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Cut and Paste 101: Plagiarism and the Net

Point-and-click cheating opportunities challenge the way we teach writing.

We learned to cut and paste in elementary school. The process usually involved blunt, don't-run-with-them scissors and giant tubs of sticky, unwieldy Elmer's glue. When we grew up, *cut and paste* became words that we used when fashioning a document from other documents: "I don't have time to rewrite the whole report; I'm going to cut and paste from the old one and hope it works." We got out a pair of shears and a glue stick and had at it.

Cut and paste has come a long way. Now we simply point a computer mouse to highlight text, click a "cut" icon, and position the cursor to "paste" the section into our new version. Marvelous. Frightening. As marvelous as such efficiency is, the words *cut and paste* now also represent a frighteningly easy method to plagiarize work. Computer-savvy students have caught on to this means of avoiding effort in such numbers that some teachers wonder whether anything original is being written anymore.

The idea isn't new. The widespread, free-for-the-asking opportunities and the in-your-face attitudes of Internet cheat sites are new.

As we educate our students for their computer-dominated future, we must address the growing opportunities for dishonest use of technology. The Internet offers many wonderful educational resources. It also presents students with a world of unethical techniques and ideas. Educators unaware of the possibilities and resources available to computer-age students are at the mercy of these technologically hip kids.

Internet Cheaters: A Field Guide

Internet cheaters come in three main types. I've described them in field-guide format so that we can quickly and accurately identify them when they perch in our classrooms.

The unintentional cheater. These students have never learned how to properly use and document resources in papers. They are likely to copy something word for word from the Internet, never document it, and present it as their own. Confronted, they don't usually admit wrongdoing because they don't understand the alternative—documenting the source.

Donald McCabe, the founder of the National Center for Academic Integrity, is concerned about the surge in unintentional cheating: "We are raising a generation of students who think anything that's on the Internet is free" (Clayton, 1997). Many students think that it's all right to take words from the Net and don't give a thought to documenting them.

The sneaky cheater. These students know what plagiarism is, know it's wrong, and know how to avoid it. They also know how to get away with it. They realize that getting a whole paper from the Net is risky. So, they plagiarize portions from research sites and portions from other student papers online and then work this "help" into a skeleton paper. They sometimes intentionally misrepresent the documentation in a bibliography, if they provide one at all. These students put a lot of work into cheating—probably as much effort as they would have expended to write the piece in the first place.

The all-or-nothing cheater. Many times, these are the students who wait too long before starting an essay and panic at the last minute. Other times, these students know in advance that they will find a suitable paper to download and turn in—sometimes putting off the assignment to the last minute because of this confidence. These students find a whole paper on the Net, add their names to the top, print it, and turn it in for a grade. This is the laziest form of Internet cheating and the easiest to detect.

No New Ideas, Just New Methods

Students have always been able to buy or borrow a paper. I remember papers circulating in my high school and recall advertisements in college campus publications. The idea isn't new. The widespread, free-for-the-asking opportunities and the in-your-face attitudes of Internet cheat sites are new. The major draws of Internet plagiarism are the ease with which students can simply cut and paste a paper from other sources and the mind-boggling array of information available and encouraging them to do so.

Some students and schools post papers online as a

mode of legitimate publication. These become fair game for the cut-and-paste method of cheating. Other sites are geared specifically toward cheating, even those that wisely feature plagiarism warnings or a disclaimer that reads something like this:

> We do not support the plagarising [*sic*] of other people's work. You must never submit an essay from this site as your own work, or repost the essay anywhere else on the internet. (Smith, 1999)

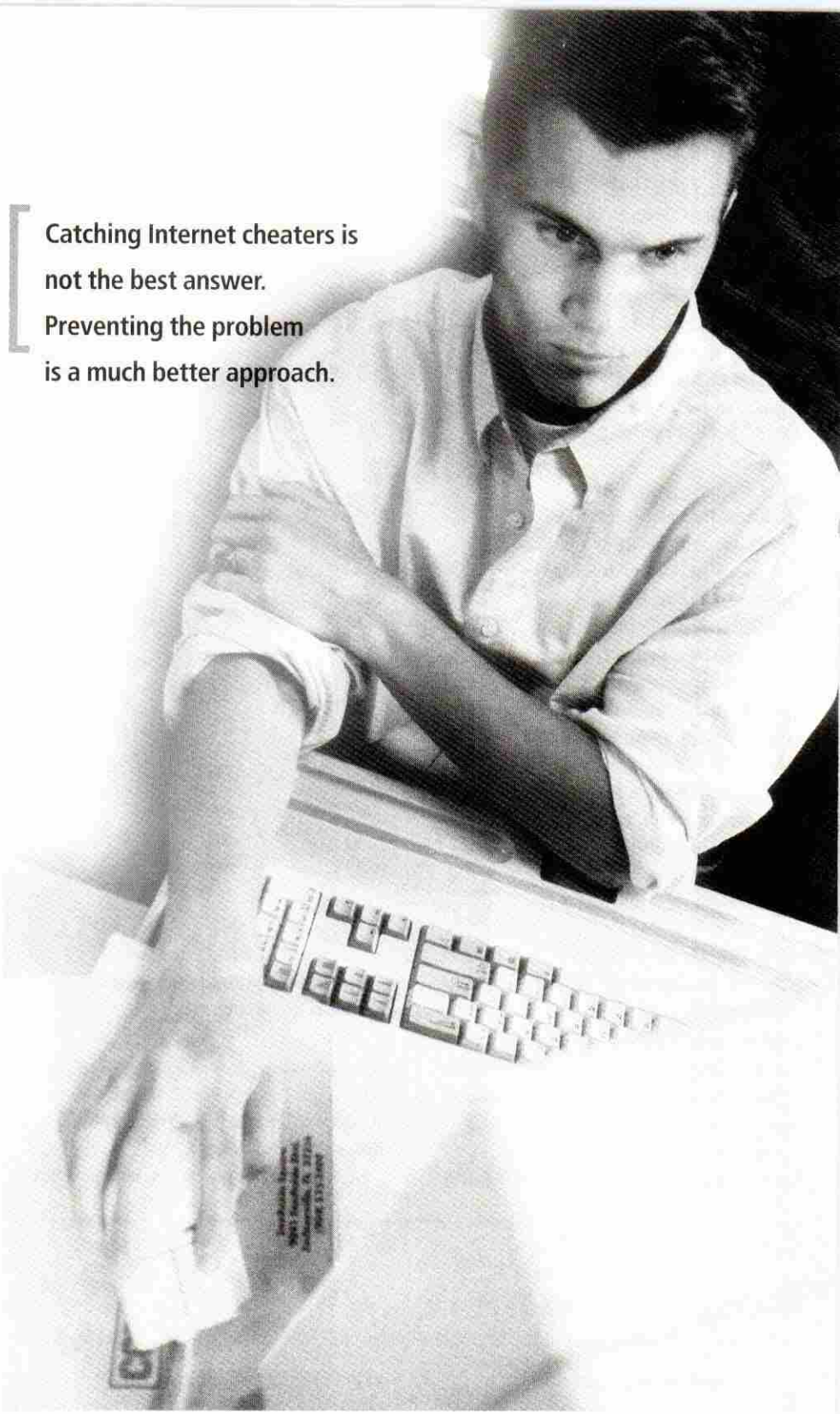
Other sites have stronger warnings, including some that remind students that teachers know about these sites and that taking a paper from the Net could get a student expelled. Most such disclaimers are buried on secondary pages where users may or may not bother to read them. On the homepage, visitors are encouraged to search for "free" papers on any topic or—for a price—to order a custom-written paper.

The warnings and disclaimers are window dressing. As put succinctly by a 17-year-old student from Stuyvesant High School, "There aren't a lot of original papers that get written anymore" (Appleborne, 1997). We can compare warnings and disclaimers at cheating sites with those at pornography sites that ask whether the user is 21 and request that underage users kindly leave the site. These disclaimers offer some measure of protection for the site developer, but do little to dissuade an eager, Web-surfing teen. With such site names as "Evil House of Cheat," "Homework World," "Cheater.com," and "School Sucks," it's no wonder that the warnings go largely unnoticed.

Some sites don't bother with a disclaimer and actively encourage students to cheat and lie. Others feature a catchy motto that contradicts any disclaimer the site may offer. At SchoolSucks.com, you are greeted with the phrase "download your workload" and the boast that at this site, "students are students and teachers are nervous." This text appears next to the site's claim that "School Sucks is not for plagiarizers" (Sahr, 1999).

The most popular sites are equipped with a search engine so that students can find a paper on any topic in any content area with ease. Many include a free e-mail news-update service to alert students when new topics are available. Some are sophisticated enough to catalog papers by several criteria, such as course, school, and teacher of the original paper; the topic or theme; and the original grade received. Many are starting to offer papers in Spanish—even Russian and Hebrew.

Catching Internet cheaters is not the best answer. Preventing the problem is a much better approach.



What We Can Do

Many teachers believe that detecting an Internet cheater is impossible. It's not easy, but it's not as difficult as they imagine. An alert teacher has several ways to find out where the student got his or her paper, such as being aware of

the sites and doing a quick search for the topic. It doesn't hurt to check search engines for the topic name, too. For example, I can type *Lord of the Flies* to see what papers are available on that novel. In fact, I did and found many papers readily available online.

Another method to confirm that a student has used the Internet to cheat is to check his or her reference list. I am amazed when students (usually unintentional cheaters) list a source as a reference and then plagiarize like nobody's business by neglecting to cite the source in the paper. I have gone to Web sites that students referred to in a bibliography and found whole paragraphs from the papers right there, word for word.

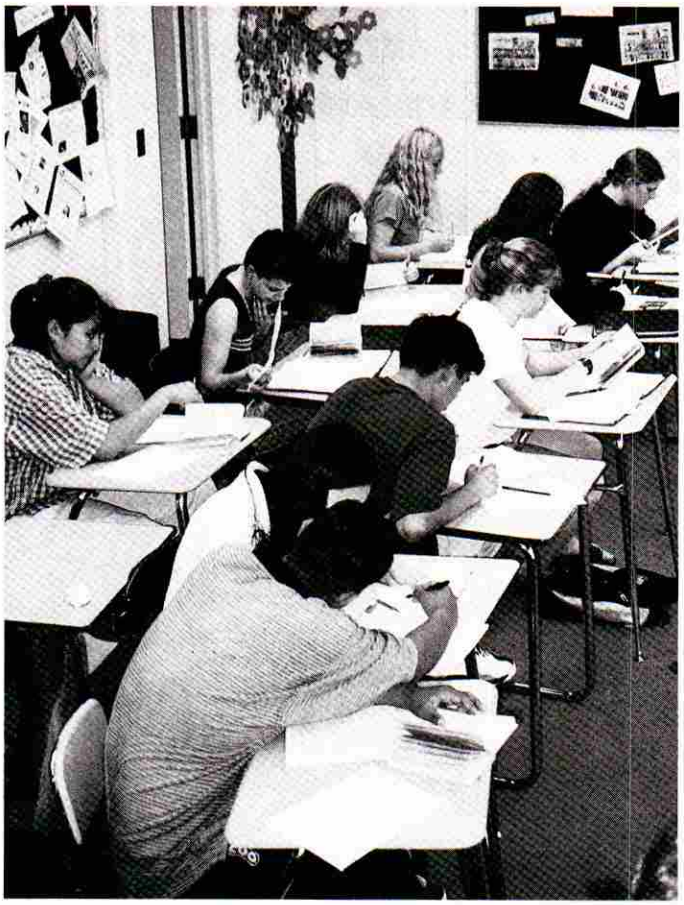


Photo courtesy of Lisa Renard

Students learn to use traditional resources for their research—and proper forms of documentation.

Do We Really Need to Go to All that Work?

More to the point than figuring out a paper's source is deciding whether we need that information at all. If we suspect plagiarism and the student cannot back up the originality of his or her work by answering a few carefully posed questions about the paper's content or key terms, we have grounds to ask the student to rewrite the paper in his or her own words.

It is important to be respectful when talking to a student or a parent about the authenticity of work and to avoid tones of indictment. Our interest lies in helping students learn to document sources, not in prosecuting cheaters. I have said to students, "This doesn't sound like your unique voice. Did anyone help you?" Appealing to the idea that a student has begun to develop a "voice" and inserting the euphemism "help" allow the student to respond with dignity and a larger degree of honesty. More often than not, the student will admit to getting "help" from a parent, a sibling, a friend, or the Internet. In the ensuing conversation, we discuss the appropriate use of that assistance and the importance of doing our own work.

Holding the student responsible for rewriting the piece is an important part of this lesson. When we discover plagiarism and assign a failing grade without asking the student to rewrite the piece, he or she develops a deep resentment and sees us as the enemy rather than as a partner in learning. When the teacher becomes the enemy, we have inhibited the student's intrinsic motivation to learn and to develop skills (Rogers, Ludington, & Graham, 1998)—almost guaranteeing that the student will continue to cut corners to get good grades instead of working to learn and achieve.

We need not fear parents, administrators, or students who deem it unfair when we ask whether a paper is original. Always get a sample of in-class student writing—at least a page—at the beginning of the term. Make a copy and file it. We then have a basis for judging the authenticity of future writing and for assessing improvement over time. We can reasonably tell a student, a parent, or an administrator that we are

FIGURE 1

Alternative Paper Topics

Revising writing assignments can make them less vulnerable to Internet cheating.

Cheat-Able Assignments	Cheat-Resistant Assignments
Explain and describe the relationship between Anne Frank and her mother.	Write a letter as Mrs. Frank to your daughter Anne, explaining the problems you are having with her.
Outline the steps of animal cell division.	What would it be like if people reproduced the way that individual animal cells do?
Write a three-page paper about Napoleon's successful campaigns.	You are a member of Napoleon's army. Write a personal diary about what happens during your advances on other countries.

challenging the originality of a paper on the basis of an earlier writing sample. On the flip side, we must be prepared to apologize. It is possible that the student's writing has improved dramatically or that the original sample was not indicative of the student's best effort.

An Ounce of Prevention

Catching Internet cheaters is not the best answer. It's a lot like doing an autopsy. No matter how terrific the coroner is at determining how or why a person died, the damage has been done. Bringing the culprit to light won't change that. Preventing the problem is a much better approach.

A student who has decided to plagiarize rather than to write his or her own paper has learned somewhere along the line that the final product takes precedence over learning something from the process of writing. Students who plagiarize have not learned to take pride in quality work from their own pens. They have not learned that when they incorporate another writer's words, it is important to give credit to the original author.

No matter how great we get at detecting student plagiarism, we won't be undoing that educational damage. Like doctors who prefer preventative medicine to a postmortem, we should look for ways to prevent students from wanting to plagiarize. We should look for ways to help them want to do the writing themselves—ways for them to see the value in the process and to take pride in their own skills and knowledge.

Make It Interesting

Probably the best defense against Internet plagiarism is to avoid the generic, every-teacher-assigns-it paper topic. Instead of asking students to analyze the plot of *The Odyssey,* have them write a comparison paper that reflects how their life journeys parallel that of Odysseus. They will have to know the plot. They will also have the bonus of using higher-level thinking skills to apply the literature to their own lives. In addition, the paper will have high interest because students tend to like to write about themselves. High-interest papers are less likely to promote plagiarism because students will want to show off their ideas.

The most vulnerable paper topics are those that ask students to merely recount information. Book reviews that don't require a personal opinion, book reports, reports of information, plot summaries, and character analyses are among the easiest to obtain and adapt from the Net. They are the types of papers that students want to avoid. If we put our generic paper topics in the "Paper Topic Recycl-o-matic 2000" to become less cheat-able, the results might look like those in Figure 1.

One benefit of taking the time to develop cheat-resistant writing prompts is increased student creativity. This technique also encourages students to invest thought in the topic, make judgements on the basis of their values, and express personal opinions—all high-level skills. Creative papers are also more fun for the teacher to read, providing a welcome departure from the tired old topics.

Embrace the Process

Students quickly learn what is important to their teachers. It used to be standard practice to assign paper topics, provide a due date, and then collect the papers. When we do only these things, we send a clear message that what matters is the end product. The process of writing becomes unimportant, as long as the paper is finished on time. Why not plagiarize if the teacher seems interested only in the final result? Print the paper, get the grade. That's what counts.

More and more, educators in all disciplines are joining writing teachers in encouraging writing as a process rather than as the means to achieve a product for a grade. When we adopt this strategy, students are less likely to plagiarize because they have worked hard at each stage of the process—prewriting, organizing, drafting, and revising. By the time they polish the final product, students who have engaged in process writing—and have been guided along the way—feel a sense of pride and ownership that does not easily allow them to tarnish all their work and learning with plagiarism.

Teach Source Documentation

To head off Internet plagiarism, we must teach our students about source documentation. The Modern Language Association stylebook features information on how to document sources from the World Wide Web (MLA, 1998). The MLA encourages students to find and record any information that will help readers locate the cited sources. The American Psychological Association and the University of Chicago Press stylebooks have made similar up-to-date changes.

To learn source documentation, students can compile a bibliography without writing the actual paper. Assign or let students pick a topic, then have them create a reference page. Working at the library and in the computer lab adds the benefit of learning about how to find resources. This assignment brings students' attention to the idea of plagiarism, introduces them to style manuals, and reinforces the notion

Key Elements of Cheat-Resistant Papers

- Be aware of how and why students may plagiarize.
- Avoid using the same topics year after year.
- Make topics specific rather than generic.
- Choose topics of high interest to students.
- Tie topics to the students' experiences.
- Require higher-level thinking skills.
- Require creative responses.
- Provide a range of topic choices that fit the objective.
- Engage students in all phases of the writing process.
- Teach and practice source documentation.

that they must acknowledge outside sources. The next step is to incorporate source documentation skills into an actual paper.

Another way to reinforce the idea of crediting sources is to always do so ourselves. In our handouts, discussions, and resource materials, we should make it a point to name researchers, colleagues, and students who have contributed ideas or words. Post quotes in the classroom with the sources clearly indicated. Allow students to reference one another in their papers, projects, or presentations. This helps them appreciate that the words that they use came from someone's hard work and that the original writer or artist deserves credit.

A Challenge for the New Millennium

Changes in the resources available to students demand that we reflect on our teaching practices and adjust how we've always done things. Internet cheaters can't flourish in classrooms where process is valued as much as, or more than, product. When we get involved with student papers at every stage, we are less susceptible to plagiarism problems. Students are also less likely to plagiarize when we take the time to create unique, student-centered writing assignments instead of opting for grab-bag topics easily found online. Internet plagiarism resources challenge us to understand how and why a student might opt to cheat, then to help students find the value in doing the writing themselves. ■

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