

Mark James Miller: Cyber-Plagiarism Not as Foolproof as Students May Think

By Mark James Miller | Published on 09.26.2014 3:00 p.m.

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“Isn’t it funny,” the student’s essay began, “how life itself is not just a fight for survival, but more a fight for mastery? Some people are satisfied with just survival, but others ...”

I had assigned my freshman composition class at [Allan Hancock College](#) the task of writing a critical analysis of [Jack London’s](#) novel, *The Call of the Wild*. This particular essay, which focused on the theme of the survival of the fittest, was average in quality, rating only a C. I graded it and set it aside, not knowing the far-reaching implications it was going to have.

I had graded another 10 or 15 essays and was getting near the end of the pile when I came upon one that began, “Isn’t it funny how life itself is not just a fight for survival, but more a fight for mastery ...” Nonplussed, I thumbed back through the papers I had already graded. Soon I realized I had two identical essays, every word the same, except for the student’s name in the upper left-hand corner.

What had happened? Had one student copied from the other, line by line? That seemed unlikely. Then another thought struck me. I typed the first sentence into [Google](#). Less than a second later I was looking at the very same essay at a website that advertises college papers for sale. Two of my students, unbeknown to one another, had purchased the same mediocre essay on *The Call of the Wild* for \$19.95, then turned it in as their own work.

This was my introduction to the brave new world of cyber-plagiarism, the buying and selling of essays from the thousands of sites that offer compositions for sale

on every conceivable subject, from anthropology to zoology, available to anyone with Internet access and a credit card. But the price these two students paid was much higher than the money they wasted on the essay. They failed this assignment and ultimately, the class, for now my suspicions were aroused and I subjected the essays they had previously turned in to the same scrutiny I had just given *The Call of the Wild*. It was no surprise to learn they had purchased other essays as well.

There is nothing new about cheating in college. **Yale University** Dean Clarence W. Mendell declared in 1931 that cheating was widespread on the New Haven campus. In a 1964 survey, 75 percent of college students admitted to cheating, and a similar percentage was found in 2011. In 1994 the **U.S. Naval Academy** was rocked by a cheating scandal involving a purloined electrical engineering exam being passed around campus; 24 midshipmen were expelled and 62 others disciplined. In 2007, 34 **Duke University MBA** students were expelled or disciplined for cheating on an exam. In 2013 70 students were expelled from **Harvard University** for cheating in a government class.

But the Internet opens up a new universe of opportunities for students to turn in work that is not their own. When I entered the words “College papers for sale online” on Google I got more than 104 million responses!

With titles like “College Essay Writing Help,” “Buy Essays Cheap,” “Same Day Essay.com,” “Essays R Easy,” these sites encourage students to use their services with promises of good grades, money-back guarantees, and making their lives easier by letting someone else do their work for them. A tagline at one site reads: “Easy to choose — Easy to use — Easy to get an A.”

“You are not in college to just write an essay,” says another. “We know there are other things that require your attention.”

These sites also attempt to assuage any pangs of conscience students might have for such blatant dishonesty with comments of this kind: “Prayers won’t help. Essay Writers will!” Another states: “With the constantly rising standards of paper writing, it becomes more and more difficult to cope with your writing tasks. Let us help!”

The students are also assured they will get away with their cheating. “Our online essay writing company supports 100 percent confidentiality ... By no means will your professor get to know that you are our customer.”

Prices typically start at around \$10 per page, although they rise very quickly. At one site a “standard-quality” essay starts at \$21.99 per page when 10 days’ notice is given. From there, the price soars to \$26.99 for each page of a “platinum-quality” essay, and skyrockets to \$48.99 when an essay is needed within three hours.

These sites offer more than just freshman composition papers. Essays are tailored to very specific needs. A first-year, college-level composition on “**The Massacre at Wounded Knee**,” five pages in length, can be gotten in seven days for \$45. Another, on “Women in Business,” at a fourth-year college level, costs \$27 if ordered in advance. If none of the papers advertised are what the students are seeking, this site advises them: “If you do not have enough information to complete an essay or dissertation, send us the basic guidelines and we will do the rest.” Another promises, “Just name the subject and the topic, state the number of pages and references, add the details from your task, and you’ll have yourself a masterpiece of academic paper in no time.”

What can be done? Since my baptism into cyber-plagiarism with *The Call of the Wild*, I have started each semester by including a demonstration on plagiarism in the very first lesson. I show the students how easy it can be to determine if someone has plagiarized an essay, and emphasize how stiff the penalties for it are. But more important, students need to know that writing an essay is not an impossible task. Writing is a skill that can be learned with hard work and study. As a student of mine once said, “Even though those essays gave me headaches, I actually learned how to love this.”

Every student is not going to love writing. But they can be taught how to write, and shown that writing a good essay is not as difficult as they may imagine. Nothing beyond except effort, concentration — and a good-sized dose of honesty — is required.

— *Mark James Miller is a teacher and writer, and has been a part-time English instructor at **Allan Hancock College** in Santa Maria since 1995. He is president of the **Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College, California Federation of Teachers Local 6185**, and is an executive board member of the **Tri-Counties Central Labor Council**. [Click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*