Professor Jack and Diane
An Honor Council Trial
Abstract Released Spring 2003
Abstract Discussion Tuesday, May 6, 12:30 and 7:30 PM
Sunken Lounge

Introduction:
Diane was a student in Professor Jack’s class. Professor Jack assigned a paper after outlining research methods, including the Internet, with his students. He noticed upon reading the papers that a paragraph in Diane’s was written in a different style than usual. He typed some of the text of the paragraph into an Internet search engine and found it almost verbatim in an online article. Although the source for the paragraph was cited in the paper, the citation was not adequate and no reference appeared in the bibliography. Professor Jack became concerned about a possible Honor Code violation and met with Diane. Both parties agreed to contact Honor Council. After much debate, Honor Council came to a suspicion of violation.

Professor Jack’s statement:
Professor Jack noticed a discrepancy in style between this paper and Diane’s previous submissions. He did a web search on one passage and found “a close match”—the language was almost identical to Diane’s passage but Diane had not cited the passage. Instead, she had written, “[the author] states that [...]” with no quotation marks around the author’s statement, and had closely paraphrased the quotation Professor Jack had found online. Diane had cited the paragraph but not the passage in question, raising confusion in Professor Jack’s mind as to what was being cited. He contacted Diane to make sure she was not intentionally plagiarizing. Diane assured him that she was not, only that she had been unsure about how to cite sources and had turned in the wrong bibliography (see below).

Diane’s statement:
Diane said that she found the passage on a different website than the one Professor Jack discovered. She had read several different sites, all with the same information. She mentioned that she was not sure how to cite online sources. She cited the source in the body of the paper and wrote two versions of her bibliography: one listing the source and one without it. When submitting the paper, she accidentally submitted the bibliography without the online source citation. She admitted to “carelessness” in submitting the wrong bibliography and assured the jury that she had no intent of passing someone else’s work off as her own.

Jury Questions:
The jury asked questions regarding the nature of the class, Professor Jack’s attitudes on what constitutes plagiarism, and Diane’s paper-writing and research methods. Professor Jack stated that he had not taught this type of class for several years, and that the last time he had, it had not been research-based. He
also admitted that when going over guidelines for writing he neglected to mention his views on plagiarism, including the fact that he considers reproducing the syntax and/or vocabulary of a passage, even if properly cited, is plagiarism. Diane stated that her method of writing papers consists of taking notes from her sources and then writing the paper from the notes without looking at the sources. This was the first time she has ever written a paper of this kind. She was under the impression that close paraphrasing of passages was all right as long as it was properly cited, that facts could be stated without citation, but not opinions, and that quoting passages verbatim with no quotation marks but with an introductory "the author states that..." was acceptable. The jury also inquired as to whether Diane was familiar with the Honor Code's definition of plagiarism. She admitted that she was not.

Jury Deliberations:
After establishing that Diane had had no intent to plagiarize, the jury deliberated on whether her errors in citation and submitting her bibliography constituted a violation nevertheless. As Diane had never written a paper of this nature before, and because Professor Jack had not been clear about his guidelines, the jury reached a statement of no violation, and issued the following suggestions to the parties:

In looking at the papers the jury was concerned about Diane's writing, we felt that she was not intentionally representing someone else's work as her own and that therefore it was not a violation of the spirit of the Honor Code. While, we do think she made mistakes and that there were misrepresentations in the paper, but we do not believe that any of it was intentional. Given [the nature of this class], we hope that Diane can make these mistakes and learn from them so that this sort of thing does not happen in the future.

The jury recommends that Professor Jack outline clearly what he considers plagiarism (including paraphrasing) the next time he teaches this class.

The jury also recommends that Diane discuss with Professor Jack and someone from the Writing Center better ways to paraphrase and cite materials.

Finally, we remind Diane that is the obligation of the student to check with the professor regarding their guidelines and expectations.

Questions:
1. Is it an Honor Code violation to "accidentally" plagiarize, i.e., should citation errors or improper citation be considered plagiarism and/or a violation of the Honor Code?
2. In some fields, especially science, paraphrasing is very difficult; there are only so many ways to adequately express a given idea. How can we establish guidelines that are appropriate across the various departments?