The best way to deal with student plagiarism is to ensure that the vast majority of your students never commit it. When plagiarism is found, it is upsetting for everyone involved - particularly if the situation has arisen because a student has simply misunderstood what is required of them, or has not been taught how to reference properly.

Over five years from 2007-2011, our Constructive Feedback and Plagiarism Reduction (CFPR) Program involved several educational strategies and materials deployed in our course manual, in tutorials, in lectures, and online. We believe our most effective strategy was to give students a brief extract from a published source, state that source clearly, require students to write a short paragraph based on the source material, and then directly show students whether they had plagiarised, either by copying material out verbatim or by taking the facts but failing to specify their origin.

We first tried this exercise on a large-scale in 2008. In tutorials, more than a thousand students were given a paragraph from a published article, its source clearly stated, and they were simply asked to write a paragraph based on the article, and submit it online. We ran these student paragraphs through our software and a week later students were shown a wide variety of outcomes. Some students had simply copied the published paragraph word for word, and others had paraphrased it but failed to reference the source. Importantly, we also included examples of writing where students had actually digested what they had read, and produced something original and interesting. We continue to present this real feedback on real writing each year as an online learning module, but we have also discovered that more immediate feedback is even more compelling.

Our in-class strategy is similar: we show students paragraphs from published papers, and begin by asking them to write a single sentence based on that material to get started. Without delay, students swap seats, and are then ‘trained’ in marking their peer’s work, that is, the tutor instructs them to grade the sentence as plagiarised if it is unreferenced. In the first semester of our first-year course that often involves everyone in the room, and students look back at their own computer with dread just as they themselves are instructed to mark work in front of them as plagiarised. A second exercise involves a paragraph with a secondary source embedded, and even the newly emboldened students will often fall into the trap of leaving out the primary source. Within a flurry of ten minutes students suddenly realise the responsibilities they have when writing.

Over the past five years our rates of plagiarism in Psychology have plummeted and stayed low. A straightforward educational exercise on referencing, writing and feedback, which involves the
participation of all students, can quickly remove any fears and misunderstandings about plagiarism and, hopefully, remove academics’ need to deal with it.

Associate Professor Fiona White and Dr Caleb Owens, both from the School of Psychology, were recent team recipients of a Vice Chancellor’s Award for Support of the Student Experience for their five-year and ongoing program - Constructive Feedback and Plagiarism Reduction (CFPR) in Introductory Psychology.