

In 1992 a controversy arose involving a charge of plagiarism made at a meeting of the American Historical Association in connection with a biography of Abraham Lincoln that had been written several years earlier by a professor of history. Another history professor who suspected plagiarism arranged to have the book run through a computer program that scans and compares texts for similar passages. The computer check indicated 175 instances of short passages (e.g. two or three sentences long) that closely matched those in another biography written forty years earlier. A special panel appointed under the auspices of the American Historical Association reviewed the case.

Did the author commit plagiarism deserving of censure by the American Historical Association? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Plagiarism involves inappropriate use of words written by another person. Standards of what constitutes inappropriate use, however, are highly context dependent. Different fields and different circumstances often call for different criteria of acknowledgement and citation. There have been instances of far more extensive, unattributed copying by authors than this case. Nevertheless, the work at issue here was an historical biography, and, for this kind of work, it would seem that one hundred and seventy five identified passages with exactly the same wording as found in an earlier work is enough to count as plagiarism. Authors of historical biographies, it would seem, have an especially stringent responsibility to avoid unattributed uses of another author's words. For this reason, it doesn't seem critical for deciding whether the author in this case committed plagiarism to determine if he copied all one hundred and seventy five passages with the specific intention to deceive readers into thinking he had written them himself. As an historical biographer he was responsible for exercising special care to avoid creating this impression.

Case from the March 6, 1997 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1997.