BASIC TYPES OF BAD STUDENT PAPERS

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There is an infinite variety of ways in which academic papers can be inspiring, convincing and important. By contrast, the vast majority of bad student papers follows one or multiple out of a fairly finite set of patterns. In the following, I will briefly characterize the main types, so as to help you avoid these errors.

The Renarration incorrectly assumes it to be its task to represent the words of wise and great researchers as accurately and unchanged as is possible. Criticism is viewed as sacrilegious and avoided at all costs, so as to dodge the imaginary wrath of the cited authors. For this reason, the Renarration primarily relies on very few key sources and only occasionally decorates these with additional references, which are without consequence to the flow of the paper. It presents the contents of others' studies in detail, without commentary or critique, discussion or juxtaposition and skirts the question what the retold study has to do with the topic of one's own paper. The most common form is the Simple Renarration, which mostly retells one source; however, there are also Multiple Renarrations, which paraphrase different sources in separate chapters or even in a ▶**Mosaic** of unordered paragraphs, typically without transitions or connections between these elements. If the source that is retold is not credited, it constitutes ▶**Plagiarism**. The easiest way to spot Renarrations is to look for lengthy passages that keep referring over and over again to the same primary source (possibly interrupted by single references to non-scientific sources and side aspects in third sources, which are not pursued in further detail). Renarrations generally receive low grades for independence and discussion, and are weak also in their use of literature and presentation of relevant contents.

The Feature is a journalistic text form, which deems it to be its primary mission to authoritatively present a subjective truth. Since this truth appears self-evident to the Feature, it uses source references mostly in order to document the correctness of its own perceptions. Alternative viewpoints are attributed to sometimes understandable but unfortunately misguided errors and delusions and therefore not given much consideration. References are arranged quite freely, using both scientific and non-scientific sources, and bent to optimally support its line of argumentation. Many Features consider it beneath themselves to document sources, others make liberal use of anecdotal references to journalistic and online material. Generally, Features know right from the outset what they will have found in the end, and lead the reader straight and often elegantly toward a predetermined conclusion. Less elegant Features easily descend into ▶**Blather**. Features can be recognized based on their use of rhetorical questions, consequent and unquestioned evaluative stances and their quite unsteady relationship with academic sources: Arguments are not discussed but merely arranged selectively as proof of predetermined truths. Features often show no or only very rough formal structuring, while transitions are made using rhetorical formula or commonplaces. Features receive bad marks for discussion, are weak on content, reflexivity and structure, and rarely better than passable with regard to their use of literature. They are often stylistically pretty, but academically quite useless.

The Mosaic sees its task in documenting the immense breadth and detail of existing information that it has absorbed through its appraisal of the available literature. Its primary rule commands it to write down anything that might be even remotely related, so as to avoid at all costs the possibility of overlooking anything. Its use of information is quite independent from this information's pertinence for answering specific questions: Numerous, mostly scientific studies are cited (usually correctly but briefly), contributing one or two interesting pieces of knowledge. However, these pieces are then not

put into relation, but arranged into a colorful potpourri. As the Mosaic finds it very important to use absolutely every piece of knowledge related to the topic (not: to the question or argument of the paper), it would never even consider disregarding a finding as irrelevant. Mosaics are mostly recognized based on their fine-grained structuring, which covers a wide variety of aspects that are somehow related to its topic. The same structure reliably lacks a chapter dedicated to discussing, comparing or concluding anything from the reported insights. Its conclusion mostly remains abstract and contains only insights that were already available at the begin of the paper. Also characteristically, Mosaics exceed the maximum page and word limit. Mosaics can receive good grades for their use of literature, but fail with regard to their structure and argument. Neither reflexivity nor independence are among its strengths, and most commonly, Mosaics fail to answer their given question.

The Blather is a mixture of ▶**Mosaic** and ▶**Feature**: It takes over the playful lightness in dealing with (often non-scientific) sources from the Feature and combines these with the impressionistic, unconnected arrangement of the Mosaic. Unlike the Mosaic, the Blather does attempt to draw connections between the reported fragments; however, unlike the Feature, the Blather remains confused itself, as it is unsure what the possible conclusion of its discussion might be. As the Feature, it usually lacks an explicit structure, however, it is considerably less elegant and usually fails to present a specific conclusion. Similarly to the Mosaic, it uses many sources, but rarely presents them correctly. Key characteristic of the Blather is its tendency to frequently jump between different arguments, where rarely more than three consecutive sentences contribute to the same train of thought. Among the favorite phrases used by the Blather are "as said before" and "another aspect". It likes formulating in subjunctive form and spends considerable space arguing that the chosen topic is a topic. With regard to their content, excellent Blathers may still obtain a passing grade, however, their structure, reflexivity, use of literature and clarity are considerably weaker.

The Plagiarism. Some Plagiarisms are ingenious, but most are quite disingenuous. Plagiarisms address important questions in weighty words and sometimes wise thoughts, even though the question addressed is quite often not the one pursued in the paper. The key error of the Plagiarism, however, is its assumption that it is either okay to present others' words and ideas as if they were one's own, or that at the very least, nobody would notice. Plagiarisms come in different variants.
The Full Plagiarism is an excellent, coherent, meaningful, elegant and well-sourced piece of scientific work. Its only flaw is that it wasn't written by the author. Full Plagiarisms are found exactly in the same way in which the author found it, that is, per online search.
The Lazy Plagiarism is a mixture of either ▶**Blather** or ▶**Feature** and Plagiarism. Lazy Plagiarisms usually start off with a few more or less reasonable but unfocused trains of thought, before they abruptly change in style, often also in focus. What follows are several paragraphs of elegant text, which are easily attributed to the work of another student, blogger or journalist (rarely more than one) using simple online searches. Key mark of the Lazy Plagiarism is its style shift somewhere in the middle.
The Module Plagiarism is a mixture of ▶**Mosaic** and Plagiarism. It mentions a wide number of aspects, which are taken over from different sources, typically connected by phrases such as "another argument" or "moreover". It neither features a discussion nor a coherent conclusion. Characteristic for the Module Plagiarism are frequent changes of style, very scarce or very rich bibliographies that refer to separate bodies of scholarship (usually excluding those used in the class). Also for the Module Plagiarism, several quick online searches reliably identify the range of original sources.
The Citation Plagiarism differs from the previously mentioned variants primarily due to the fact that the sources of taken-over passages are occasionally credited at the end of paragraphs. At the same time, the Citation Plagiarism omits the detail that the so-credited paragraphs are either entirely or to a large extent literally identical with the cited sources. The Citation Plagiarism may in principle be aware

of the need to use quotation marks, but has concluded that quotations spanning entire pages might look odd and thus decided to skip this step. It thus blurs the lines between the author's and others' words by suggesting that the neat prose had sprung from the mind of the former, merely inspired by the wise thoughts of the latter. Thereby, the Citation Plagiarism avoids the need to generate its own thoughts and hopes to avert the accusation of plagiarism by listing the copied sources in the text. Alas, it hopes in vain.

The Paraphrase Plagiarism exists as a subtype of ▶**Full**, ▶**Lazy** and ▶**Modular Plagiarism** (the Paraphrase ▶**Citation Plagiarism** usually turns out to be closer to a ▶**Renarration**). It is distinguished primarily by the fact that taken-over text passages are paraphrased prior to their being pasted into the paper. Some variants paraphrase entire essays and studies published by others, others merely import specific fragments in this way. Other than the previous versions, Paraphrase Plagiarisms are not always easily found via online search, and sometimes avoid also the characteristic style shift – although their reliance on specific sources, in familiar sequence, still usually suffices to unmask the culprit with little effort. At the same time, Paraphrase Plagiarisms are a lot of work. When they are discovered – which is still quite simple for a versed instructor – they thus raise the acute question why the author did not invest the same effort into writing some honest work, which might have afforded her or him a passing grade and saved everyone the trouble of the disciplinary committee.

All variants of ▶**Plagiarism** share that they are not graded according to the usual criteria: Any work whose transgressions cannot be confidently explained as accidental omissions is referred to the disciplinary committee, where – unless it can be convincingly excused by the author as grave but exceptional mistake – it can incur serious consequences from the class being voided to the student failing the entire study program.