Everything You Need to Know About Contract Cheating

Glossary of Terms

• **Contract Cheating**: the practice of students engaging a third-party individual or service to complete their written assessments.

• **Ghostwriting**: writing for someone else; sometimes used as a synonym for “contract cheating” but also an **acceptable practice in many professional contexts**.

• **Academic Custom Writing Websites/Paper Mills /Essay Mills**: “business that allows customers to commission an original piece of writing on a particular topic so that they may commit academic fraud.”

• **Plagiarism**: to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one’s own.

• **Academic Integrity**: a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

• **Accrediting Organization**: an organization accredited by a recognized accrediting body for its competence to audit and issue **certification** confirming that an organization meets the requirements of a **standard**.

• **Authorship Investigate**: Authorship Investigate is a tool from Turnitin that compares differences in written work to help administrators make a determination of what to do when they suspect a case of contract cheating. If a case escalates beyond the classroom, Authorship Investigate provides the forensic evidence needed for further investigation.

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5 Things You Need to Know About Contract Cheating

Across the education landscape, students, educators, and researchers like you are working hard to combat academic dishonesty. Here are five things you need to know about contract cheating that will hopefully inspire action:

1. **Essay cheating is on the rise.** Contract cheating is increasing at a conspicuous rate, according to data that represents approximately 31 million students worldwide. These numbers illustrate how the threat of contract cheating is global and cannot be ignored.

2. **Social media is an active recruiting tool.** Twitter, like many social media channels, allows essay mills unfettered access to at-risk students by creating a falsely secure channel for introductions. A student can post a casual "I’m so stressed! I’d do anything to finish this paper!" to which a contract writer can simply reply: "DM me! I can help!" By granting access, students then open themselves up to exploitation.

3. **YouTube influencers are enabling it.** In addition to the stress already bombarding individuals at the secondary and higher education level, well-known online personalities are now being hired by essay mills to prey upon the insecurities and anxieties of students.

4. **Universities are cracking down.** Institutions across Europe are starting to take action. Administrations feel that the essay mills themselves need to be held accountable for misleading students and they’re eager to disrupt (and ultimately, eliminate) this unethical industry.

5. **Students could face criminal prosecution.** Whether they realize it or not, students involved in contract cheating may also be committing criminal offenses and could be found responsible for serious crimes like fraud or forgery.

The practice of contract cheating will persist unless institutions, educators, students, and industry partners unite to take action.

3 Ways Essay Mills Make It Easy to Buy an Essay

Students and educators around the world know that contract cheating is a growing reality on our modern campuses. Sometimes known as ghostwriting, contract cheating is when individuals engage a third-party or service to complete their assignment or exam. At high schools and universities worldwide, students can log onto a variety of essay mill sites, offer exact details on the nuances of their assignment (including the number of pages and citations required) and the due date, then receive a guarantee that the paper will arrive on time once payment is confirmed.
Daphne Taras, the Dean of the Ted Rogers School of Management at Ryerson University, addresses the severity of contract cheating in her recent article, emphasizing that “this is a serious industry that operates in the shadows, and it is a threat to our own industry of advanced education.” As the grim implications of contract cheating on campuses worldwide increase, it is essential for students and educators alike to understand the practices that make these industries thrive and what they can do to combat them.

Here are three ways essay mills make it easy to buy an essay online:

1. **Reaching students at the right time:** Essay mills understand that students feel the greatest pressure at the middle and end of their semesters. These businesses have learned that a student with a looming deadline is more likely to succumb to the temptation of contract cheating than one at the beginning of a term. Essay writing businesses target students with advertising and discounts on a specific schedule, often with a countdown clock that reminds students of a term’s impending end. Vulnerable individuals at the end of a stressful semester are likely to receive a well-timed email or pop-up ad to order a paper “just in time”.

Recently, the BBC discovered that prominent YouTube stars were encouraging students to purchase essays from online businesses on their channels. Essay mills have also started crafting entire networks of potential essay sites (or “client sites”) to give students the sense that they are shopping for the best match when really there is one master essay business at the core. Cath Ellis, the Associate Dean of Education in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UNSW, Sydney, has conducted extensive research in the area of contract cheating and discovered that “several of these ‘client sites’ were connected together into one business. This gives potential clients an illusion of choice while maximizing market share for the academic custom writing business.”

2. **Offering a “professional” and personalized experience:** The overall interaction between students and essay mills often feels like a business transaction. These businesses strive to provide a “professional” experience for students in place of a nefarious one, which helps to eliminate any lingering student anxiety. Daphne Taras, from Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada, experienced the savviness of the essay-writing business firsthand.

Using a false student name, Taras explored what it meant to be a student purchasing an essay online for a higher education class. During her experience, she received an actual telephone call from the business itself. The person on the other end of the line assured Taras that “they are a legitimate service, and capable of doing the work that is required”. Just days after confirming her order, she noticed that her credit card statement had a different, benign name of the business in the statement. No red flags would be raised by a parent reviewing their student’s credit card bills, which would ensure that the business transaction between the student and the essay mill remained private. Some essay mill sites have even gone as far as to post the logos of top universities in their
region without permission, claiming that “students from these institutions buy their essays from us!” This misleading personalization is meant to create the connection essay businesses need with students to make their sale.

5. **Following up with perseverance:** Essay mills earn money by attracting loyal customers. The more they can develop an ongoing relationship with students worldwide, the more essays they are able to peddle. By personalizing the experience and relentlessly following up, they can often guarantee repeat customers.

After a student purchases one essay and the business has their contact information, an essay mill will often check in with that student at key points during the academic school year. They might offer discount codes for new orders, coupled with light-hearted graphics. Susceptible students in the throes of mid-term madness might be cheered by a colorful image, promising to resolve their woes.

In the end, essay mills have learned to meet the very particular, seasonal needs of students and have seamlessly adapted to new technologies, reaching potential and repeat customers through online advertising, emails, and even phone calls. It’s clear that students and educators alike need to understand the strategies that have helped this industry to grow and continue to find ways to fight back against the threat that is contract cheating.

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**A Student’s Perspective on Contract Cheating**

*By Whitney Boswell Whitney*

*Boswell is a Junior at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She’s majoring in cultural anthropology and interned on the Turnitin Marketing team in the summer of 2018. In this post, she offers her perspective on the rising problem of contract cheating, a behavior that she has witnessed first hand. While she empathizes with students who may be tempted to outsource their assignments, she ultimately makes an argument for the value of authentic writing.*

It’s easy for students these days to feel like they are drowning in tasks. College, and even high school workloads, can be completely overwhelming, and I have often felt like it is impossible for me to succeed.

Picture this: it’s 3 am. You’re sitting alone at a large table on the second floor of your university’s library, surrounded by piles of papers and textbooks so thick that you can no longer see the table. You are feeling a mixture of exhaustion, dread, panic, and fear.

You have a final essay due in 5 hours, and you aren’t planning on getting any sleep. After this assignment is turned in, you plan to immediately work on your next essay on the to do list. Overwhelmed? This scene is more common in an average college student’s life today than you might imagine.
Modern students are feeling this extreme pressure because they fear the worst: if they don't obtain good grades, they won't graduate, won't get a good job, and won't achieve their dreams. Enter: contract cheating. By paying third parties to complete their assignments for them, students are able to feel more at ease knowing they have one less thing on their plate and a greater potential for a passable grade.

Stressful high school and college environments are the ideal hunting grounds for contract cheating organizations. Targeting students at their most frazzled and vulnerable, these websites are strategic about both ad placement and content, making contract cheating look like a very attractive offer. Though the majority of students do not participate in contract cheating, this problem still has a major effect on an institution's student body as a whole. The abundance of contract cheating in higher education calls into question the validity of thousands of degrees that have been awarded throughout the past few years across hundreds of institutions. Did these students truly earn these degrees through their own hard work?

Most students spend upwards of four years working tirelessly to earn their degrees: paying for an expensive tuition, neglecting their social lives, essentially living at the library, and pulling all-nighters, all for the sake of earning that coveted piece of paper. The tens of thousands of hours of work put in by these students can, in an instant, become nothing but wasted time when another student is able to earn the same degree by paying someone else to do their work. To me, this is not just bothersome, but clearly an injustice that has been ignored and avoided for too long.

**Students:** Your education is a privilege. Millions of people around the world would give their lives for this right that we are lucky enough to have, and it's time we take it seriously. We have the opportunity to change the world with this knowledge, and I see it as our responsibility to do so to the best of our abilities. I know that getting an education is not always easy, but asking for help when we feel the most defeated is the bravest and most rewarding strategy for success. Use the resources gifted to you: professors, TA's, tutors, mental health centers, and so many more. By utilizing this support, we can take charge of our education and set ourselves up for successful and happy experiences in school.

**Parents:** Whether or not you realize it, your child is likely being affected by the issue of contract cheating. Support them in every way you can; by being understanding and empathetic, you can show your children that you believe in them, even when they don't believe in themselves.

**Educators:** You have the immeasurably important job of educating the youth that will one day be our scientists, our nurses, our teachers, and our leaders. Make your classroom and your office a safe space for questions, and let your students know it's ok to not always understand. The resources and environment you create for your students will be critical in shaping their educational experience; so make it count.

High school and university are never easy journeys, and no one makes it through without their fair share of scrapes and bruises. However, with the right resources, a strong support system, and a little bit of self-confidence, we can come out the other side with a wealth of new knowledge, ready to take on the world. It's
important to remember when contract cheating seems like the only option: you’re only cheating yourself. Tuition is more than just paying for a seat in a lecture hall and a grade at the end of the semester. Don’t just pay for the grade: truly invest in the knowledge and in your own future.

**Students Against Contract Cheating Competition Winners**

Sometimes known as ghostwriting, contract cheating is the practice of engaging someone else to complete your work for you, and this issue is on the rise. Some students simply don’t understand the dangers associated with this form of malpractice, so who better to shout about the problem than those most impacted by it?

**Raising awareness**

To highlight the risks of contract cheating to students, Turnitin launched a brand new competition - Students Against Contract Cheating - which encouraged students across the UK and Ireland to express their creativity. We asked students to tell their story, make a statement, and to explore new and creative ways to make other students aware of contract cheating, why it’s not acceptable, and stress the risks involved in using contract cheating services.

Judged by a task force committed to tackling the problem, including Karl Leydecker (University of Dundee), Irene Glendinning (University of Coventry), Brian Irwin (Sheffield Hallam University) and Yasmin Pitter (Pearson), we are pleased to announce our two winners and how they were inspired to take a stand against contract cheating:

**Winner: Rachel Baylis**

*Population and Geography student at the University of Southampton*

Rachel informed us that while she hasn’t engaged in contract cheating, it is readily available to her: “In my university halls’ WhatsApp group, last year, the group would frequently receive messages offering to write student essays in exchange for money ... however, I don’t think students are aware of the potential consequences.”

Her knowledge about the problem prompted Rachel to use a comic book strip format to cleverly illustrate the different ways in which a student can be caught should they choose to cheat.

We asked Rachel what advice she’d give to students tempted to take the route of contract cheating: “It’s not worth the risk. One bad grade is better than having to redo the year or even being extorted financially! We put in so much effort to gain a university place that we should appreciate our time as students before moving into the ‘real world’.”

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*Everything You Need to Know About Contract Cheating*
As a student of Population and Geography, Rachel has firsthand experience of the pressures of looming assignment deadlines and believes that this could contribute to the rise in the issue of contract cheating: “I recently had four major deadlines within four days, and I was really stressed out about.”

Rachel implores universities to offer more one-on-one support to students experiencing difficulty with an assignment or exam.

**Winner: Alice O’Dowd**

*Law student at University College Dublin*

Alice produced a piece that features the use of a popular instant messaging platform and highlights the extreme consequences of contract cheating.

She told us, “At first, I didn’t understand the dangers of using essay mills, but soon found that students were paying vast sums in exchange for poor quality work or no work at all, leaving themselves open to the risk of blackmail or exposure.”

Alice believes that finding the confidence to approach a programme or academic advisor before seeking help from illegitimate means is fundamental in effectively combatting the issue of contract cheating: “It’s a bad short term solution with long term consequences.”
Be smart, don’t cheat

Rachel Baylis, Student at University of Southampton
Don’t become a target for blackmail

Say no to Contract Cheating

Alice O'Dowd, Student at University College Dublin
How to Take Action Against Contract Cheating

Authorship Investigate is a new product by Turnitin that reduces the administrative burden of investigating suspicions of contract cheating. Data-driven insights quickly surface indicators of academic dishonesty, so you can focus on your investigation and spend more time building a fair and impartial case.

✓ Gather the facts
Collate students past assignments in minutes, not hours.

✓ Confirm your suspicions
Easily identify outliers and differences and build your case.

✓ Enrich your case
Use forensic linguistic analysis, document metadata and Natural Language Processing (NLP) to uncover evidence.

✓ Connect with Experts
Gain access to an online community and discover best practices and resources from experts worldwide.

Talk to an expert