; Cody, S.)
- Require evidence of research, including citations. Have a librarian come to class and review image searching databases and citation practices.
- Specifically mention in assignment instructions that all third-party images must be properly attributed and cited. Explicitly state in the assignment description the penalty for lack of image citation and attribution

See the end of this document for a sample assignment that requires students to engage in design research and the iterative design process. This assignment was designed by Beatriz Juarez from the School of Fashion and is shared here with her permission.

For further ideas, follow general ideas for preventing plagiarism via assignment design:

- [Academic Integrity Office: Tips for Enhancing Academic Integrity in Assignments, Ryerson University](#)
- [Designing Activities and Assignments to Discourage Plagiarism, University of Wisconsin-Madison](#)

Case Studies

Encourage discussion of visual plagiarism and artistic integrity through the use of case studies. Some examples of visual plagiarism for use in case studies can be found here:

- [Visual Plagiarism: When Does Inspiration Become Imitation?](#), EPUK (photography)
- [Design Plagiarism: Myth or Reality](#), SND (journalism)
- [Romanian People Noticed That Dior Copied Their Traditional Clothing And Decided To Fight Back](#), Bored Panda (fashion)
- [Crimes of Fashion: Intellectual Property and Indigenous Dress](#), University of Illinois (fashion)
- [Obey Plagiarist Shepard Fairey: A Critique](#), Mark Vallen (graphic design, art)
- [Art Plagiarism: Intro to Commercial Art](#) (graphic design, art)

Citing Images

Just as students are expected and required to attribute and cite the source of quotations and ideas they use from others in their written assignments, so too must students properly attribute and cite any visuals they use in their academic work if they were not created by the student. Students must understand that visuals must be cited even if they are clipart, stock photography, royalty-free, open media, or available under a Creative Commons license.

Type of student work where visuals must be cited include:

- Essays
- Reports
- Presentations (i.e. slide decks)
- Digital media (e.g., blogs, websites, social media posts, apps)

Students don't often realize that they are required to properly attribute all the creators of the visual, which is not necessarily the source from where the student found the image. For example, citing Google for an image found in their image search engine is not sufficient. Also, it is not uncommon for social media posts for visuals to be shared by people even though they are not the original creator of the visual work. A reverse image search engine can help track down the creators (see below for link).

Academic styles vary in how and where to cite images, so students should be directed to consult their department's academic style guide, librarian, or their instructor. If there are particular types of visuals that come up often in your assignments, consider providing specific resources to students to assist them, for example showing them how to cite a Google Map in APA using "[How to Cite Online Maps](#)" on the APA Style blog.

Instructors are encouraged to model academic integrity by citing any visuals they use in class, such as in presentation slide decks.

Permission to Reuse Images and Copyright

Please be aware that there are different rules and laws that apply for reusing visuals within academic-only contexts (e.g. in-class or for assignments) versus work created or available for the general public. For academic work, reusing images (with proper attribution and citation) may be allowed without the creator's permission under fair use/fair dealing provisions.

If students are creating work that is available for the public to see (such as a website, application, blog, social media post, poster), copyright and trademark laws prevent them from using other people's work without first attaining the explicit permission of all the visual work's creators. Best practice in such situations is to get such permission in writing, such as via a signed permission form.

In instances of public-facing work where students are unable to discern and receive permission to use a visual from all the image creators, they should be advised to not use such images.

If students are creating any public-facing project using other people's images that may be public beyond the duration of the course or from which they may make money, they should be advised to consult a copyright lawyer.

Tools for Students

Ideas for tools that can be provided to assist them in avoiding visual plagiarism include:

- [Guide for Citing Images, University of Manitoba](#)
- [TinEye: Reverse Image Search](#)
- [Online Exif Photo Metadata Viewer](#)
 - [Overview of Metadata Viewer](#)
- [Creative Commons Search](#)
- [Can I use that picture flowchart?](#)
- [The Definition of a Photo Line Credit](#)
 - [Best Practices for Attribution](#)

Software to Detect Visual Plagiarism

This section was developed by Susan Cody, School of Professional Communication:

There are no perfect visual plagiarism detection tools available yet. A student determined to commit visual plagiarism and willing to put in a little bit of work (some editing to make the new image sufficiently different from the original one) will typically get away with it unless the original creator (or somebody else who is familiar with the original image) just happens to see their image being used without permission.

It's useful to distinguish between four degrees of difficulty in detecting visual plagiarism:

1. Finding exact copies of copyrighted images is easiest, as long as the creator submitted them to a database
2. Finding exact copies of non-copyrighted images or copyrighted images not submitted to a database is harder
3. Finding lightly edited, cropped or resized copies of images is harder still
4. Finding copied images to which medium to major edits have been made is difficult to impossible

Currently, prevention may be a more effective way to combat visual plagiarism than detection. Having said that, below are the four best tools for detecting visual plagiarism. All of them are free (some up until a certain number of images per week) and easy to use. If you use them a lot, it's quicker and easier to perform searches if you install their browser extensions.

- [Google Image Search](#): Has the largest database; uses a lot of text elements for its search. Not very good at finding edited, resized, or cropped images. Results also show similar images. The similar images function is hit and miss - it can recognize people and buildings, for example, and use that to find similar images.
- [TinEye](#): Large database; very easy to use interface. Good at finding cropped, edited, and resized images. Does not recognize people or buildings, does not have a 'show similar images' function
- [Image Raider](#): Allows users to search multiple images at the same time. Can be slow.
- [Yandex](#): A newer tool based in Russia. Good at finding cropped, edited, and resized images

If you don't get good results from any of the four tools mentioned above, try [SauceNAO](#).

Glossary of Terms

Depending on your field or the assignment you've designed, you may want to review discipline-specific definitions of some of the following terms with your students.

- Attribution
- Appropriation
- Clip Art
- Collage
- Copyright (what are the rights of copyright holders, what can be copyrighted, what is the difference between a copyright and a trademark)
- Creative Commons and Creative Commons Licences
- Cultural Appropriation
- Derivatives
- Fair Dealing (Canada)
- Fair Use (U.S.)
- Homage
- Image credit
- Imitation
- Infringement
- Inspiration
- Intellectual property
- Interpretation
- Knock-Off
- Mash-Up
- Open Access
- Open Source
- Parody
- Pastiche
- Piracy
- Public Domain
- Remix
- Royalty-free
- Satire
- Stock Photos
- Trademark



Work Cited



Academy of Art University. (2015). Faculty Training: Visual Plagiarism. <http://faculty.academyart.edu/faculty/teaching-topics/tips/visual-plagiarism.html>

Blythman, M., Orr, S., & Mullin, J. Visual Plagiarism. University of the Arts London. <http://induction.arts.ac.uk/plagiarism/visual-plagiarism/index.html>

This issue of Best Practices was developed by the Learning & Teaching Office and the Academic Integrity Office with contributions from faculty members in the Faculty of Communication & Design, 2018.

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ENGAGING IN DESIGN RESEARCH AND ITERATIVE DESIGN PROCESS

Visual Research is what most of us designers do once we start a new project.

There are several reasons why a professional (or a design student) should engage in this process.

- 1) To analyze what the competition is doing and evaluate how other designers approached similar challenges.
- 2) To assess these creative challenges from a practical and creative perspective.
- 3) To create a strategy to improve such processes .

As a design professional you may hear of a colleague who does not want to engage in design research because “they don’t want to be influenced by other designer’s work”. It is easy to fall in this trap by falsely believing that our ideas could get affected by analyzing the work of others. This “influence” comes from not having enough critical thinking skills to judge the work of others and separate it from what makes our project unique. The reality is visual research goes hand in hand with a Creative Design Process as the strongest tools to foster creativity and *avoid plagiarism*.

CASE STUDY

You have been assigned with designing a 4-page magazine article for a special consumer magazine featuring specific fashion trends. The first spread should act as an opening/introductory spread and the next spread will contain most of the information.

As part of your design research, you have looked into many fashion publications, analyzed the different visual languages and assessed how they organize the information presented in their pages.

After some deliberation—and natural inspiration that comes from looking at these great examples—the visual language that seems to fit best your target audience seems to be close to Harper’s Bazaar’s.

Therefore you set 3 examples aside.

1)



2)



3)



Note: Part of your Design Research is to study the work of these image makers: art directors, photographers or illustrators. These research will be used as part of your Design Process too.

This is the part that will require the use of Critical Thinking skills.

It is very important to rationalize and be as clear as possible about your creative intentions.



It is perfectly ok to be inspired by the work of others—that is how many of us learn— however, is not ok to steal and replicate concepts and ideas, specially when we can't put into words what makes this work effective and can't rationalize what attracted us to the work in the first place.

1) Ask yourself what makes these pages unique—but also cohesive—as part of the same title.

-Is it the use of negative space? *Describe how.*

-Is it the way they integrate typography with imagery? *Describe how.*

-Is the way they play with specific contexts? *Describe how.*

-Is it the choice of typography? *Describe why.*

-Is it the way the break the page grid? *Describe how.*

Once you find the what, the how and the why of these pages, the next step is to make a list of tangible attributes about these pages that you think you can use **AS A STARTING POINT** when executing your work. Use 3 to 5 words to describe the work:

bold

playful

strong

minimal

eclectic

2) When starting your Design Process, start here, at the list of attributes and then **DEVELOP YOUR OWN IDEAS**. They should evolve until you find your own answers, until your creative problems are being solved by YOU, *not by copying or replicating ideas*. As you evolve in your experimentation, you will move away from your initial inspiration, you will find your own answers, because every creative problem is different and unique.

In the same way you came up with 5 words to describe the overall feel of the article, do the same with the typography you are using: what do you like about these typefaces? Are they classic, timeless? Maybe they allow you to fit as much information in a page without challenging the reader. Do they help me reflect the personality of the publication?

Once you have analyzed this part, do your own typographic research and assessment. Come up with your own type sets that will solve your specific creative problem (in this case, solving your different levels of typographic hierarchy).

But what happens with the rest of the story?

In the same way, you should assess your client and audience needs and decide if a grid will fit the requirements of the project. Where do you start? By creating your own editorial grid *based on your own criteria and measurements.*

Copying other magazine grids and margins is a recipe for disaster, why? Because their creative and informational needs **ARE NOT THE SAME AS YOURS!**

(Simply put, there are not two exact projects.)



3) Start the same process after creating your own grid. You can certainly use similar grids (after all, many magazines use similar grids of 6, 9 or 12 columns), but you should also engage in an extensive creative exploration allocating your **OWN ASSETS** in these pages (photos, text, captions, page numbers, credits) in **THE WAY IT WORKS FOR YOU** and not in the way it works in your initial source of inspiration. *If these assets were not created by you, please credit them in the right format.*

When you engage in an iterative design process, you are engaging in testing, analyzing, and refining ideas; based on the results of testing and evaluating the most recent iterations of your design, changes and refinements will be required until you meet all the creative needs and requirements of the project.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU ENGAGE IN VISUAL RESEARCH AND DESIGN EXPLORATION?

Besides avoiding any potential plagiarism, your are fostering your creativity and bringing it to a new level; you will be able to assess the demands of your project—from a design and user's point of view.

You will be able to clearly articulate the specific demands of such creative challenges without having to name *unjustified visual references* (which will happen if you just copy something you like).

BECOMING MORE CREATIVE TAKES PRACTICE! But you need to foster healthy creative habits and keep practicing, because the creative process is more important than the final product. This is the stage of solving and reshaping creative challenges and as you evolve in your professional practice, these habits will become essential when time constraints become more and more apparent.

In short...you'll become a great designer.