



## CLASSROOM PRACTICE

# Cybercheating: A New Twist on an Old Problem

By pure chance, the two students had copied the same paper from the thousands of papers available on the Internet. Then, to add to the irony, the two papers ended up back-to-back in a stack of papers from three classes randomly tossed together into the wire basket on Mr. Gardiner's desk. He gives other teachers some suggestions on ways to deal with this emerging problem.

BY STEVE GARDINER

**I**N THE MIDDLE of grading a stack of some 90 essays analyzing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, I was interrupted. When I returned to grading, the words on the page seemed too familiar. I thought for sure I had made marginal comments on this paper and given it an A. Must have been the interruption, I thought. But as I read on, I knew I had marked this one already.

I reached over to the face-down papers on the edge of my desk and turned over the top one. Sure enough, the writing was identical. "How could they do this?" I raged. "Do they think I'm stupid? How could they copy each other's papers when they are in the same class?" I was too angry to continue grading, so I filed the papers in my briefcase and determined to con-

front the two writers the next morning in class.

Near the end of the class period, I asked the two suspects to stay after class. They sat on opposite sides of the room, and I watched for conspiratorial glances. But there was no

clue that they had any idea what was going on. When the bell rang, they approached my desk. I placed both papers on the desk and asked, "Which one of you gets credit for writing this paper?" Silence. "Look, the papers are word-for-word. Which one of you wrote it, and which one of you copied it?" More silence.

Finally one of them said, "I got pressed for time and downloaded it

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from the Internet. I'm really sorry."

"I did the same," said the other.

They hadn't worked together on this at all. It had been pure chance that they had copied the same paper from the thousands of *Macbeth* papers available on the Internet. Then, to add to the irony, the two papers ended up back-to-back in a stack of papers from three classes randomly tossed together in the wire basket on my desk. If their papers had been separated by 40 or 50 others in the stack and if I had graded them, say, three days apart, I might not have noticed their similarity. Perhaps it was another cruel trick played by the witches who tormented Macbeth, but the one-in-a-million chance of downloading the same paper and turning it in to the same teacher had happened. I sent the students out of the room and looked at the stack of ungraded essays on my desk. Hours of work. How many more downloaded papers would I grade?

I talked with my friend Vince Long, who teaches computer education. He showed me how to use the same search engines the students used to find the papers so that I could trace them back to the source. It was easy. The next day, I confronted all three classes and told them I had become aware of [www.schoolsucks.com](http://www.schoolsucks.com) and a number of other sites that provide instant research papers and that I knew how to find their sources. Since it was the first time I had knowingly dealt with cybercheating, I made my students an offer. "If you downloaded your paper from the Internet and you give it to me today with a note telling me what you did, I'll work with you on a solution. If, after today, I find out you downloaded your paper, you will get a zero on a required paper, which means a failure in senior English and no graduation."

By the end of the day, six papers

were on my desk. I found five of the original sources within six or seven minutes.

And it's not just *Macbeth* papers that are being downloaded. In subsequent discussions, my students admitted to "knowing somebody" who had downloaded every required paper in every curriculum area for more than a year. History, science, Eng-

lish, geography — any areas that require written research or analysis — have sent students on Web searches with cut and paste in mind. It's no different from copying a page from an encyclopedia, just easier and much faster.

So how do teachers catch suspected cybercheaters? First, the clues are apparent, as they always have been.

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Some are very obvious. At least two of the papers on my desk that day were written in perfect APA style, even though we had never discussed APA style. One teacher showed me a line from a paper that read, "While I was working on my undergraduate degree. . . ."

Other clues aren't quite as noticeable but are likely to catch a teacher's eye anyway. Some papers just don't "sound like" a particular student's writing. There's a feeling that comes from grading students' writing over time, and that feeling raises a red flag in a teacher's mind. It's a vague feeling, but we know it when it shows up.

That's when the search engines go to work. At first I used Alta Vista, although Yahoo, Web Crawler, Google, or any other search engine will work as well. Now, I've changed and use Dogpile ([www.dogpile.com](http://www.dogpile.com)) because it is a meta-search engine and digs into over a dozen search engines at the same time. It takes a few seconds longer, but it goes through so much of the Web that I feel more confident about the results. One caution about using Dogpile is that it searches Real Names, which seems to find 10 matches for every query it searches. I tend to ignore the Real Names matches and look for matches in any other search engine included in Dogpile.

When I find a suspect paper, I look for a unique phrase of six to 10 words and type that inside quotation marks within the search line at the top of Dogpile. In a few seconds the results show up, and I can scroll down through the search engines looking for the matches. If I find a match, I click on the link, and the designated search engine takes me directly to that site. Often it goes straight to the paper I need, but sometimes I have to search around within the target

site to find the source paper.

If I get no matches on a first search, but I still feel suspicious, I type in one or two more phrases and check them for matches. If three searches turn up negative, I'm fairly certain the paper didn't come from a website, and I may follow up with tradition-

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al methods, such as asking the student questions about the content of the paper or the research methods used.

While knowing how to retrace a downloaded paper is valuable for today's teacher, a little prevention is still the best policy. I warn students about cybercheating and explain to them that I know how to find papers and, in fact, have done so. I also tell them the consequences of cybercheating (our department has a specific policy), and, since most of my students are high school seniors, I tell them that most colleges and universities would see cybercheating as grounds for expulsion. Then I try to structure the assignment in such a way that it would be very difficult to use an Internet paper to fulfill the requirements.

This last measure is easier said than done because of the number of sites available for downloading papers. Some offer papers for free; others of-

fer papers for sale or for trade. Examples of sites with free papers can be seen at [www.bignerds.com](http://www.bignerds.com), [www.cyberessays.com](http://www.cyberessays.com), [www.netessays.net](http://www.netessays.net), [www.schoolpapers.com](http://www.schoolpapers.com), [www.schoolsucks.com](http://www.schoolsucks.com), and others. Sites that sell papers include [www.academictermpapers.com](http://www.academictermpapers.com), [www.ezwrite.com](http://www.ezwrite.com), [www.papers-online.com](http://www.papers-online.com), [www.papers24-7.com](http://www.papers24-7.com), [www.termpapers-on-file.com](http://www.termpapers-on-file.com), [www.termpapers911.com](http://www.termpapers911.com), and others. The site at [www2.crosswinds.net/new-york/~essays/skip.htm](http://www2.crosswinds.net/new-york/~essays/skip.htm) offers a list of links to other sites with term papers for free or for sale. One source for discussions of cybercheating and of ways to deal with it can be found at <http://newark.rutgers.edu/~ehrlich/plagiarism598.html>.

When I looked at the six papers on my desk that day, I was angry. Like any teacher who has caught students cheating, I felt victimized. While some of the cybercheaters would fall into the "usual suspects" category, others who had downloaded papers and turned them in were a shock to me. Most of our students won't cheat; they are fine young people. But I understand that the temptation of exchanging hours of research and writing for a few minutes of searching seems like a good deal as a deadline looms. I admit that, on that first day, I wondered how I could ever overcome the power of the Internet and the lure of cybercheating. Today, I've worked past that. The World Wide Web is not the end of academic research as we've known it. The Web is one more tool for research and a wonderful one at that. But students need to learn how to use it in the right way and for the right reasons. They need to learn how to find legitimate sites and how to evaluate the information those sites contain. In short, they still need to learn good research skills. And isn't helping them do that what a teacher's job has always been? 