Universität Stuttgart

Guidelines for teaching staff on handling plagiarism and attempts at deception

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While teaching or reviewing final theses, you may occasionally encounter suspected cases of plagiarism, obvious cases of plagiarism or other forms of attempts at deception. The boundaries are not always clear, and each case requires an individual assessment. Particularly for difficult cases, you can find a wide variety of information in these guidelines: contact persons, tips for how to handle the situation, as well as legal and additional information.

In addition to this information, these guidelines include a definition of plagiarism that has been discussed and adopted by all relevant institutes and committees. This same definition is also provided to students in separate guidelines and is intended to help prevent plagiarism. In addition, these guidelines contain suggestions for conducting discussions that have proven effective in numerous previous suspected cases of plagiarism.

These guidelines and the student guidelines were developed by the "Plagiarism Prevention" working group at the University of Stuttgart in 2019 and updated in 2025. We hope that these two guidelines can help ensure transparency in cases of plagiarism and facilitate a constructive approach for all parties involved.

The student guidelines are also available online: (https://www.student.uni-stuttgart.de/pruefungsorganisation/document/Plagiarism_Prevention_Guidelines.pdf).

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1. On scientific integrity

The University of Stuttgart and its members are committed to the highest principles of scholarship – honesty and integrity in research and teaching. This guiding principle is enshrined in the "Statutes of the University of Stuttgart for Ensuring Good Scientific Practice and Handling Misconduct in Science" dated July 31, 2013.

Our goal is not only to provide students with subject-specific education, but also to help them develop and apply scientific ways of thinking and working. Research always involves a process of communication with other researchers. This is why it is essential to be able to clearly attribute theories and arguments to their originators and to engage in related discussions – whether at conferences, in publications, in teaching or in coursework.

Plagiarism, ghostwriting and other attempts at deception undermine the existing foundation of trust between teachers and students. Furthermore, they are not in the students' own best interest, as they thereby deprive themselves of the opportunity for academic and personal development.

2. What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is an attempt at deception in the sense that scientific work is presented as an independent achievement when in fact it originates from other sources. The following constitute clear examples of plagiarism: a) published works such as scientific books and articles (primary sources), secondary literature and online sources, and/or b) unpublished works solicited by an "author" from other individuals to be presented as original work (ghostwriting).
In cases where the author directly copies results generated by generative AI, it may be difficult to ascertain whether this constitutes plagiarism.

Depending on the subject culture, there are different rules regarding citation practices and the question of what is considered common knowledge (textbook knowledge) within the subject and therefore does not need to be cited. This also applies to the handling of content generated by generative AI: While some examiners and disciplines allow or even encourage the use of generative AI without restrictions or disclosure requirements, others require explicit disclosure or prohibit its use entirely. Please contact your institute (or your examiners) for subject-specific regulations and rules on when AI usage exceeds de minimis usage.

The most obvious case of plagiarism is the unmarked verbatim copying of text, whether it consists of phrases, passages or entire texts. "Unmarked" means that it is not apparent from the work that these text passages were written by another person or with the help of an AI tool (e.g., an LLM-based chatbot). Citations must be referenced with the author, title, publication date and place of publication. The labeling of AI-gen-

erated content is governed by the guidelines of the examining institution or the supervising faculty member. There is currently no unified approach in academic writing or binding citation standard for AI-generated texts, meaning that faculty members, institutes, faculties, universities, publishers and funding agencies can establish their own guidelines. Students and researchers should verify in advance which regulations apply to them. Institutions conducting examinations or research should clearly communicate their guidelines for labeling AI-generated content.

However, plagiarism is not limited to cases where passages are copied verbatim and unmarked from other sources. The unmarked and non-verbatim copying of others' thoughts and ideas – i.e., unmarked summaries (paraphrasing) – also falls under the term "plagiarism," as does the unmarked copying of arguments and argumentative structures ("structural plagiarism"), definitions, hypotheses, theoretical considerations, conclusions, experiments, empirical data, results and their interpretation, charts, tables and graphs.[1]
Cases where an academic piece of work or parts of such work are translated from another language without citation and then submitted as original work are also considered plagiarism ("translation plagiarism").

In some subject cultures, the unmarked and unattributed copying or paraphrasing of one's own previously published texts is referred to as "self-plagiarism." Strictly speaking, this does not constitute plagiarism, since it does not involve "third-party" intellectual property; however, publishing rights may need to be taken into account. Neglecting to cite your own previous work makes it difficult to place your hypotheses in the context of previous research. To avoid self-plagiarism, it is recommended to mark directly quoted text with a citation and to adequately reference the source when paraphrasing text. Please note that examination regulations may restrict the possibility of reusing texts and data that were part of a previous examination procedure in whole or in part in a new examination procedure.

Cases where written work is submitted that was written in whole or in part by another author ("ghostwriting") also constitute deception by plagiarism. Ghostwritten text does not necessarily contain plagiarized text passages; the deception lies in the misrepresentation of the text's authorship.

If texts are edited or revised using an AI tool, such revisions must not compromise the originality of the work submitted for examination. This would be the case, for example, if an AI tool were to alter the text to such a significant degree that the original content and academic quality of the work can no longer be assessed. The use of AI-supported tools for proofreading or improving writing style may be permissible, as long as the author's original contribution to the content remains intact. Since related regulations

[1] See, for example, Martin, Brian (1984): Plagiarism and Responsibility. In: Journal of Tertiary Education Administration 6/2, pp. 183–190, here pp. 183 ff.

may vary, it is important to verify the requirements of the examining institution before using AI tools.

All of the points mentioned above can be included in a declaration of originality. In the declaration of originality, the student confirms in writing that he or she has properly cited all content and sources by other authors in his or her academic work. The declaration of originality is only valid with the author's signature, meaning students are explicitly asked to reflect on the issue of plagiarism before submitting their work.

With the increasingly widespread adoption of AI-supported tools for writing, research or proofreading, some universities are expanding their declaration of originality to include specific regulations regarding the use of artificial intelligence. Students must make it clear whether and to what extent they have used AI tools, especially if they have directly incorporated AI-generated content into their work.

The "aids indicated" in a declaration of originality also refer to AI tools. To draw attention to this and make reference to potential disclosure requirements (if such requirements exist), the declaration of independence can be worded as follows:

"I hereby certify that I have written this paper independently and using only the aids indicated. I have clearly marked as quotations all passages that I have copied verbatim or paraphrased from literature or other sources, e.g., websites, and have referenced all respective sources.

In addition, I certify that I have only used AI-supported tools (e.g., for text generation, proofreading or content-level input) within permissible limits. I have documented whether and to what extent I have used AI tools in accordance with the regulations of institute/faculty X and certify that this does not compromise the originality of my academic work.

(Signature)"

3. Handling suspected cases of plagiarism

In suspected cases of plagiarism, the examiners are responsible for determining the severity of the case. Given the diversity of subject cultures, it is not possible to recommend or establish universal citation guidelines and de minimis thresholds.

In unclear, particularly serious or complex cases, a discussion with the student can provide clarity and make it easier to reach a decision. There is no legal obligation to conduct a discussion with the candidate before assigning the grade"fail" due to an attempt at deception.

Guidelines for discussions in suspected cases of deception

Preparing for the discussion

In suspected cases of deception, the examiner who has identified the irregularities and is familiar with the details of the case may conduct a clarifying discussion with the students involved during examination record inspection. Depending on the institute's regulations, examiners may invite additional individuals to the discussion (e.g., representatives of the examination committee, degree program managers, ombudsperson for teaching, etc.). Having a third person present has proven to be helpful, as this person can facilitate the conversation, take minutes or act as a witness. One advantage of inviting a degree program manager could be, for example, to inform students about preventive measures.

It is advisable to send an invitation to the discussion in advance so that the student can prepare and bring relevant documents. This ensures that the discussion can be conducted in a transparent and effective manner for all parties involved. During the discussion, please explain

- There are irregularities in the student's work that suggest an attempt at deception,
- The student has the opportunity during the discussion to dispel this impression,
- After the discussion, a decision will be made on further steps,
- Who will take part in the discussion and in what capacity.

Conducting the discussion

The discussion brings together the examiner, the student and, if applicable, other invited individuals. In the interest of transparency and accountability, participants introduce themselves at the beginning of the discussion and explain their roles. The discussion is confidential, but minutes should be taken. The examiner explains the facts of the case, i.e., why the examination or parts of the examination suggest an attempt at deception. The student is given the opportunity to address the suspicion and if possible dispel it, for example by providing specific details about how the work was produced.

The tone of the discussion should not become overly emotional. Attempts at plagiarism are rarely directed personally against teaching staff. Examiners are recommended to pursue a factual approach focused on clarifying the facts and explaining correct behavior, as well as pointing out possible penalties.

Based on the facts of the case and the student's explanation regarding the suspicion of deception, the examiner decides whether or not an attempt at deception has occurred.

If the suspicion of deception is not confirmed, that is, if the student can explain the grounds of suspicion but can also demonstrate adherence to academic integrity in his or her work, the matter is considered resolved.

If the examiners conclude that there was indeed an attempt at deception during the examination, the grade "fail (deception)" is assigned. If it appears that the student lacks methodological competence rather than having attempted deception, examiners may consider assigning the grade "fail" (without the comment "deception").

Furthermore, students should be made aware of measures to take in order to avoid facing suspicions of deception in the future. Specific measures to prevent plagiarism may include, for example, referring students to relevant services offered by the writing center, to institute guidelines on academic writing or to advisory services provided by institutes and faculties.

Once the case has been fully processed, the student should be informed that he or she will be penalized more severely in the event of further attempts at deception, but that, apart from the penalties already communicated, the current case will not have any additional adverse consequences.

Possible penalties in cases of plagiarism

I. General regulations

The individual examination regulations of the University of Stuttgart specify the penalties permissible for attempts at deception.

The following provision, taken as an example from the Framework Examination Regulations for Master's Degree Programs (Section 17 Para. 4), is included in all examination regulations for the University of Stuttgart's Bachelor's and Master's degree programs:

"If candidates attempt to influence the result of their coursework or examination by cheating or using unauthorized aids, the module in question or the Master's thesis is considered to have been graded "insufficient."
[...] In serious cases, the examination committee can exclude the candidate from completing any further coursework or examinations."

The examination regulations provide for two possible penalties in the event of an attempt at deception:

1. The examination is graded 5.0 due to deception.

2. The candidate is excluded from completing further coursework or examinations in serious cases.

II. Assigning the grade 5.0 for an examination due to deception

Plagiarism constitutes a misrepresentation of the originality of the work a candidate submits for examination.

Examiners are often uncertain about what percentage of a piece of work must be plagiarized in order to constitute an attempt at deception. An attempt at deception can generally be assumed when the de minimis threshold is exceeded. This depends on the specific circumstances of each case, the errors found and the professional judgment of the examiners.

If the examiner can prove that the candidate made an attempt at deception, the examination is assigned the grade 5.0 due to deception. This is not an evaluation of the examination itself in terms of content, but rather a penalty for the attempt at deception.

When entering the grade in C@MPUS, please make sure to add the comment "T" (for "Täuschung," deception). This ensures that the transcript later specifies "5.0 due to deception."

If the examination that is to be graded 5.0 due to deception is a Bachelor's or Master's thesis, in addition to the entry in C@MPUS a written notice must be sent informing the student of the grade and including information on legal remedies. This requirement is set forth in Section 19 Para. 4 of the framework examination regulations.

Additional information:

As a general rule, the burden of proof for deception or attempted deception lies with the university. An examination should therefore only be graded 5.0 due to deception if it can be proven that the student actually attempted deception.

This is not always easy in practice. Particularly in the case of academic ghostwriting, where a third party is commissioned by the student to prepare a written piece of work in whole or in part, it is very difficult to prove that the work was written by a ghost-writer and not by the student.
In the event of an attempt at deception, the university can make use of a mechanism called prima facie evidence in order to lighten the burden of proof. If events follow a typical sequence that, based on general experience, constitutes compelling evidence for a case of deception, the burden of proof is reversed: in this case, the examining authority does not need to prove that deception has occurred; instead, the candidate must prove that he or she has not made an attempt at deception, despite general experience suggesting otherwise.

For example, if passages of text by another author are included in a final thesis without proper citation, this initially suggests that the candidate is attempting deception regarding the authorship of the text and intends to present these passages as his or her own intellectual work. Based on general life experience and the typical sequence of events, this constitutes compelling evidence for a case of deception. The candidate would now have to dispel this prima facie evidence by demonstrating that this case diverged from the typical sequence of events.

Prima facie evidence generally provides a solid basis for proving attempts at deception, because in most cases the candidate will not be able to demonstrate an atypical sequence of events.

Additional considerations: deception and AI-supported texts

As AI-supported tools become more widespread, new challenges are emerging in substantiating attempts at deception. Since AI-generated texts generally are not clearly identifiable and can easily be stylistically adapted, it is practically impossible for universities to prove beyond a doubt that an examination was produced with the help of AI.
Unlike traditional cases of plagiarism, which can be detected by comparing a text with existing sources, there are no generally established technical methods for determining with certainty whether a text is AI-generated. Currently available AI detection tools do

not provide evidence that would hold up in court, as their results are unreliable and can be manipulated.

This means that, in cases of AI-assisted ghostwriting or the submission of fully AI-generated text, the university generally has no direct way of proving that an attempt at deception was made. Without a verifiable source or a significant discrepancy between the person's previous and current work, it is difficult to impose direct penalties.

Implications for prima facie evidence

Since it is not possible to prove AI usage beyond a doubt, the question arises as to whether prima facie evidence can be applied in suspected cases. The prima facie approach is based on demonstrating a typical sequence of events (e.g., the use of text passages by other authors without citing the source) that constitutes compelling evidence for an attempt at deception.

This approach proves difficult in suspected cases of AI usage:

- AI-generated text that has been revised and adapted to the candidate's writing style cannot be easily distinguished from original writing.
- There is generally no typical sequence of events, since AI usage cannot be proven beyond a doubt.

Whether and under what conditions it is possible to use prima facie evidence to establish a suspected case of AI-related deception must be determined on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the details and overall circumstances of the respective case.

One possible use case for prima facie evidence in relation to AI usage is fictitious sources cited in a student's work. Citing sources that do not actually exist is a typical indication that AI was used during the student's writing process, as AI programs are known to invent sources. If, in such a case, the allegation of an attempt at deception is based on prima facie evidence, the reversal of the burden of proof means that the student would in principle be able to refute the allegation of an attempt at deception if the student can provide the examiner with the source from which the quotation was taken.

The Munich Administrative Court (decision dated November 28, 2023 – M 3 E 23.4371) allowed the use of prima facie evidence in one further set of circumstances. This court decision was the first to address AI usage in higher education as a legal issue. It remains to be seen how case law on this issue will develop. The case in question concerned an applicant who submitted a too-perfect essay in English as part of his application to a Master's degree program. The applicant had previously submitted a significantly weaker essay in an earlier application for the same degree program. Furthermore, the essay stood out significantly from those submitted by other applicants in terms of its linguistic perfection. The university examiners who detected the attempt at

deception clearly pointed out in their evaluation that the applicant's essay, due to its perfection, sentence structure, text structure and flawless use of the English language, deviated from what one would expect from a Bachelor's degree graduate based on general experience. They were also able to demonstrate that AI programs are particularly capable when it comes to to condensing content to its essential components and presenting it in error-free, polished language. In this case, the court concluded that, based on the circumstances, a typical sequence of events within the meaning of prima facie evidence had been established.

If neither direct evidence nor prima facie evidence of an attempt at deception can be established in the event of a suspicion of deception involving AI usage, the student's work must be graded as usual.

In this context, it is not permitted to conduct an additional oral examination as part of the investigation into the attempt at deception with the intent of determining whether the student can verbally reproduce the knowledge demonstrated in his or her written work.

Possible preventive measures for universities to proactively prevent or make it more difficult to attempt deception through AI usage

Since it is difficult to directly prove AI usage, universities can pursue alternative approaches to prevent or at least make it more difficult to attempt deception through AI usage:

- Greater emphasis on analytical and critical thinking skills
    - Examination formats should focus more on independent reasoning, reflection and problem-solving, rather than requiring the mere reproduction of knowledge.
    - This would limit the benefits of AI-supported texts and ensure that students actually engage in independent thinking.

- Replacing or supplementing coursework with other forms of examination, such as oral examinations
    - Degree programs with a high proportion of coursework could replace some of this coursework with other forms of examinations, such as written or oral examinations. This usually requires an amendment to the examination regulations.
    - Under certain conditions, coursework may be supplemented by an oral examination component. For example, examination regulations often stipulate a 20- to 30-minute oral presentation as part of the examination for Bachelor's and Master's theses. It must be determined for each individual case whether the examination regulations and/or the module description for the module need to be amended to accommodate an additional oral examination component.

- Documenting the writing process
    - Supervisors of student academic writing may require students to submit interim reports or drafts during the supervision period in order to ensure transparency regarding the development of their work.
    - This makes it more difficult to submit an entirely AI-generated piece of work without any original contribution.

- Clear guidelines on AI usage
    - Examiners can establish clear guidelines as to whether and to what extent AI tools are permitted during the writing process for examinations.
    - If the use of AI is prohibited, examiners can also require students to submit a declaration of originality in which they confirm that they have not used any unauthorized AI aids.
    - This does not however replace a technical verification, as it constitutes only a voluntary commitment.

III. Exclusion from completing further coursework and examinations

In serious cases, the examination committee may decide to exclude the student from completing any further coursework or examinations.

In accordance with the examination regulations, this penalty is limited to serious cases. Exclusion from completing further coursework and examinations results in de-registration from university.

The legal standard for distinguishing between "standard" attempts at deception, which result in a failed examination, and serious cases of deception, which may additionally be penalized by exclusion from completing further coursework and examinations, is an objective examination of the extent to which a candidate has violated the rules of fair competition and the principle of equal opportunities for other candidates who behaved appropriately.

Serious cases of deception may include, for example (non-exhaustive list):

- Repeated instances of deception,

- Employing the services of a ghostwriter,

- Collusion among multiple candidates,

- Use of a purchased piece of work written in whole by a different author,

- Serious cases of non-compliant use of AI tools and/or

- Serious cases of deceptive usage of technical aids.

The examination committee as a whole, not the head of the examination committee, is responsible for determining the severity of a case of deception.

The examination committee must decide not only whether the case in question constitutes a serious case of deception, but also whether the student should be excluded from completing further coursework and examinations. The examination committee must consider the negative consequences of this decision and weigh the various interests involved.

The student should be granted the opportunity to make a statement before a decision is made.

If a student is excluded from completing further coursework and examinations, the student must be notified of this decision in writing. The notification must include the grounds for the decision, an explanation of the weighing of interests and information on legal remedies. A template for this notification can be requested from Division III, General Study Matters.

IV. Plagiarism discovered after transcript is issued

In many cases, plagiarism is not discovered until after the degree certificate has already been issued.

The examination regulations allow for the grades of coursework or examinations affected by deception to be adjusted accordingly. If necessary, module examinations may be graded "insufficient" and mid-degree exams as well as Bachelor's or Master's examinations may be graded "fail" (see Section 32 Para. 1 of the framework examination regulations).

The grade for an examination can only be adjusted within the first five years following the date of issue of the transcript in cases where deception is not discovered until after the transcript has been issued (the date specified on the transcript is decisive).

4. Key facts at a glance

- These guidelines provide general information applicable to all institutes. Please contact your institute (or your examiners) for subject-specific regulations and rules on citations, AI usage and de minimis thresholds.

- The responsibility for determining whether plagiarism has occurred and for evaluating the examination lies with the examiners. In serious cases, the examination committee is consulted. An attempt at deception can generally be assumed when the de minimis threshold is exceeded. This depends on the specific circumstances of each case, the errors found and the professional judgment of the examiners. (for details, see pp. 6 ff.).

- To clarify the facts of the matter, it is recommended that a discussion be held with the candidate and another person to take minutes (for details, see pp. 5 f.).

- Prima facie evidence: The burden of proof for deception or attempted deception lies with the university, but this is reversed if events follow a typical sequence that, based on general experience, constitutes compelling evidence for a case of deception. In such cases, the candidate must prove that he or she has not made an attempt at deception, despite the examiners' general experience suggesting otherwise (for details, see p. 8).

- AI usage: There is currently no unified approach in academic writing or binding citation standard for AI-generated texts, meaning that faculty members, institutes, faculties, universities, publishers and funding agencies can establish their own guidelines. Students and researchers should verify in advance which regulations apply to them. Institutions conducting examinations or research should clearly communicate their guidelines for labeling AI-generated content.

- Prima facie evidence in cases of suspected AI use: One possible use case for prima facie evidence in relation to AI usage is fictitious sources cited in a student's work. Citing sources that do not actually exist is a typical indication that AI was used during the student's writing process, as AI programs are known to invent sources. If, in such a case, the allegation of an attempt at deception is based on prima facie evidence, the reversal of the burden of proof means that the student would in principle be able to refute the allegation of an attempt at deception if the student can provide the examiner with the source from which the quotation was taken (for details, see pp. 8 ff.).

5. Further information

- Support for discussions on plagiarism cases

Ombudsperson for teaching and doctoral degree studies
https://www.student.uni-stuttgart.de/en/counseling/ombudsperson/

- Assistance with legal matters

Division III, General Study Matters
https://www.uni-stuttgart.de/en/university/organization/administration/d3-studymatters/

- Courses and events

Key competencies (current offerings listed on C@MPUS)
https://campus.uni-stuttgart.de/cusonline/webnav.ini

Writing center
https://www.sz.uni-stuttgart.de/en/writing_center/

- Useful links

Self-study unit "Fremde Federn finden" (Finding strangers' quills) – HTW Berlin:
http://plagiat.htw-berlin.de/ff/startseite/fremde_federn_finden

Plagiarism prevention project – Re*fair*enz at the University of Konstanz:
https://www.plagiatspraevention.uni-konstanz.de/en/
Here you can find publications and resources on the topic of plagiarism.

Legal assessment by Thomas Hoeren, 2023, starting on p. 22: https://hss-opus.ub.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/9734/file/2023_03_06_Didaktik_Recht_KI_Hochschulbildung.pdf

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Citation guidelines in German, English and French – TU Munich:
https://mediatum.ub.tum.de/?id=1225458

- Literature

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