

Guest Ethics Column: Paton: Use your own words in all relationships

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It is February, a new month to consider ethics in day-to-day living. Usually, when I think about February, I am drawn to the middle of the month, the 14th. I think about Valentine's Day, Cupid, relationships.

It is a great time to write to those you love and tell them how much they mean to you. Use your own words, not someone else's, even if they are not as eloquent and poetic as you might desire. Your reader will appreciate hearing your thoughts, ideas and perspectives rather than those that they have heard before.

You might find this strange, but as a faculty member, I greatly value the thoughts of my students. Of course, reading papers is not like reading a Valentine's Day card, but there is a special relationship that is developed between the writer and the reader. I enjoy reading students' thoughts and perspectives, and their evaluation of the work of others. I often hear the unique voice of the student speaking through the pages.

I also am heartbroken — yes, really heartbroken — when I read words I know do not belong to the student but are not attributed to the real author. Sometimes the “voice” of the writing changes so much I know I am not reading the student's writing. It is at this point I really struggle with the thought that the student doesn't value our relationship. It would be like me telling you right now, “love means never having to say you're sorry,” and you would think, “I have heard that before.”

(Yes, you have heard it before, and it might be cited: *Love Story* (1970); you can even find it in Wikipedia, not that I am recommending this as a reliable source.)

So back to the issue of ethical decision-making in relationships. This special month of relationships, I would like to ask you to consider how you can make ethical choices in writing. Think of your writing as a relationship with your reader and commit to ensuring that your words are your own, and the words of others are appropriately cited.

It might be helpful, when you are tired, cannot come up with a single original thought and consider using someone else's words as your own, to just ask the question: “Do I want to

have a conversation with my reader about why I stole someone else's words and used them as my own?"

Being accountable is part of every good relationship, including that between the writer and reader. If you need more information, ask your faculty member or take a look at the Style Guide on the University Writing Center Web site.

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