# Why Students Plagiarize—It's Not What You Think

A nonfiction's writer's personality, beliefs, and experiences in the world have a tremendous impact on how they evaluate, assimilate, analyze, and synthesize their research to make personal connections.

Each writer views the facts and ideas they've gathered through their own lens, and that's what allows them to present information in unique and interesting ways. It's the reason that *Death Eaters: Meet Nature's Scavengers* by Kelly Milner Halls is so different from *Rotten! Vultures, Beetles, and Slime: Nature's Decomposers* by Anita Sanchez and *Something Rotten: A Fresh Look at Roadkill* by Heather L. Montgomery even though all three books have some overlapping content.



Currently, most students don't take time to think before they write. They don't "digest" the information they've gathered. And because this critical step isn't part of their prewriting process, they sometimes end up plagiarizing.

You see, plagiarizing isn't merely the result of students being lazy. It occurs because students lack the skills necessary to put the information they've collected through our own personal filters and making their own meaning.

When students are able add a piece of themselves to their drafts, they can move beyond writing dry, encyclopedic survey pieces that mimic their sources and begin crafting rich, distinctive prose. To help them do this, re-think the way they gather information.

In most schools, students turn to books and the internet for research. But professional writers know that these sources are just the tip of the iceberg.For us, gathering research is like a treasure hunt—a quest for tantalizing tidbits of knowledge. It's an active, self-driven process that requires a whole lot of innovative thinking. We want our books to feature fascinating facts and intriguing ideas that no one else has ever written about. To find that information, we think creatively about sources. We ask ourselves:

Who can I ask?
Where can I go?
How can I search in a new or unexpected way?

Unfortunately, most students don't bring this same creative spirit to their research, and that's why they often find it boring.
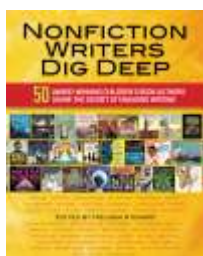


Research should be as varied and wide ranging as possible, and it should include sources that can't be copied, such as firsthand observations made in person or via webcams. Students can also watch documentary films, examine artifacts, and interview experts.

While the idea of asking students to conduct interviews might seem daunting, it doesn't have to be if your school takes the time to develop a community of experts. Everyone is an expert in something. By surveying parents at the beginning of the year, the school can build a database that includes what parents and staff members are passionate about and whether they're willing to answer questions from a child doing a report. You can also identify community workers who are willing to assist students.

By interviewing the experts right in their own backyards, students gain a stronger understanding of how professional writers go about their work. And because students develop their own questions and record the answers, the information they collect will be imaginative and original. When students do this kind of research, there's no chance of plagiarism.