

## Buying In, Selling Short: A Pedagogy against the Rhetoric of Online Paper Mills

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I don't cheat, but not because it is unacceptable. I don't cheat because I'm picky about my work and would never use someone else's, especially if they didn't write as well as me.

—English 101 student

Unlike other forms of academic dishonesty, which are driven only by the desire for a reward or at least the pursuit of a discrete “right” answer, plagiarism is additionally, and importantly, reliant on students’ perceptions of authorship. The purchase of essays from paper mill Web sites, as one of the more egregious forms of plagiarism, is generally undertheorized in English studies, perhaps because it is often viewed as a less complicated problem in the context of larger, more “forgivable” acts such as the visible rise of cut and paste and other types of academic dishonesty at the postsecondary level. Clearly, however, the advent of digital technologies that allow access to completed papers on a variety of topics, often at a low price or at no cost and delivered instantly to one’s e-mail inbox, has created valid concern among faculty, especially those involved in the teaching of writing.<sup>1</sup> This concern has generated a great amount of discussion about *detecting* such wholesale (and frequently labeled as criminal) plagiarism, diverting attention away from

the more productive discussion of how faculty might prevent such plagiarism from occurring in the first place.

As I have argued elsewhere (Ritter 2005), student patronage of paper mills is reinforced in the college writing community by students' disengagement from academic definitions of authorship; their overreliance on consumerist notions of ownership, especially in Internet commerce; and, importantly, students' lack of confidence in their own writing and research skills. Many first-year writers, such as the one quoted above, have divorced academic integrity from authorship such that choices about writing come down to issues of quality. Students base their choices specifically on which site of authorship—that which resides within themselves or that which resides online—will provide the better product for gaining a college degree, which students believe is a proof-of-purchase certificate and faculty believe is an intangible intellectual achievement.

When a student buys a paper to call his or her own, it is not generally due to a failure to study for an exam or a panic over whether the answer is “A” or “C.” Nor is it only about achieving the short-term goal of a “good” grade. While it would be naive to completely discount the factors of panic and desperation in this equation, the decision to purchase a *whole* paper—rather than shore up an incomplete, insufficient, or otherwise poor quality paper of the student's own making—ultimately comes from a clear disassociation with both process and product, both the act of writing and the value of the written product itself. This lack of understanding of (or concern for) the tenets of authorship is widespread, especially among first-year writing students who more often than not have had no corollary expository writing instruction in high school. Patronage of paper mills is, as a result, a learned behavior, which may be unlearned, to an extent, through faculty efforts to integrate into first-year writing courses challenging, thought-provoking assignments that ask students to be active agents in their own writing.

As writing teachers continue to puzzle over how to find instances of plagiarism, we are most desperate to answer to those external forces asking why we can't stop “all this cheating,” especially in our charged (and often self-appointed) capacity as the Plagiarism Elimination Task Force for our universities-at-large. Thus we patronize our own special Web sites (turnitin.com, plagiarism.org) seeking detection solutions, only occasionally asking why such wholesale plagiarism is occurring at all. A recent mass-mailed advertisement for turnitin.com (which I received on 2 April 2005), titled “One of These Students Is Plagiarizing a Paper. Can You Tell Which One?” claims the following: “The internet is an invaluable research tool—but it also

gives some students an irresistible opportunity to plagiarize.” It then goes on to claim that many institutions use the turnitin.com service to “solve the plagiarism problem and ensure academic integrity in the classroom.” In addition to my belief that these claims are, at their core, false—as I reject the notion that students cannot “resist” plagiarism and that turnitin.com’s service will “solve” the “plagiarism problem”—this advertisement points to the typical way in which plagiarism discussions are focused on detection and outcomes, rather than on holistic considerations of prevention in the context of writing instruction and student written work.

The ideas at play in the turnitin.com advertisement are in evidence on the hundreds of faculty-designed Web sites, for faculty audiences, on plagiarism detection and prevention. These sites follow a common template: topics move from a discussion of what plagiarism is and in what ways students plagiarize, to how to talk to students about plagiarism, to how to write “plagiarism-proof” assignments, to, finally, how to detect plagiarism when it happens and how to appropriately punish students. While these faculty-led sites are valuable resources, as a whole they do not complicate the notion of authorship, nor do they address the student’s specific role in reducing academic dishonesty. As faculty, we often seem to feel that the entire “problem” of plagiarism is ours to fix: *we* must communicate what plagiarism is to students, *we* must write better assignments, *we* must take on the ethical dimensions of plagiarism and *deliver* the lesson to our students. Of course we must, at some level, do all of these things, especially for new college students who have little experience with academic discourse or with the demands of the university setting; however, we also must invest our students with some agency of their own in this complicated and long-term learning process. We must position our students as partners in the learning process and as primary players in the construction of their own academic agencies, and we must do this in the context of their own writing and research.

In this article, I pose a classroom-based response to the point of writerly no return, whereupon first-year writers, faced with options such as the paper mills, make critical decisions about the use-value of their own academic authorship. I explicate a writing assignment that I have designed for the first-year research writing classroom, which seeks to develop students’ skills as active researchers and writers and challenges their personal—and culturally reinforced—notions of authorship and academic integrity. To provide a background for the assignment’s design and purpose, I first revisit some prominent existing positions on student development in the writing classroom, as well as theories about external forces that shape this develop-

ment. Specifically, I argue that because first-year composition is often a site of “subject-free” instruction, which causes resistance among students skeptical of the course’s required nature and implicit catch-all instructional design, it is the course within which patronage of paper mills may be the most prevalent. Additionally, I argue that theories of learning that seek to understand this resistance from a cultural standpoint—specifically Deborah Brandt’s theory of “sponsored” literacy—allow us insight as to how paper mills thrive on our students’ disengagement from the very act of writing and authorship itself. I illustrate how these theories may be evidenced in the context of a writing assignment designed to address such disengagement head-on in the first-year writing classroom. Finally, I discuss how sample student responses to the assignment illustrate some of the conflicting messages that the paper mills send to students, messages that may be deconstructed profitably by students in pursuit of an eventual academic agency of their own, gained through rhetorical analysis of these controversial, public texts.

### **In Search of an Agency: First-Year Writers and Institutional Status**

Many scholars have noted that first-year writing students falter not because of innate lack of skill or facility with language but because of their unfamiliarity with and inability to navigate a new discourse community, that which resides in the academy. Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz (2004: 125), in their report on the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, take as a guiding premise that first-year students are acutely aware, as new college writers, that the “old” rules of high school writing are no longer valid. Thus these student writers occupy “the double perspective of the threshold, a liminal state from which they might leap forward—or linger at the door.” Sommers and Saltz additionally recognize that “what is missing from so many discussions about college writing is the experience of students” (125), particularly when they have been made to feel like “academic tourists” by virtue of never writing anything substantial or meaningful in high school (130). They argue that these students can, in contrast, “thrive in a course where they are urged to trust their own intuitions” (139). In the Harvard study, Sommers and Saltz prove that those students who discarded their preconceived notions about writing and allowed themselves to be fully engaged in the intellectual process of writing-as-learning were those who exhibited and were able to recognize, on graduation, their maximum growth as writers (134).

Such engagement requires an investment in the process as well as the product, however, and such investment does not come easily. As David Bartholomae (1997 [1985]) has famously argued, we must bring our students

into academic discourse as not only willing but equal participants in learning, challenging them to mimic the language and rhetoric of the academy so as to achieve full-fledged, participatory agency in it. Bartholomae uses “mimic” to mean internalizing as opposed to co-opting without context or attribution; understanding the difference between taking and employing is at the heart of Bartholomae’s charge that we assist students in their “invention” processes. Our students must “learn to speak our language” by “assembling and mimicking [it] while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirement of conversation, the history of a discipline, on the other hand” (590). Bartholomae argues that such a learning curve is critical to academic success, especially for basic writers. This learning is complicated by the multipurpose nature of the first-year writing course, designed in many institutions as an introduction to academic literacy courses meant to serve many masters in an often interdisciplinary manner.

Without having true “disciplinary” status, as Sharon Crowley (1998: 9) observes, the required first-year writing course thus becomes primarily, by default, “the institutional site wherein student subjectivity is to be monitored and disciplined. . . . The course is meant to shape students to behave, think, write, and speak as students rather than the people they are, people who have differing histories and traditions and languages and ideologies” (8–9). Crowley sees the course as not just lacking disciplinary status, as relevant to acquisition of a particular academic discourse, but also as harboring a multitude of competing (and potentially outdated) goals that students should and often do resist when articulated as a university requirement. Most writing faculty have experience with this resistance, as composition frequently manifests itself as the “introduction to the university” course, particularly on campuses where it is labeled “first-year seminar,” encompassing a wide variety of initiatives of instruction, including but not limited to the basics of study skills; reading comprehension (particularly of nonfiction texts); critical thinking and analytic inquiry; orientation to library services and other support services (such as tutoring labs) for practicing these skills outside the classroom; and, finally, expository writing.

Unlike other courses in which the primary task is to learn subject matter, first-year composition is thus the course without a “true” subject. Along with students, faculty often see the potpourri design of the first-year writing course as problematic and thereby sometimes resist it themselves, on professional grounds. Faculty may ask, what is the focus here? What am I teaching? This, I believe, leads to the popularity of the special topics focus of many composition program curricula (including my own), particularly those

courses rooted in research writing. Unlike other academic disciplines, composition is a requirement for all, regardless of student background, skill level (with the exception of placement mechanisms designed to better sort students by proficiencies), or student interest or intended area of study; hence Crowley's now-famous "abolitionist" argument regarding this course as a requirement per se. I believe that composition's lack of disciplinary status—and the resistance that this causes in its classrooms—is applicable to a discussion of plagiarism, as student resistance to such a course coupled with a central, process-oriented goal in that course (writing improvement) makes for a difficult mix for disengaged, reward-seeking students navigating a territory that seemingly lacks both a central purpose and a clear endpoint reward.

Then there is the often added charge of the composition course—to produce students who are "ready" for the myriad ethical and preprofessional challenges of their more advanced course work (that which truly "counts" in their degree field)—and we have a difficult mix indeed, on which the paper mills may easily capitalize. Learning to write means learning to be an honest writer, one who has ideas that may be labeled "original," "unique," or "new," but with little tangible, available explanations of how students might achieve these labels given the tools at hand. Learning to write in the first-year research writing classroom also thus becomes a study in learning how not to write—how not to commit unethical acts, broadly conceived, in writing. As plagiarism itself goes to the core of what faculty consider immoral behavior—copying, cheating, lying are all applicable descriptors here—such lessons are logically situated in a discussion of the "right" way to write and do research. This discussion takes place in the first-year classroom so as to invest in students these concepts early in their academic careers, as a true "service" to the university.

Candace Spigelman (2001: 338) recognizes, however, that in terms of ethical challenges in the teaching of writing, students often "do not passively accept our version of the ethical or the good. . . . Although they may ape our pieties, they may not internalize our hopes for a better world." Thus, as first-year writing faculty, we are collectively addressing students who feel the push and pull not only of intellectual instruction but often of ideological or even moral instruction as well, and who may resist this secondary pedagogy as much or more than they do the primary writing occasion(s) within which this instruction is given. This resistance leads students, quite logically, to prioritize writing that seems to have real ideological and intellectual value, in contrast with the more perfunctory writing tasks required in their secondary and postsecondary general education courses.

Unfortunately, as Christy Friend (1994) has argued, simply keeping our own ethical stances out of classroom discussions or writing assignments does not necessarily clear the way for a value-free environment. Friend argues that “a classroom that adopts a ‘hands-off’ stance toward student opinions does not always require students to take responsibility for their judgments” (556). As a result, students’ values exist at the singular level—that which need not be articulated or defended in a larger cultural context. Friend would thus seem to be arguing that the standard design of the first-year writing course—that which promotes an open discussion of competing ethics and values, moderated by the instructor—would be the ideal model for writing instruction and the appropriate method for teaching students to imbue their writing with their own personal ethics, making such writing valuable to them as authors. However, for Friend, this is not the case. She contends that

even supposing that students do acquire such positions and feel committed to convincing others of them, does this alone necessarily equip them to write about their positions in principled ways? Does a student who holds an “ethical” position on, say, racism, necessarily know how to construct a text on that topic that the academic community would consider responsible? Imparting values to students and shaping the processes through which they communicate them are connected but not equivalent problems. To talk about them as though they are is to conflate the ethical stance as an end product with the process by which it is arrived at and put to use. (553)

Ultimately, Friend’s pedagogy seeks to “empower people as participants in making ethical decisions rather than simply distributing goods and sets of static principles to them” (560). In other words, we can provide the format for a discussion of ethics—including the ethics of academic honesty—but we cannot teach students how to employ these ethics, once they decide where they stand. We cannot believe that simply bringing ethics into the classroom means that our students will either mimic what is “right” or internalize what they should believe, reproducing those beliefs in their written work. For Friend, there must be a bridge that forces students to invest themselves in the process of developing and writing about their own ethics and values; I would argue that this process is the most appropriate one for addressing plagiarism, for constructing a pedagogy against plagiarism rather than in reaction to it once it has occurred.

While invested student writers do the best and most worthwhile writing not just for their professors but for themselves, realizing that investment in

(required) first-year courses is indeed problematic when students are enrolled against their wills and are additionally part of a growing consumerist college culture that, in terms of postgraduation goals, “set[s] [its] professional goals explicitly *in opposition to* less attractive outcomes” such as hourly wage jobs and other nonlucrative, low-prestige careers (Smith 1997: 303; emphasis added). In contrast, first-year writing courses typically promote more lofty goals of intellectual development and civic engagement in their designs and objectives. Our task as writing faculty is to strike a balance between helping students to become literate professionals and shaping their writing consciousness in ways still palatable to our own ethics, the ethics of the university, and the ethics of the larger community in which our students live and work.

At times in this process we are part of a binary opposition in which teachers are always adversaries, even when compared with external forces shaping student writing and literacy. In many ways, as Brandt (1998: 167) has argued, those authoritative voices from outside our classroom—such as deans, colleagues from other academic disciplines (especially those not writing-intensive in nature), and company bosses and board members—are the “sponsors” of our students’ literacy, in that these outside individuals are “delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people’s literacy usually gets recruited.”

These concepts of economies and recruitment are most powerfully at work in the internal and external dynamics of the first-year writing classroom, as students frequently see their work in this course as a means to an end, both temporarily (completing a general education requirement) and long-term (finish this and other courses, and then comes the degree, and then the money, hopefully) despite our perceptions of the course as an introduction to academic literacy and academic discourse. Along the way, what students are writing, let alone when and how it is written, becomes, for the most part, quite immaterial in our students’ own eyes, even as it is carefully planned and executed in our syllabi. These external sponsors drive the students’ writing as well as, I would argue, their academic ethics; the sponsors shape “the different cultural attitudes people develop toward writing versus reading” as they “enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite,” gaining “from [the students’] success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association” (167).

In the context of the required first-year writing course, I believe Brandt’s argument to be the most applicable and the most fraught with consequences. If students are not writing for themselves and for their own agency

in the academy, then whom—or what—are they writing for, and how should those ends shape our pedagogical means, especially when we add lessons about plagiarism into the mix? I would like to argue here that if we see concepts such as authorship and “sponsorship” not only in the context of the diversity of the first-year writing curriculum and issues of student agency but also in light of a highly commercialized, economically driven American culture, we might also begin to see such sponsorship perverted in unexpected sites, namely, the paper mills. Then might we begin truly to engage our students in these complex ideas through their own academic writing assignments.

Charged with teaching students about plagiarism, we often fear these sites and attempt to keep them out of our students’ lines of vision. Even as the writing classroom is a unique space in which more cooperative, collaborative learning is truly possible, when we are charged to teach broad, far-reaching concepts such as academic honesty—which includes instilling values about authorship in addition to implicit instruction in morals—this cooperative learning seems to be less important than how our investment in the concept of academic honesty will play out when the student enters the workforce or the preprofessional arena (including graduate school) as an “honest writer.” Paper mills are in themselves also “sponsoring” our students’ literacy (or avoidance thereof) by selling something valuable to both students and professors: electronically delivered academic writing, often itself free from plagiarism, if we can get our minds around that oxymoron.<sup>2</sup> Thus, I argue that we cannot “teach” our students anything in isolation and that the longer we try to remain as separate entities in this work, the further we fall behind in shaping the engaged, invested, independent writers that Bartholomae and Sommers and Saltz strive to create. As Brandt (1998: 169) asserts, “Literacy, like land, is a valued commodity in this economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge.” The paper mills, however aggravating, duplicitous, or even criminal they may be, are buying our students’ loyalties, shaping their concepts of authorship and literacy, and we are letting them.

To combat our students’ patronage of paper mills in light of the obvious, and troubling, disconnect between our ideas of authorship and literacy and those of our students, I argue that we must take the classroom time to analyze the paper mills’ rhetoric and their appeal to today’s college students by examining the sites with our students. Analyzing these sites in conversation with our students offers the most enduring, intellectually viable solution to absentee authorship vis-à-vis paper mill patronage and the most intellectually stimulating way that I can find to answer both the external demands for

“antiplagiarism instruction” and our own internal demands for thoughtful, challenging assignments that make students engage in that ideal of thinking for themselves.

My pedagogical approach to combating the paper mills’ rhetoric is a writing assignment that asks students first to analyze what the paper mills are doing to persuade students to purchase their services and then to formulate an essay response to this rhetoric that pulls them into the conversation heretofore only taking place among teachers (and, in some cases, independent companies such as turnitin.com). My assignment, given in a first-year writing course devoted to the research topic of “issues in education,” asks students to visit three or more paper mills and analyze how the sites use pervasive, multiple rhetorics to pull in potential clients (students like themselves) and engage them in academic dishonesty. As students synthesize the rhetorical approaches in their writing, they take part in an authoritative, “academic” conversation about their peers’ motivations (and perhaps their own) for patronizing these Web sites. As I agree with Spigelman’s (2001: 321) general principle that we, as faculty, “[recognize] the anti-foundational nature of any system of values and our own reluctance to promote our own values in the classroom, given our understanding of institutional domination and power relationships,” as well as the problems that arise from “the student’s ability to discern the instructor’s mission and to compose in accordance with that perception” (322), I believe that investing the ethical authority in students makes for the most productive means of tackling antiacademic practices such as wholesale plagiarism.

### **Designing the Assignment: Prioritizing Student Agency**

My writing assignment seeks to teach first-year students an alternate, and broader, view of academic inquiry, again repositioning the paper mills (against their intended purpose) in an intellectually useful light for first-year researchers. My assignment asks how one may employ research writing skills (synthesis, analysis, source citation) to study dishonest academic practices that form the antithesis of first-year research and inquiry, in hopes that students will reflect on the critical practices that all authors use in designing their own research on controversial or problematic topics.

As opposed to a more broad-based research assignment *on* this topic, in which students might interview colleagues and professors about their opinions of “cheating” and plagiarism, or research the incidences of plagiarism on one’s campus, my assignment asks that students do a textual analysis of the Web sites themselves and create a researched argument from these seem-

ingly one-dimensional, commercial materials. To avoid singular notions of transference in such text-based writing assignments, Darsie Bowden (1993: 377) advocates for “the creation of real world assignments,” among other classroom suggestions, to serve as models of “genuine rhetorical acts.” My assignment seeks to model this by giving students the responsibility for rhetorical analysis, as they deconstruct a popular and highly rhetorical site that is so frequently ignored or dismissed in other academic and larger community contexts. Ultimately, I believe that if we design assignments that require that students analyze the primary texts of our commercial culture to define relatively opaque terms like *plagiarism* and *academic dishonesty*, and the rhetorical force behind these terms on the paper mills, then we might be able to satisfy our own intellectual standards in the classroom while appeasing those external forces that mandate that we deliver, to their courses and their companies, “good” writers with a critical sense of our culture’s internally competing academic ethics.

In designing and implementing this assignment, I operate from the premise that students who find their way during their college careers to the paper mills have already bought into the rhetoric of the company—including the myth that professors don’t care about students and that authorship online is nonexistent, therefore the purchase of a previously authored product is an acceptable means to an end (Ritter 2005: 615). This premise is based on my prior research findings that show that the attitude about writing precedes the patronage and fuels it in kind. There is the way in which this seductive rhetoric of antiauthorship ultimately spreads. Consider the real difference between the student who, desperate for a paper the night before a due date, visits a paper mill recommended by a friend and the student who is doing the recommending. We must distinguish between the rhetoric used to bring in students initially and the deeper (un)ethical impulses that keep students coming back for more, sometimes frequently enough that they may establish an account with one or more sites and type in personal information or a password that tells the company their academic needs or preferences on their return to the site.

When we examine the rhetoric that paper mills continue to use online, in their capacity as nationally advertised companies that gain student-clients from all over the country, we can see that not much except the method of delivery has changed for the paper mills since the pre-Internet days of my youth, in which such companies were housed in shabby houses on the edge of college campuses and staffed by apathetic undergraduates whom one saw on campus occasionally but, of course, never personally knew. The com-

panies are still operating relatively anonymously but with the bravado of a high-profile corporation, as they hoodwink students—their customers—into believing that cheating is “OK” because of both external and internal pressures for students to succeed in the face of a bleak job market, unfeeling and impersonal professors who are part of the university machine, and, perhaps most important, the prevalence of boring and “irrelevant” writing assignments. As Brandt (1998: 183) recognizes, “The ideological pressure of sponsors affects many private aspects of the writing processes as well as public aspects of finished texts. Where one’s sponsors are multiple or even at odds, they can make writing maddening. Where they are absent, they make writing unlikely.” When our students reach the point of desperation such that they go online seeking papers-for-sale, when their human writing sponsors, on the one hand, say “do it yourself” but also “do it right” and, importantly, “don’t cheat,” they then turn to their economically driven, practically minded Internet sponsors, the paper mills.

My main objective in this assignment is thus to engage students in a conversation about these sites and make this conversation part of their research writing experiences. However, I want my own prejudices about the sites to be less explicit than the overall directive of the assignment (to analyze the rhetoric in terms of its argument for academic dishonesty). Thus the prompt for my paper assignment is fairly informal and straightforward in its design. I do not want to be the teacher preaching “morals” per Spigelman’s concerns; I am more interested in finding out what students really think, when given the chance to express their thoughts (and beliefs), and in how those beliefs play out in their primary analyses of these electronic texts.<sup>3</sup>

When I first designed and employed this assignment, the sites I listed were representative of the twenty or so of which I was aware. Students visited *schoolsucks.com*, *research-assistance.com*, and *essayfinder.com* with the most frequency, but across the papers all sites listed were represented, including a few that I did not list. Since then, the number of sites has grown exponentially, providing hundreds (some researchers estimate thousands) of additional sites for future students’ analyses. Regardless of the sites chosen, the skill of the paper mills’ rhetoric was evident in the ways in which students both recognized the power and in most cases worked to justify it in the name of their friends, relatives, and peers who had already used such services, even if the students themselves clearly understood how the words, images, and overall design of the Web sites worked to fool college students into thinking that cheating was acceptable.

The predominant thinking in my students’ essays was “using these

sites is not OK for me, but I can see how it might be OK for others.” This logic, which elevates the student’s own perceived morals over those of his or her peers, is reflected in one of the many papers that took this argumentative approach in its design. A student, whom I will call Larry,<sup>4</sup> states, “In my heart and in my logical mind, I know that cheating wouldn’t help me at all. . . . I have cheated but I would never buy a paper from the Internet to hand in to a class. I have morals.” Students such as Larry are able to see cheating in general and the purchase of papers specifically as morally different, which may allow for the belief that paper mill patronage is always for someone else—albeit frequently a “someone else” whom they know well and who may someday be the student him- or herself. Larry’s response also may mimic what he believes the teacher (me) wants to hear: *I’m a moral person; I don’t cheat in this way*. I do recognize the issues at work in this response, as Larry is prompted to create an argument, yet one that seems to be at odds with itself. However, for this student to parse out the difference between cheating as an abstract concept and cheating one’s self out of authorship is, to me, a significant accomplishment. Our own culture at large traditionally fails to separate out these types of dishonesty and further fails to separate out the differing impetuses behind them. So it is significant to see students doing such parsing, when faced with the task of deconstructing how and why the Web sites proliferate. Additionally, Larry’s response, as one example here, illustrates this perceived distance from a type of cheating (paper mill patronage) that is widely seen as last-resort, in-your-face academic dishonesty.

This leads us, ultimately, to a troubling question: how can students simultaneously unmask the confidence game these Web sites play—and recognize the consequences of it, in many cases—while encouraging others to partake in it? Perhaps the rhetorical power of these sites is so overwhelming that even those students assigned to deconstruct it have a hard time completely ignoring its antischolarly attitude and logic when put in the context of their own authorial histories. To revisit Brandt’s theories, there is a reluctance, I believe, to fully reject the powerful concept of “sponsorship” that these sites promote to students already at odds with the prevailing values of academic literacy and authorship. Frequently, the sites promise to engage students in a transaction that will benefit their immediate needs (completion of a paper assignment) in an anonymous, secure fashion. The sites additionally promise that they “care” (in various ways) more than professors do.<sup>5</sup>

Brandt (1998: 173) might argue that this is the logical exchange in a consumerist society characterized by an “information-making, service-swapping” economy. To connect the paper mill patron’s experience to Brandt’s example

of the worker Dwayne Lowery, who experiences new literacy standards in his union management position, such students are aware of “new standards of literacy” developing, including “the arenas in which the worth of existing literate skills become degraded” (176). These students’ high school writing styles are no longer valid; they have been told that they must “relearn” how to write, without a lot of explanation as to why, other than it’s the “right” way now, in college. As such, these students, like Lowery, are compelled to find any way possible, lacking a real understanding of the importance of the writing process, to simply produce “documents that could compete in kind with those written by . . . formally educated, professional adversaries” (176). Brandt emphasizes how Lowery’s shifting workplace positions, first as an assembly-line worker in an automobile factory, then as a water meter reader, and ultimately as a union field staff representative responsible for writing documents related to worker contract negotiations, required that Lowery enter into a world of writing where literacy is “part of economic and political conflict” (176). As such, his previous notions of writing were suddenly and dramatically in conflict with those of his counterpart workers and writers.

Like Lowery, many students’ concepts of literacy, and by extension authorship, are literally shaped by the “accumulated layers of sponsoring influences—in families, workplaces, schools, memory—[which] carry forms of literacy that have been shaped out of ideological and economic struggles of the past” (178). However, when asked directly and thoroughly to analyze how and why they are compelled to do this using the paper mills, students are largely reluctant to articulate their complicity in this sponsored relationship. A closer look at a few of the student papers written in response to my assignment might shed some surprising light on this contradiction between ethics and academics that results from paper mill sponsorship: the student who patronizes such sites has become by definition a consumer, pulled out of the intellectual arena of the classroom and the campus and into the arena of big business and the Internet.

### **Deconstructing the Rhetoric of Commerce: Students’ Writerly Agencies**

My first-year students, at a regional, comprehensive university in the Northeast, come from largely working-class backgrounds and are often the first in their families to attend college. Most of them work, many in excess of twenty-five hours per week, and they freely state that they are attending college primarily to “get a good job,” specifically in professional fields such as secondary education, business, and nursing. As one of my colleagues has rightly pointed out, students attending universities such as mine, bound by

geography and finances, frequently do not really know *why* they are in college. Students at my institution frequently articulate only three possibilities after high school graduation: college, the military, or an hourly wage job (in this hierarchical order). They thus see college as not a “choice” but a societal mandate that often stands in opposition to what they “really want,” which itself is often impossible for them to articulate without engaging in a discussion of school versus greater societal freedoms. This enrolled-against-my-will attitude is, of course, a primary contributor to perceptions of authorship and academic integrity.

Still, when asked to tackle this assignment, their views on academic dishonesty—and, by extension, education—were somewhat diverse, which encouraged me to explore their responses individually in contrast to their seemingly uniform group attitudes about writing and literacy in our classroom interactions. Ellen, for example, argues that there is a practical (and anti-intellectual) impetus at work in students’ use of paper mills:

Could the marked increase in cheating be attributed to the state of our colleges, or perhaps the direction in which our college curriculum is going? Schoolsucks.com seems to suggest such, pointing out that “if the papers [on the site] are so bad, then we also have a teaching problem.” Perhaps . . . the teaching methods in most institutions of higher learning are not catering to the students of this generation. Meaning that today’s student is arguably more concerned with advancing solely for the purpose of moving on and graduating in order to get a job. . . . Therefore, in order to move on and concentrate on work in his or her own field, the student may be tempted to cheat in order to fulfill [requirements] in school.

Ellen’s critique of the system of higher education is predicated on her personally tailored secondary education, courtesy of home schooling. This made Ellen the perfect “outsider” who could analyze essentially from afar the educational system that most public-educated students take for granted. Ellen was able to observe that students in general blame the system for their educational woes and employ this blame in their justifications for patronizing paper mills. This philosophy feeds nicely into the paper mills’ structure. If seen as literacy sponsors, in Brandt’s terms, these sites “affect literacy learning in two powerful ways. They help to organize and administer stratified systems of opportunity and access, and they raise the literacy stakes in struggles for competitive advantage” (179). If students indeed, in Ellen’s opinion, cheat to “fulfill requirements” and as a response, the “teaching methods” are not “catering” to these students, then the students will, indeed, seek outside

sources of support that both better meet their needs and promise to provide a greater return on their educational investment. Certainly the paper mills do offer “stratified systems of opportunity and access” and, ironically, “raise the literacy stakes” in their design, as they provide a growing database of ever-better, ever-easier papers for sale that promise, both implicitly and explicitly, to be better than anything the student could have written.

In addition to her comments about student motivation, Ellen recognized the Internet’s possible future role as a kind of “library” replacement for a “whole new form of research,” and the way in which one paper mill, School sucks.com, has capitalized on that thinking by blaming the (possibly) poor papers they sell on the bad teaching that created this work in the first place. Ellen’s overall observations that students cheat in response to poor teaching, needless (or seemingly meaningless) general education requirements, or a need to succeed for financial ends (i.e., a job) are not only reflective of the central position that the Internet holds in our students’ research and researched writing but also in line with what scholars have previously found regarding student motivations for committing acts of academic dishonesty on the Internet or otherwise.

Patrick Love and Janice Simmons (1998: 541) found that students viewed plagiarism as “the dominant subset” of cheating in general; however, one student in the study claimed that “people know when they are cheating, but might not know when they are plagiarizing” (541), which exemplifies Rebecca Moore Howard’s (2000: 80) well-known theories of unintentional plagiarism of varying sorts and the distinct ways in which this sort of “patchwork” need not constitute intentional academic dishonesty. Love and Simmons further found that there were two types of factors influencing cheating: “internal” factors and “external” factors (542). The factors specific to plagiarism were, internally, “negative personal attitudes; lack of awareness; and lack of competency,” and externally, “grade pressure, time pressure, and task pressure,” and additionally, in a separate category, “professors” (544). Under “professors,” leniency and avoidance of the plagiarism issue were major factors, as was the failure to confront cheaters or failure to supervise students’ independent projects (545). This accords with Ellen’s perception that students cheat in response to “sub-standard” teaching methods. The factors of grade, time, and task pressure may in combination contribute to the notion that students cheat to fulfill a graduation requirement and then proceed to their careers of choice. This is information that we, as writing teachers, need to know and can best trust when we hear it from our own students.

Another student, whom I will call Mindy, argues for an additional

factor in the use of paper mills previously touched on here: the relative ease and anonymity of the sites themselves, compared with the methods of the old days, when papers-for-sale were exchanged hand to hand (or mailbox to mailbox), known to select students and accessible to fewer still:

Ten years ago college students paid someone else to do their papers. They didn't have the luxury of downloading papers or using the Internet, and the probability of being caught was much higher. Although there are ways for teachers and faculty to discover academic dishonesty, students have found ways around it. . . . Paper writing websites are making it OK for students to be lazy as long as they have money.

Mindy additionally points out the vulnerability of “customized” paper topics by trying a sample search request of her own:

I visited buypapers.com and all I had to do was fill in a box that asked what my paper had to be on. I typed in “what is the rhetoric of academic dishonesty on websites today,” the topic of this very paper. In a matter of twelve minutes I received a response explaining that after I entered my credit card number, the assignment would be given to a writer and I would have my paper in five to eight days. I then proceeded to schoolsucks.com and received an identical response.

Finally, Mindy argues for an examination of the paper mills not to expose their unethical business practices but to expose the ambitions—or lack thereof—of students patronizing the sites:

I also believe that it is wrong to deprive a student of his or her individuality. How and when will students be able to express themselves and learn if someone else is doing their work for them? So what kind of messages are these websites sending? They are telling students to forget individuality and education and to think about laziness and money while engaging in academic dishonesty.

Mindy provides a range of reactions to the sites indicating her community standing: she worked as a resident assistant in one of our student dormitories and frequently encountered students who in her estimation were shirking their responsibilities as college students. Her approach to the assignment was to see the Web sites as opportunities for these already delinquent students to find more (and easier) ways to avoid doing work. However, like many students, she tried to assign blame to the companies as well. Some students went so far as to blame the paper mills for promoting a kind of devil-may-care attitude on the part of adults toward children in general. As

one student, whom I will call Annie, stated, “Although grown adults give out definitions of plagiarism, cheating and academic dishonesty, there are some grown people who set up websites and sell essays to students.”

Both Annie and Mindy quickly seized on the divide between “adults” (or those who operate the paper mills) and “students” in their arguments for who is to blame for academic dishonesty and papers-for-sale. What is interesting about this constructed division is that neither Annie nor Mindy, both over eighteen years of age, would likely consider themselves anything less than “adults.” But perhaps when they are put upon to construct their identities as *other*—not those in charge of learning but those charged to learn, in the context of the college writing classroom—they begin to absolve themselves of any true responsibility to either their own personal ethics or their own intrinsic rights to the authorship (and by extension, ownership) of their written work.

Such would be a common reaction for students to have when provided with variations of sponsorship, if we return to the idea that, in Brandt’s theory, sponsors seek to gain directly or indirectly from those sponsored, “lend[ing] their resources or credibility” to this effort (1998: 167). These students, operating under the economic exchange system, put a great deal of faith and trust in the Web sites—faith that the papers are “quality,” trust that the paper will result in an acceptable (if not high) grade. In turn, the Web sites promote themselves as “credible” and authoritative—which in response necessarily infantilizes the sites’ patrons, who must in turn be without authority and whose writing must be less than credible.

Despite this recognition that the paper mills were both (seemingly) authoritative and simultaneously deceptive, another popular response to the assignment was to show how a student could easily detect and deconstruct the rhetorical trickery used by the paper mills, frequently the visual rhetoric that illustrates the notion that students are disinterested in learning, eager to “fool” teachers into thinking that the work they are submitting is actually their own, and overburdened or tired because of outside stressors. Almost all the students in my three sections at some point in their papers gravitated toward analysis of the visual construction of the sites, in particular toward the graphics that communicated the above ideas without language, or contradicted the sites’ publicized objectives, which claim to stand on higher moral ground than their actual business objectives (to offer “assistance in research” versus offering whole papers for sale). This particular component of analysis allowed students to articulate an attempt at power over their own inquiries, rather than simply being transcribers of previously published knowledge

pieced together in a well-cited collage. In short, students were discovering that they could, sometimes gleefully, outwit the “authors” of the paper mills, exposing their fraudulent techniques in writing done for a required university course.

As one student, whom I’ll call Steven, points out:

[On [termpapers-on-file.com](#)] the exact content of [the passage] is the following: “The intended purpose of our term papers is that they be used as models to assist you in the preparation of your own work.” . . . this statement comes in contrast with the images on [the] first page of the site. The first image represents a student sitting on a desk and three huge piles of books surrounding him. The other image is one that represents a human being sitting in front of a personal computer without knowing what to write. One could infer that these images are trying to pass the following message: “Why study and be desperate when I could find my essays through this site [instead]?”

Another student in Steven’s section of English 101, Jill, also visited [term papers-on-file.com](#) and observed a similar message in the series of graphics there:

Take the man on the computer, for example, who is not doing his work. This shows us that it’s O.K. to not be able to do your homework; maybe you’ve tried like this man, but have had no success. If so, that’s why we’re here, to help with your paper! Then there’s the man at the desk with piles of papers surrounding him. This tells [the Web site’s] audience, “we understand that you have so much other work to do, and if you don’t have the time . . . you can always turn to us.” The last image with the man and the hourglass pretty much speaks for itself. Time is running out, so you better take the easy way out and buy one of our papers.

Jill’s paper was one of the more thorough analyses of both visual and written rhetoric on the Web sites; her paper title (“Can Paper Mill Web Sites Be So Persuasive as to Make People Change Their Morals?”) is one indicator of her analytic approach. Jill begins by pointing out how small details, such as color selection, create a wholly persuasive visual document built on images of commerce and financial thrills, noting that [cheathouse.com](#) uses “(blue and red) text flashing back and forth such as you would see at a casino” (2). She also then notes how the Web sites often turns to sources outside their Webmasters to sell their products. Jill observes when visiting [cheathouse.com](#) that statements from loyal users, submitted to the Web sites as testimony of prior successes much like testimonies for products on the Home Shopping

Network or television product ads, serve as extra incentive in their persuasive discourse. Jill notes that statements such as “Since I joined Cheathouse, my grade average has gone up from a D- to a B+! You guys rule!” indicate what students want, namely, good grades and, in turn, parental and community respect. These observations again ring true with studies such as Love and Simmons’s (1998) that show that external factors for cheating often outweigh students’ individual ethical boundaries operating in their nonacademic lives, and with Brandt’s theories of external sponsorship of student literacy in the larger professional community. As with other literacy sponsors, there are “powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty” (Brandt 1998: 167) that lead to repeat, even proud patronage; student deconstructions of the Web sites show this to be a powerful component of the sites’ rhetorical strategies.

But students also recognized on many of the Web sites the tendency to give contradictory information that may cause students to be confused about what they will actually gain and at what price; in this respect, allowing students to do primary analyses of these sites caused many to question the long-term viability of such companies. Ginny observes this in her dismantling of the earnest psychological and financial promises stated on ezwrite.com, one of the newer paper mills online and one that Ginny found in her Web research:

It is very easy for a desperate, stressed-out student to get influenced by the false promises of the site (Ezwrite.com). Ezwrite . . . uses the phrase “instant gratification,” which causes the kids to develop a false sense of security in thinking that their school problems will be solved. The price of \$4.95 per page is displayed in big, bright, pink lettering at the top of the page. However, if you scroll down the page, you will find papers up to \$10.00 per page for a custom paper. This shows that the web sites’ advertising isn’t all true.

Ginny’s own personal predilections were those that would likely lead her to purchase, or at least consider purchasing, a paper at some point during her college career; she regarded the writing course as a requirement that “had” to be completed and as fairly useless in her quest to transfer to a technical college and eventually become a veterinarian. As such, she represented the students in my class with more malleable ethics—geared toward specific career-based ends—where cheating and academic dishonesty were concerned. But it is interesting to note that despite her assertions during class discussion that cheating, including copying another person’s exam or “borrowing” a previously written paper, is widespread and “just the way college

works,” Ginny’s disappointment with the sites’ empty promises caused her paper to be overwhelmingly negative about paper mills and covert cheating practices in general.

Certainly one may question whether Ginny expected so-called truth in advertising on these sites. But that question alone points to a problem with student patronage of these sites, as the entire exchange is predicated on trust in the quality and value of the “product” that students purchase. Yes, I believe that Ginny *did* expect the sites to be truthful in their graphics and provide a reliable and consistent product. In general, I believe that when faced with high-stakes issues such as whether to write a paper or buy one, students are historically quite genuine in their quest for an answer or solution. The design of the sites alone—which positions them as enemies of teachers, and of colleges and universities and the academic “system” in general—also promises to be aides, helpers, partners in completing that degree. Perhaps Ginny’s powers of critical reflection, though slightly misguided, were forced to the surface by this assignment, and perhaps this critical disappointment that she discovered through her own writing will be something she will remember when later tempted to purchase a paper online.

Ginny’s somewhat troubling analysis—which implicitly blames the sites for not being more ethical in their business practices with students—was noted by another student as well, whom I’ll call Amy. In Amy’s analysis, however, the ethical tables turn personal, as she points out how Schoolsucks.com fails to keep her interest because it uses phrases that are too “harsh” in their attitude toward school and teachers:

As you read on, the language gets harsh. “Lying sucks. Your teacher knows of this site. We don’t rate the paper, so many/most of them suck too. Lots of things in this world seem to suck. Lying (that ‘fancy word’, plagiarism is a form of it) sucks” (www.schoolsucks.com). If I were a student looking at this site for information . . . I wouldn’t want to use it (because) it has a negative attitude. After reading this I was so frustrated with the attitude behind the web site I didn’t even want to look anymore.

Amy’s paper, it should be noted, was one of the strongest arguments on the declining morals in our society, namely, the morals of college students in writing courses. She points out in her somewhat high-minded introduction that as students are given college writing assignments, “maybe the assignment isn’t anything interesting but it is obviously given to (the students) for a reason, like everything in life it is another learning experience that will guide one into a good future.” However, in many places in her analysis, she notes

that the Web sites meet her “approval” so long as they truly seem to be sites of assistance rather than sites for paper purchases, and so long as they keep a positive attitude about school. This, again, may reflect Amy’s own personal stance on education: she kept meticulous notes for each of her classes and served as a self-appointed leader in class discussions. But still her points of view are contradictory: how could she essentially give her blessing to sites that seemed honest, without applying her obvious powers of critical reflection to these sites and exposing them for what they are, based on her own ethical point of view? For Amy, the student is to blame, not the sites themselves, as she notes about Cheater.com that “the purpose is to have information handy to the viewer but it is the viewer who must use what is given to them and *choose to do wrong with it*” (emphasis mine).

### **Reconstructing the Deconstruction: Classroom Implications**

These sample essay responses at first appear to showcase a few contradictory messages in the students’ analyses. On the one hand, students seem to be savvy about rhetorical analysis (especially the deconstruction of visual rhetoric); aware of mixed messages and false claims put forth, especially those relevant to product quality; and able to position the value of the Web sites in the context of students’ conceptions of what college can and should do for them. On the other hand, students seem to uniformly claim that such rhetoric applies to others, but not to them, and that this rhetoric is irresponsible yet only as powerful as the students themselves allow it to be. But on further examination, these responses clearly illustrate instead the range of justifications created for and observed by the students as they engage in the rhetoric of the paper mills, having been entrusted by a teacher to “figure out” how discourse about academia actually is employed in the “real” world, including their own academic futures. Students not inclined to use the sites found ways that their analyses might target the unnamed but vulnerable “other”—the student, the Web site, the collective entity of students’ parents. While this projection, in psychological terms, allows students in many cases to avoid tackling their own moral quandaries, it does show that a kind of learned, student-led “watch” system on the paper mills is possible if as teachers we encourage it to happen.

Even students who may have been tempted in the past to purchase papers from these sites, put in a situation in which they are required to analyze what is sold there and how it is done, began to realize the flaws in this seductive system. I cannot guarantee that such an assignment will eliminate plagiarism in writing courses; in fact, I would be foolish to attempt such a

guarantee, as I believe that we can never eliminate plagiarism, for reasons thoroughly interrogated in our field's existing scholarship, nor can we completely eliminate the paper mills. The value of the purchased product is too deeply ingrained in our consumerist culture for these sites to fold, at least not in the short term.

However, if we take a proactive stance and use these sites as sources of analysis, in order to help students understand the basis for an academic agency that is not dependent on external forces (sponsors) but is instead rooted in their own developing authorial identities, then at least we can create some educational good out of an anti-intellectual enterprise. In short, giving students the power to analyze their choices and their responses to these sites may open up new opportunities for discussing some of those tricky issues at the center of academic dishonesty that our current seek-and-detect methodologies do not even begin to address or equip us to oversee in any beneficial, learning-centered manner. This discussion will also allow us to promote the value of writing in an alternate format and will, I believe, result in more interesting and complex writing, to which we might more meaningfully respond.

I believe that students can acquire the highly valued commodity of academic agency that academia seeks to bestow on students and employers, and other community members seek to secure in these students-as-academic products, only through challenging, process-based writing assignments that demand critical analysis of texts, such as the paper mill Web sites. As Ann Penrose and Cheryl Geisler (1994: 517) have shown, it is ineffective for faculty to instead decide that the end product of knowledge is more desirable, or more teachable, than the process of acquiring more limited but equally useful rhetorical knowledge. Penrose and Geisler claim that faculty cannot “argue that the remedy for students’ problems with authority is an increase in their domain knowledge . . . [as in doing so] we implicitly accept . . . the information-transfer model, in which personal knowledge is denied” (ibid.). In other words, if students are simply taught more in the abstract—for example, about specific issues or concepts—they are not likely to apply this knowledge to their own developing agencies unless the instructional context makes it applicable, essentially through active learning.

I would argue that plagiarism as an “issue” can be inserted into this theory of knowledge acquisition. As Penrose and Geisler argue for the importance of “the role of rhetorical knowledge in the development of authority” (517), so too would I argue for writing assignments to address plagiarism from an authoritative stance, designed to promote agency rather than enforce values or preset notions of what is “right” for all students. It is because these

paper mill sites seek to undermine students' academic agency, as their primary business goal, that we must challenge students to unpack the rhetoric that makes this subversive notion so appealing, even as the rhetoric strikes a chord close to the students' own capitalist hearts. Rather than continue to see academic discourse and economic rhetoric as mutually exclusive, and students and teachers as adversaries in the "war" against plagiarism, I encourage other first-year writing faculty to instead consider addressing the idea of plagiarism and authorship through alternative means that involve students as the principal investigators into the parameters of their own writing education.

I would also note, however, that an assignment such as the one I describe here need not be limited to the first-year writing classroom. Faculty across student levels, and across the disciplines, should also invent active, collaborative methods of involving students in writing assignments that question existing dichotomies between authorship and economics across fields and majors. To avoid the preaching that our students ultimately tune out, let us also seek to locate the ethical and moral inquiry, and resulting quandaries, in student writing itself. I hope that faculty, regardless of area of study or field of expertise, will promote such inquiry into academic dishonesty with their students. Such a pedagogy would characterize students as active scholars, or makers of meaning in the research, rather than passive receptors of information who seek, in *Survivor* style, to "outplay, outwit, outlast" the academic system that has turned a deaf ear to the siren song of authorship-for-sale on the World Wide Web.

## **Appendix**

### **Essay #3: The Rhetoric of Academic Dishonesty on the Internet**

#### *Length:*

5–6 pages, typed, double-spaced, following all format guidelines outlined on our course syllabus.

#### *Note:*

Bring 3 copies of your draft for peer group workshops on the draft due date.

Bring 1 copy of your draft, revision, and peer workshop comments on the revision due date.

*Assignment:*

In this essay, in the context of our course focus on education in America, I would like for you to explore the world of “academic dishonesty” as it pertains to the Internet. Specifically, I want you to analyze and synthesize what appears on a few of the Web sites that sell papers for student use—otherwise known as “online paper mills.” In doing so, you should think about a term called “rhetoric,” which is defined as anything that persuades (words as well as images).

This assignment has *two goals*: (1) To get you to think about the idea of academic dishonesty as it pertains to research and authorship in a research writing class like English 101; (2) To get you to analyze the role of the Internet as a “research tool” for writers/authors in college.

Your essay discussing these paper mill Web sites should determine what the Web sites’ rhetoric is—in other words, how these sites persuade people to buy their products, and how they justify the enterprise of selling papers at all—with specific examples from each site.

1. *Choose three* of the following paper mill Web sites for your study. You should probably look over more than three, and then narrow your choices down based on what you find of interest:

[www.schoolsucks.com](http://www.schoolsucks.com)

[www.essayfinder.com](http://www.essayfinder.com)

[www.academictermpapers.com](http://www.academictermpapers.com)

[www.termpapers-on-file.com](http://www.termpapers-on-file.com)

[www.cheatHouse.com](http://www.cheatHouse.com)

[www.research-assistance.com](http://www.research-assistance.com)

2. *Examine the language, visuals, and other design elements* of each of the three sites. Also browse the various *links* on the sites, including sample papers (if available for free preview). Make notes about how the sites compare and how they use “rhetoric” to argue for the value of their services.

3. Then, in an *essay* driven by an *argumentative thesis addressing the question* “how do paper mill Web sites use rhetoric to justify academic dishonesty?”, *analyze* what you have found, with specific examples, and *then synthesize* your findings. Remember your audience is one that has not visited these sites and is not in this class.

## Notes

1. On the concept of cheating for a reward, see especially Kevin Bushweller's account of primary school students cheating on a test to get the reward of a candy bar, as well as other chilling accounts of means-to-an-end dishonest behavior, in his article "A Generation of Cheaters" (1999). For one statistic about the perceived problem of plagiarism as relevant to technology, see the discussion of the nearly 200 percent rise in cases of all types of academic dishonesty reported at Virginia Tech from 1996 to 1999—from 142 in 1996 to 450 in 1999 (Auer and Krupar 2001). On postsecondary classrooms, oft-cited databases such as Donald McCabe's Center for Academic Integrity also document a general rise in cheating nationally among college students. Even though some researchers believe that the Internet does not pose a new or particular problem for faculty, McCabe asserts that specific instances of student academic dishonesty do illustrate a trend toward students viewing the Web as "public domain" rather than a source that must be cited or acknowledged (Kellogg 2002). Recently publicized institution-wide examples from the University of Virginia and Simon Fraser University, as well as personal accounts from secondary-school teachers such as Steve Gardiner (Flannery 2004), indicate at minimum a widespread knowledge of such Web sites and the tendency for students to use these sites indiscriminately as alternatives to writing their own papers, especially where highly "general" topics are assigned.
2. Increasingly, the paper mills are claiming that their work is "absolutely 100% not plagiarized" with "all sources documented," to reassure students that if they purchase the work, they will not be accused of plagiarism based on what is in the paper itself. Of course, the fact that students will purchase these papers and then put their own names on them, thereby plagiarizing wholesale, is not addressed in these sites' rhetoric.
3. See the appendix for the complete essay assignment.
4. Students in all three of my participating composition sections consented, in writing, to my citation of their work here, with the use of pseudonyms. Because my student course population was more than 70 percent female, a slight exaggeration of the gender breakdown in our college population, many of the students' work excerpted here comes from female students.
5. See, for example, sites such as [www.authenticessays.com](http://www.authenticessays.com) and [www.geniuspapers.com](http://www.geniuspapers.com), which promise students careful and situationally specific (i.e., custom-written) papers on request, meeting all the students' needs, and in a short period of time (forty-eight hours or less, in some instances).

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