

Plagiarism: Improving Student Learning in the Built Environment

[Guidance notes on the preparation and presentation of written work - essays, reports and dissertations](#)

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Introduction

Developing student writing skills forms an important aspect of most undergraduate curricula, be this in the form of essays, reports or dissertations. Concerning the latter, the curriculum in architecture at the University of Edinburgh was revised some years ago so as to require students to submit a dissertation in their fourth year of study. The intention was, and remains, to provide students with an opportunity to investigate an architectural topic, in written form, in greater depth than that provided by the conventional student essay or project report.

Experience has revealed that students require guidance in the preparation and presentation of written work, especially in the case of the dissertation. Of particular concern is the need for students to observe the academic and scholarly conventions that are required when making use of the work of others in order, thereby, to avoid the problems of plagiarism.

This case study outlines the guidance provided to students of Architecture at the University of Edinburgh. In particular, it traces the origins of the student booklet ESSAYS, REPORTS AND DISSERTATIONS: Guidance Notes on the preparation and presentation of written work. This booklet forms an integral part of this article and can be accessed for use by the reader from the CEBE website <http://www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk>.

The Use and Acknowledgement of Sources

The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee, the TLA, monitor good practice in pedagogical matters centrally at the University of Edinburgh. Some years ago, the TLA was asked to provide students with guidance on the conventions which are required when use is made in written texts of the work of others. This circumstance came about through the case of a small number of students who were found to be appropriating the work of other writers from books and journals. In essence, they were not making it clear to the reader

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that some of their text was quoted from other sources and, as such, is required to be identified and formally acknowledged. In the majority of these cases, the students were genuinely unaware of the formal conventions to be followed when citing the work of other writers on their subject. This problem is thought to be quite common throughout undergraduate education and is not confined to students of the built environment.

At this period (1980s) the author was convenor of the University of Edinburgh's Essay Writing Group. This was an ad-hoc group of academics who met from time to time to consider good practice in the promotion of student written work. By way of illustration, the group ran a series of introductory lectures for new students, which still continue, concerning such matters as Taking Notes in Lectures, Using Library Resources and Making an Essay Plan. However for final year students working on their dissertation, something more advanced was required with a focus on The Use and Acknowledgement of Sources to address the problems of plagiarism as previously mentioned. As convenor of the Essay Writing Group, the author was invited to write a set of guidance notes on this subject.

The text in question duly appeared (1986) as a University of Edinburgh Library Guide under the title:

DISSERTATION AND REPORT WRITING: Guidance Notes on the Use and Acknowledgement of Sources.

These guidance notes were intended to illustrate as many as possible of the formalities and stylistic conventions which are involved when presenting a finished text that incorporates, or in some way makes reference to, the work of others. The assistance offered to students was compiled under three headings:

- Quotations: Adapting the words of others into your text
- Footnotes: Identifying the sources of quotations and making comments on your text
- Bibliographies: Listing the sources you have consulted

Further details of these texts can be consulted on the CEBE website — see *References*.

The guidance notes had considerable success and were reprinted at intervals and made available to students through the Main Library of the University. The author was also informed by his colleagues that students valued the notes and that they were considered to be of benefit to students with discernible improvement in the quality of their dissertation writing.

The Preparation and Presentation of Written Work

Notwithstanding the success of the guidance notes, it became apparent over the years that students required further assistance with the development of their writing skills. What was required was supplementary guidance concerning the preparation and presentation of written work. Accordingly, the author was invited by the Main Library of the University of Edinburgh to expand the original guidance notes to take account of this perceived need. These revisions were subsequently incorporated (1992) in the form of the following additional sections:

- Preparation and Research: Reading and making notes
- Essay Writing
- Dissertation and Report Writing: Organising material
- Library Resources for Advanced Study

Further details of these texts can also be consulted on the CEBE website, see *References*.

Over the years, the guidance notes in this revised and expanded form have reached a wider group of students and anecdotal evidence indicates they derive benefit from them.

E-Learning

Recent developments, notably the availability of information through Internet sources and websites, have required the guidance notes to be updated. This has been undertaken by the author's colleague Alice Crossland who is Librarian in the Department of Architecture at the University of Edinburgh. Through her efforts, students in architecture are now provided with the following guides to e-learning:

- Information Sources
 - Databases of Journal Articles
 - How to locate Journals
 - Using other Libraries
 - Internet Resources
- Literature Searching
 - Why do a Search?
 - Planning the Search
 - Doing the Search
 - Citations

Further details of these texts are available from the author, see *References*.

Benefits

There is general agreement that the standard of dissertation writing in the Department of Architecture has improved considerably in recent years:

- Students now follow the correct conventions in citing the work of others
- The use of referencing and footnote conventions has improved
- Student work shows greater independence of mind and intellectual rigour

An evaluation strategy is now in place to monitor the outcomes of the dissertation. A panel of tutors and 'second readers' consult all the dissertations submitted each year and scrutinize them for compliance with a stipulated set of criteria. These emphasize that students are required to be intellectually honest and must not attempt to derive unfair advantage by making unacknowledged use of the work of others. More generally, plagiarism is regarded as being a serious offence at the University of Edinburgh as is reflected in the following extract from the University's regulations, a copy of which is given to each student:

The University's degrees and other academic awards are given in recognition of the candidate's personal achievement. Plagiarism (that is the action of copying, without adequate acknowledgement, the work of another in one's own work as if it were one's own) is academically fraudulent and an offence against University discipline.

Plagiarism, at whatever stage of a candidate's course, whether discovered before or after graduation, will be investigated and dealt with by the University. Any failure adequately to acknowledge or properly reference other sources in submitted work could lead to lower marks or a mark of zero being returned or to disciplinary action being taken.

Ongoing Developments

With the ever-increasing use of the Internet, more and more information is now available to students. As the reader will be well aware, it is now possible to download entire texts on a particular subject complete with supporting visual images. Such developments can only be regarded as a good thing. They do however pose a source of temptation, albeit to the less scrupulous student, who has merely to 'cut and paste' such materials to create a ready-made dissertation or project report. The implication is clear. Today's academics must be even more vigilant than their predecessors to ensure their

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students follow the scholarly conventions of their subject and respect the intellectual property of others.

References and Sources for Further Information

1. Russell, Terence M [ESSAYS, REPORTS AND DISSERTATIONS: Guidance notes on the preparation and presentation of written work.](#) Second Edition, Department of Architecture, the University of Edinburgh, 1992. This booklet is available to the reader on the CEBE website at: www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk
2. Crossland, Alice [Information Sources](#), Department of Architecture, The University of Edinburgh, 2004. These Guidance Notes are available to the reader by email from the author
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