

TIP SHEET for Instructors

How much assistance is too much?

What is “substantial” assistance?

According to the Code of Student Behaviour (“the Code”), one subsection of Cheating reads:

30.3.2(2)c No student shall represent another’s substantial editorial or compositional assistance on an assignment as the Student’s own work.

This begs the question: what does “substantial” mean? Applying this section is difficult precisely because it requires discretion.

When students use tutors, editors or other academic services for assistance on an assignment, the ideal outcome is that using that type of service will improve the students’ own abilities so that they can submit better work. Unfortunately, some slip into a situation where the tutor or editor simply “improves” the assignment rather than providing the tools for the student to do it. The extreme consequence of this is that the assignment becomes something the student would not be able to replicate because, in effect, it was completed by the tutor/editor. A tutor or editor becomes the ticket to a higher grade on a particular assignment, rather than someone who can assist the student to learn the material, or the techniques necessary to write about it. In short, the student submits the work of the tutor/editor as their own.

The risk in applying this section of the Code is that it could be seen as punishing a student who has legitimately improved. Since that is exactly what we ask of students, we must proceed with caution when considering this charge under the Code.

How can you tell?

In order to distinguish “substantial” assistance from genuine academic improvement, some tests are necessary:

- Has the student’s work improved incrementally over time or was there a sudden dramatic improvement from one assignment to the next?
- Is the student able to articulate the concepts or central ideas of the assignment?
- Is the student able to define key terms or sophisticated vocabulary used?
- Would the student be able to replicate the same level of work under similar conditions?

If the answer to the above questions is negative, it is possible that the student is receiving “substantial” assistance, that is, assistance to the extent that the student could not have completed the assignment on his or her own.

How can it be prevented?

The following advice can be given to students who are working with tutors or editors:

- Rather than working through the actual assignment with a tutor, the student can ask a tutor to work through similar questions or problems in order to get feedback for improvement.
- Have an editor highlight or identify where errors have occurred in the student’s writing but leave it for the student to correct.
- Students should ensure their tutor or editor understands these rules, and be very cautious about allowing anyone to rewrite or insert material into a paper or assignment.

For more information please contact Student Conduct and Accountability at 780-492-0777, or studentconduct@ualberta.ca.

Please note this publication does not replace or supersede the policies and procedures outlined in the Code of Student Behaviour. In the case of any disagreement, the Code of Student Behaviour takes precedence.