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 you use tutors, editors or other academic services for assistance on an assignment, the ideal outcome is that using that type of service will improve your own abilities so that you can submit better work. Unfortunately, some students 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.

This is not about punishing students for improving the quality of their work. After all, instructors provide feedback on assignments and papers in an effort to help you improve. However, students can sometimes rely too heavily on the assistance of others, and that is when it crosses the line.

How can you tell?
In order to distinguish “substantial” assistance from genuine academic improvement, some questions you can ask yourself:

- Are you able to articulate the concepts or central ideas of the assignment?
- Are you able to define key terms or sophisticated vocabulary used?
- Would you 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 you are receiving “substantial” assistance, that is, assistance to the extent that you could not have completed the assignment on your own.

How can it be avoided?
The following are some ways to avoid this situation when working with tutors or editors:

- Ensure your tutor or editor is familiar with the Code, and particularly the section on “substantial editorial or compositional assistance.”
- Rather than working through the actual assignment with a tutor, 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 your writing but leave it for you to correct.
- You are responsible for everything you submit. Be very cautious about allowing anyone to rewrite or insert material into your paper or assignment.
- Also be aware that this can be considered plagiarism (submitting another’s work as your own).

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.