

Instructions manipulating social norms and message framing do not affect student plagiarism

Sophie Lukowski, Montgomery Bopp, Kara Carpenter, Jessica Castine, Nicole LeFevre, Renee Bator, & Steve Mansfield

State University of New York College at Plattsburgh



INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is a pervasive antisocial and risky behavior in academic settings. What can be done to reduce student plagiarism?

Prior research has shown that:

messages that use **injunctive norms** are an effective means to motivate pro-social behavior (Cialdini, 2003).

messages that are **positively framed** discourage risky behavior (Tversky and Kahneman's prospect theory, 1979)

Can instructions that emphasize an injunctive norm with a positive tone reduce plagiarism?

We tested this using a 2x2 factorial design to assess the impact of **injunctive** norms versus **descriptive** norms, and **positive** versus **negative** message framing, on the incidence of plagiarism in a written assignment.

Norms:

Injunctive norms: relevant to social approval/disapproval.

e.g., *People refrain from littering when there is evidence that someone has swept the area.*

Descriptive norms: relevant to the prevalence of a behavior.

e.g., *People refrain from littering in a clean setting.*

Message Framing: presents comparable outcomes either positively or negatively

Positive: e.g., *Dispose of litter properly.*

Negative: e.g., *Do not litter.*

Hypothesis

Students will plagiarize least on the written assignment if the instructions emphasize an injunctive norm with a positive tone.

METHODS

Writing Assignment

115 undergraduate students completed an online writing assignment.

Students read a chapter describing research about cultural differences in attitudes towards learning.

They then answered 3 open-ended homework-like questions about the chapter.

1. *Describe internal and external validity and explain how you evaluate the validity of a study.*
2. *Describe the differences across the three groups in math and reading scores.*
3. *Explain how the three groups differed in their school and home environments.*

Each answer was required to be 200–250 words in length (based on pilot studies).

Manipulation

Students were randomly assigned to 1 of 5 conditions: either one of the four experimental conditions or the control condition.

Prior to starting the writing assignment, students were given special instructions based on the condition they were in:

Table 1. The special instructions for each condition.

	Injunctive norm	Descriptive norm
Positive framing	<i>Please complete this assignment entirely in your own words in order to make sure your work is original.</i>	<i>The vast majority of students have completed this assignment entirely in their own words, making their work original.</i>
Negative framing	<i>Please do not copy any text from the reading assignment in order to preserve the originality of your work.</i>	<i>Many students have copied text from the reading assignment, which devalues the originality of their work.</i>

The students were instructed to “keep this statement in mind when you are doing your writing assignment”, and they were required to check a box to indicate that they had read the instructions.

Students in the control condition were given no special instructions.

ANALYSIS

The student assignments were first normalized to correct obvious spelling mistakes and other typographical errors.

We then used *turnitin.com* to assess the percentage of each submission that matched the text chapter.

RESULTS

Table 2. Mean plagiarism percentages (the average percentage of each submission that matched the text chapter).

	Injunctive norm	Descriptive norm
Positive framing	<i>N</i> = 16 plagiarism μ = 4.2%	<i>N</i> = 25 plagiarism μ = 6.5%
Negative framing	<i>N</i> = 20 plagiarism μ = 2.1%	<i>N</i> = 22 plagiarism μ = 6.0%
Control	<i>N</i> = 32 plagiarism μ = 6.7%	

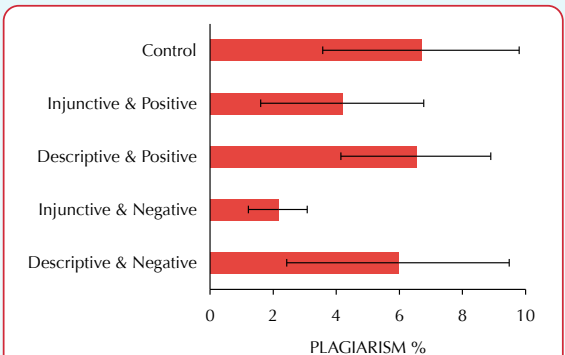


Figure 1. Mean plagiarism percentages (± 1 SEM)

A two-factor ANOVA reveals

no significant main effect for the **norm** manipulation ($F_{1,79} = 1.36, n.s.$)

no significant effect for the message **framing** manipulation ($F_{1,79} < 1, n.s.$)

no significant interaction ($F_{1,79} < 1, n.s.$)

Plagiarism percentage was **not** significantly affected by the experimental manipulations.

CONCLUSION

While injunctive norms and positive framing have been shown to be effective in promoting prosocial and unrisky behavior in other studies, our data challenge the use of this approach to directly reduce plagiarism.

However, one possible explanation for our finding is that much of the plagiarism in these assignments may have been incidental or unintentional. Perhaps if students could be made aware of their plagiarism, and permitted to revise their work before submission, they may be more susceptible to injunctive norms and positive framing.

REFERENCES

- Cialdini, R. B. (2003). Crafting normative messages to protect the environment. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 12, 105–109.
- Kahneman, D., and Tversky, A. (1979) Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk, *Econometrica*, 47, 263–291.