

**EDITOR'S COLUMN**  
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**Imitation: Flattery or Thievery?**

How much borrowing of words or ideas is acceptable? Where should we draw the line between reasonable reliance on other sources, which happens all the time, and theft from those sources? My wife, a college professor, says she occasionally sees blatant plagiarism. The more common problem is the liberal use of someone else's phrases and sentences mixed in with their own words. This is harder to detect, but still plagiarism nonetheless. In this age of computers and the Internet, cutting and pasting is so simple, even a child could do it. In fact, we've already had to give the plagiarism talk to our daughters when they ended up cutting and pasting a little too much from their Internet sources (I wonder how many other parents give their kids "the plagiarism talk"). The girls wanted to know if it's okay to borrow a few words here or there, just because they happen to be the perfect words. I suppose that's acceptable, as long as they're words they might have used anyway.

I recall the case of George Harrison's song, "My Sweet Lord," which was found by the courts to be subconsciously copied from the song, "He's So Fine," recorded by the Chiffons. In doing some reading for this article, I learned they actually have a term for this phenomenon of coming up with something creative, thinking that it's one's own, when in actuality it's the subconscious recalling of something that one has read, heard, or seen in the past. It's called "cryptomnesia." No one has proven that such a condition even exists, but I find its existence entirely plausible. I'm sure it happens all the time.

The title for this article, "Imitation: Flattery or Thievery?," comes from an [evolt.org](http://evolt.org) Internet article by Erika Meyer, a former college English professor-turned-web designer. She agrees that blatant plagiarism should be identified and punished, but feels that it's hard to know where to draw the line between reasonable borrowing and outright stealing. Sometimes two works are similar because of coincidence, not imitation. She wonders, "How many writers have worked on an article or song only to find that someone else 'wrote it first?' It has happened to me more than once." She finds that web designers frequently use color combinations, design elements, and wording from other web sites that catch their eyes. If certain designs or colors are successful at drawing a web surfer's attention, why shouldn't other sites use a proven strategy?

Just the other day, I happened to hum the menacing theme music from "Jaws" to my kids. When my wife heard it, she commented, "You know, that sounds a lot like the 'New World Symphony.'" I thought about it for a moment and decided she was right (aren't our wives always right?). Did John Williams come up with the beginning of the "Jaws" theme from a subconscious recalling of the final movement of Dvorak's tribute to America? We'll never know. It's unlikely that he hadn't heard Dvorak's famous music. I was curious to see if other people noticed the similarity and did an Internet search. I can't say I "Googled" it, since I used Yahoo. Anyway, on Wikipedia (everyone's favorite modern-day encyclopedia, despite all the warnings about potential inaccuracies and biases), the discussion group for Dvorak's Ninth Symphony includes an entire section devoted to the similarity between the two pieces. I concluded that you can find just about anything on the Web.

I also remember the lawsuit slapped on Dan Brown by the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, alleging that Brown stole ideas and plotlines for *The DaVinci Code* from their book. Although the courts ruled in Brown's favor, I also believe that he did borrow significant ideas and plotlines from other sources and then added his own embellishments and narratives to make the novel his own. The interesting part of the lawsuit was that the losing plaintiffs also won in the end, because publicity surrounding the case boosted sales of their book.

As I was reading the March 7 issue of *The Week*, my favorite news magazine, I came across an editorial by Eric Efron that was perfect for the topic at hand. So perfect that I had to include it verbatim. He wrote:

“‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ Stirring words from Abraham Lincoln in 1858 – and also from the New Testament: ‘If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand’ (Mark 3:25)... And when John Kennedy urged Americans in 1961 to ‘ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,’ he may have been channeling Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in an 1884 Memorial Day address said it was time to recall ‘what our country had done for us, and to ask what we can do for our country.’ All this brings to mind a line attributed to Albert Einstein (though who knows where he got it): ‘The secret to creativity,’ Einstein said, ‘is knowing how to hide your sources.’ In the age of YouTube and Google, unfortunately, that’s easier said than done.”

They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but I’m not sure what degree of imitation is flattery versus thievery. I would venture to say that almost all creative works, ranging from radiology journal articles to books to speeches to art, contain elements that are borrowed or inspired by other works, whether the borrowing be conscious or subconscious. Creativity demands that we take these borrowed elements and incorporate them into a work that is uniquely our own. The rules against plagiarism seem more stringent for the written word over the spoken word and for scholarly works over casual missives.

### **Advice for Authors**

My advice to all authors is this: Always err on the side of caution. Start your first draft with your own words. Do not cut and paste phrases and sentences from other sources. Be aware that even paraphrasing is a form of plagiarism. If you must borrow others’ ideas, always cite the source. And if you use their words, enclose them in quotation marks. When in doubt, cite and quote. Finally, don’t believe everything Einstein says. Do not hide your sources; only Woodward and Bernstein and their brethren are allowed to have anonymous sources.