

Curing the Cold but Killing the Patient? Turnitin.com, Online Paper Mills, and the Outsourcing of Academic Work

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Abstract

During the last decade, Turnitin.com has become the most prominent text matching service and the first choice of most colleges and universities who seek a technological approach to detecting student plagiarism. Turnitin's rise parallels a significant shift in a business that would seem to be one of its primary targets—the online term paper mill industry. Online paper mills have significantly changed in the last few years, evolving into professionally designed sites touting custom writing services. This evolution reflects the industry's reaction to the pervasive use of Turnitin and its perceived effectiveness in detecting student plagiarism; moreover, the industry's new rhetorical focus on outsourcing positions custom writing services as a potentially powerful temptation to student learners. Custom writing services simultaneously extol the virtues of outsourcing one's academic work while warning against outsourcing that same work to foreign entities, a powerful rhetorical combination that both plays into the benefits of outsourcing for consumers and also targets—in pejorative tone—the mainstream fears of overseas outsourcing in general. While the submission of custom essays may never amount to more than a fraction of academic misconduct cases, we may also be at the beginning of a powerful trend towards the outsourcing of academic work.

*If you are the type of student who believes your academic career is too important to leave to chance, then our custom essay service is for you. **RapidEssays.com***

During the last decade, Turnitin.com has become the most prominent text matching service and the first choice of most universities and colleges who seek a technological approach to detecting student plagiarism. At the latest count, Turnitin.com handles 100,000 papers daily from

7,000 institutions globally and a database of 40 million student papers (Raw, 2007, para. 1). Just as some university administrators, faculty, and students are beginning to raise questions about the service and its practices, proponents see it as a powerful tool to combat what they perceive as the rise in student plagiarism.

Interestingly, the rise of Turnitin.com over the last few years parallels a significant shift in a business that would seem to be one of its primary targets—the online term paper mill industry. At first glance, one might assume Turnitin's commercial success has dealt a devastating blow to online paper mills. In his evaluation of plagiarism detection software and services, Purdy (2005) conveys this view: "Plagiarism detection services . . . can test if students copied text from web sites, purchased papers from on-line paper mills, or copied text from other students" (p. 275). Purdy, however, overstates the effectiveness of Turnitin or any other plagiarism detection software or service in testing purchased papers; his view seems predicated on a traditional notion of the online paper mill as being primarily a purveyor or recycler of pre-existing essays. However, online paper mills have significantly changed in the last few years, evolving from shoddily constructed sites stuffed with equally shoddy essays to more professionally designed sites touting custom writing services. Whereas I once wondered how students intent on a quick paper fix could possibly slog through the muck of most online paper mills to pluck anything even remotely acceptable (and I suspect that many student-users did not find acceptable papers to

match particular assignments), today online custom writing service web sites are much better designed and market themselves as being more responsive to their consumers' needs; in short, they are much more user friendly. Hundreds of sites now offer custom written papers for \$9.95 a page and up, as much as \$60 a page for same day service. Many paper mill sites that previously did not offer custom papers are now doing so, and some have shifted exclusively to custom services. As a representative of one online custom writing service told me, custom is where the money is (PaperPimp.com, personal communication, Dec. 10, 2005).

I contend that this abrupt metamorphosis of the on-line paper mill industry, from being cataloguers of pre-existing essays to creators of original ones, reflects the industry's reaction to the pervasive use of Turnitin and its perceived effectiveness in detecting student plagiarism; moreover, this reaction has positioned online custom writing services as potentially powerful temptations to student learners. Previous studies (McCabe 2001; Scanlon and Neumann 2002) suggest student use of online paper mills pales in comparison to other forms of plagiarism and other types of cheating; and Dodd (2006) corroborates these findings. I suspect the very recent transformation of the industry to emphasize custom writing services will increase student usage beyond previous levels. Certainly the purchasing of online papers will never become the predominant form of academic misconduct, but, as credit card companies and other corporations have noticed, there is a surfeit of disposable income on college campuses, and custom writing services seem intent on creating a "need" for their services through their glossy web sites and catchy rhetorical appeals.

Thus, in this paper, while I will demonstrate Turnitin's impact on the online essay industry, I will also analyze the rhetoric of custom writing services web sites as primary source material and argue that these sites convey an understanding

of the new outsource economy, a rhetorical pitch which some students may find particularly persuasive. Custom writing services simultaneously extol the virtues of outsourcing one's academic work while warning against outsourcing that same work to foreign entities, a powerful rhetorical combination that plays into both the perceived benefits of outsourcing to the consumer and the mainstream fears about the negative effects of overseas outsourcing. Moreover, the custom essay stands uniquely positioned as a product in which a shared national and linguistic identity between producer and consumer is crucial, and the custom essay services seize upon this distinctiveness as they forge a troubling representation of a morally bankrupt, antiquated system of higher education.

Turnitin and the Evolution of the Online Paper Mill

Critics of Turnitin might contend that the proliferation and evolution of on-line custom paper writing services exemplify the folly of seeking technological solutions to pedagogical problems, and that Turnitin's technological cure has helped to spread an even more dangerous technological virus. Yet others more positively predisposed towards Turnitin could reasonably counter that the evolution of the custom writing industry is a minor side-effect well worth the potency of Turnitin against the much broader problem of "cut and paste" plagiarism. Regardless of which position one holds, the fact remains that online custom paper mills appear poised to expand their clientele, and I predict we will be hearing more, not less, about them in the coming decade.

Indeed, a key selling point of the custom paper as opposed to a pre-written one is its ability to pass undetected through Turnitin. While John Barrie, President of iParadigms, the parent company of Turnitin, asserts, "Digital plagiarism is a digital problem that requires a digital solution," he also acknowledges that his service cannot detect original essays (qtd. in Hansen p. 789). Nearly every custom writing service touts the

ability of its product to pass muster, with Turnitin specifically, or with plagiarism software detection services in general. For example, in a banner at the top of its web page, Papermasters.com (not to be confused with Masterpapers.com) proclaims, "Plagiarism free and guaranteed to pass turnitin.com"; another promises "Authentic Writing Scanned for Plagiarism." The irony is, of course, that while the custom papers may indeed be original and thus plagiarism-free, the clear intent of student-consumers is to pass these papers off as their own, plagiarism-free so the consumers are free to plagiarize without worrying about possible detection.

Incredibly, some custom writing services even represent themselves as leaders in the battle *against* plagiarism, as is articulated in Essay Plant.com's press release "Stop Plagiarism Now" (2007):

Nowadays in our modern society plagiarism becomes very popular. And it's very easy to copy/paste information from Internet [sic] and provide it like it is yours. But when you get an assignment where you should write only from scratch, for some people it can be a problem. But if you will plagiarize, you will get an "F", and it is not good. But now with Essay-Plant.com it is much easier to live and study. If you need a well-written paper you should place an order at EssayPlant.com and in a couple hours you will get a great paper. (para. 1)

It is difficult to say which is more ridiculous: the awkward prose, verb tense errors, and missing commas or the contorted logic asserting that some student writers are so inept that outsourcing their work to purported professionals is their best bet in avoiding plagiarism. Another site takes a similar tack: "EssayPaper.net Fights Plagiarism" for "those who face needs for" (para.1) custom writing services, an odd verb phrase that suggests that students have no choice in the matter and are forced to outsource their writing because of cir-

cumstances out of their control. Another custom writing service even offers, with every paper purchased, a free copy of EVE 2, plagiarism detection software (Essay Verification Engine) from a competitor of Turnitin; the irony here is that while custom writing services claim their products can pass Turnitin, they cannot actually run their essays through it because those essays would then become part of the Turnitin database, and would hence be detectable if put through again, thus rendering their products useless to student-consumers.

Moreover, online custom writing services' claims about their products' ability to "beat" Turnitin underscore the absurdity of their assertions that their essays are for "research purposes only." Disclaimers asserting that purchased essays are intended to be used as guides and models to illustrate what an academic essay should look like are side by side with rhetoric extolling virtues that could be derived only if students pass in the essays as their own academic work. In addition, testimonials from purportedly "satisfied customers" unravel the sites' already dubious claims that their products should only be used as models. For example, one student testimonial praises a custom writing service because Turnitin.com detected less than ten percent of its essay as unoriginal, which the student notes was acceptable because the flagged material was properly cited, directly quoted source material.

Whereas at one time the standard rhetoric of the traditional online paper mill was to mock Turnitin and downplay both its effectiveness and pervasiveness—as the now defunct PaperPimp.com (2005) bluntly asserted, "Turnitin.com is bullshit" (para. 1) -- the current rhetoric of custom writing services reverses this course and thereby ironically becomes a major booster of Turnitin's power and popularity. Custom writing services are asking consumers to spend considerably more on a custom paper than on a prewritten one or one obtained from a friend or from a fraternity

file. A powerful and omnipresent threat of digital plagiarism protection via Turnitin makes a custom essay all the more valuable. The rhetoric of the custom writing services posits the custom paper as the most evolved and fool-proof form of online paper for purchase, immune to plagiarism detection, unlike the traditional paper mills' outdated papers and outdated methods. For example, a February 2007 posting on CustomEssays.com trumpets the triumph of its custom writing service as "a response to a rapid development of a modern world" and cites Turnitin itself as responsible for this shift:

Remember, how sometime ago essay mills were on the roll? Huge databases, millions of opportunities... they are almost gone today. The reason is simple – when some smart guys came up with plagiarism detection software, cheating became almost impossible. Downloaded essays are now easily detected, and students that buy written papers are accused of committing academic frauds [sic]. . . . Turnitin.com is an Internet-based plagiarism-detection service that is used by hundreds of teachers. They submit essays to the Turnitin website to check for plagiarism. After each checking the essays are added to the database, establishing complete control over the writing process. (para. 3)

According to CustomEssays.com, Turnitin's success in establishing "complete control" over the writing process greatly enhances the value to the consumer of the custom written product. Turnitin is even powerful enough to render cheating "almost impossible"—a gushing claim about its effectiveness that even exceeds those of Turnitin's own marketing department—and leaves the consumer no choice but to opt for purchasing a customized, original product. Kantor (2006), a technology columnist for *USA Today*, corroborates the view that Turnitin has influenced the evolution of the online paper mill industry, suggesting that the proliferation of custom essay web sites is the next logical step in a "technological arms race" (para. 3).

Theorizing the Paper Mill

While the ready availability of online custom essays has piqued the interest of many journalists (Hansen 2004; McGrath 2006; Lyons 2006; Ainsworth-Vincze 2006), scholars, for the most part, have overlooked the custom writing services and online paper industry and their rhetoric. The most perceptive scholars who have explored student plagiarism (Howard 1999; Price 2002; Page 2004) have tended to focus on the important questions of how plagiarism should be defined and whether certain practices traditionally deemed plagiarism are only forms of academic apprenticeship or ineptitude rather than academic misconduct.

Given this focus, online papers mills and custom writing services have received scant critical attention because, unlike other practices traditionally defined as plagiarism—such as patchwriting¹ or missing citations—there is no debate about whether purchasing a paper constitutes academic misconduct. Ritter (2006) provides an accurate summary of previous studies: "This scholarship promotes the notion that one egregious type of plagiarism—the patronage of online term-paper mills—is a willfully deceptive act that needs no further study against the less wholesale, more 'complicated' forms that merit examination" (p. 601-602). I would add, though, the purchased paper has provided a handy, fixed definition of intentional plagiarism which some have used to interrogate a more complicated view of other practices. For example, in her analysis of the ambiguities and complexities of defining plagiarism, Howard (1999) contends, "Too much of the discussion about plagiarism (both modern and postmodern) treats it as a unified phenomenon, whereas in practice the term encompasses a heterogeneous range of textual practices" (p. 19). Howard argues that we need to reconsider whether some textual practices such as patchwriting are in fact plagiarism, and plagiarism policies need to account for authorial intent.

In Howard's formulation, the purchased paper serves to underscore what the patchwritten paper is not—an intentional act of fraud and, hence, academic misconduct: "At present, institutions juridical installations against plagiarism, reify the formalist definitions in which plagiarism is a unified category that includes patchwriting, the purchase of term papers, and a lack of citation" (p. 157). Howard sees it as a question of authorial intent: whereas the patchwriter may be grappling with a difficult text and trying to make sense of it, the purchaser of a term paper is clearly attempting to deceive. In short, the practice of patchwriting complicates our notion of what is and is not adjudicable plagiarism—and Howard makes a compelling case that patchwriting should not be considered plagiarism. Indeed, with his/her clear intent to deceive, the paper purchaser occupies a space that the patchwriter does not:

Most commentators today would agree that the submitters of purchased, ghostwritten, stolen, or borrowed term papers should be classified with the perpetrators of fraud. Only if the patchwriter is found to have fraudulent intentions should the matter be considered ethically based and hence adjudicable. (p. 160)

Ritter (2005) provides the first substantial, direct analysis of the rhetoric of the online paper mill industry. She contends "online paper mills have thus been allowed to prosper in the absence of true critical reflection on their persuasive power . . ." (p. 602) and her groundbreaking work provides just such reflection. Her work is particularly insightful in analyzing student attitudes and motives in relation to the patronage of online paper mills; she identifies key reasons why students patronize online writing services including "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 research and writing skills" (p. 26). She then demonstrates

how the rhetoric of term paper mill web sites cleverly plays upon these factors. While Ritter greatly adds to our understanding of online paper mills, she does not address the recent evolution of more traditional paper mills to custom writing services, a change that I see as crucial in analyzing the industry and its potential impact on higher education.

Higher Education and the Outsource Economy

According to the rhetoric of online custom writing services, the fact that faculty are using Turnitin in the first place underscores an irreparable change in student-professor relationships, a change influenced by the contours of the new outsource economy. Custom writing services argue that professors who employ Turnitin cynically view students as lazy cheaters who are guilty before proven innocent, and if these professors have chosen to outsource their work to Turnitin, then students are equally justified in outsourcing their own work. In the discourse of custom writing services, students are represented as constantly besieged, barraged by unreasonable demands on their time by overbearing professors who have lost touch with the true meaning of education. Most of these web sites rely heavily on visual rhetoric to convey this message, and two images dominate: the "before" pictures of frazzled students and the "after" pictures of relieved, successful ones, often depicted as beaming, capped and gowned graduates, providing a firm reminder of just what is at stake in the transactions. While many sites carry brief testimonials lauding their services, some have more extended narratives from "students" who recount their experiences with cold-hearted, unyielding professors. As one site proclaims, "You get caught in this vicious cycle of never-ending paperwork, you begin to lose touch with reality, and you start believing that higher education is all about grades and due dates" — and, it would seem, a "loose" touch with spelling conventions as well.

The custom writing services' rhetorical argument that they provide a beacon of hope to students who are confronting a dysfunctional system of higher education is nowhere more developed than on Sparrow Papers.com, whose motto "Free as a Bird" refers to the spare time which use of the service will give the consumer; "Free as a Bird" most certainly does not refer to the cost of the product at \$30 dollars a page. The site includes the typical paper mill visualization of "the ends justifies the means" mindset, a dozen graduates in gowns flinging their caps in the air in celebration, and its "Resources" section presents a critique of higher education and numerous rationalizations for use of its services. Bob Sparrow, founder of the site and self-proclaimed "nationally recognized expert on childhood development", pronounces, "In short, the education system has killed the students' spirit. My custom essay service is doing what it can to right that wrong" (para. 2). Just how perpetrating fraud can right a wrong is beyond me, and at times it is hard to discern whether Sparrow is presenting an argument or satirizing one. Even more inane than Sparrow's diatribe are custom writer Melissa Bryant's short narrative essays with pithy titles such as "Without Custom Essays There Would be Emotional Ruin." One can surmise from such titles that student-consumers' academic work will be written with equally inane convolution.

It is often easy to discount the custom writing services' emotionally charged rhetoric as utter nonsense, yet there is an air of privilege and ego-stroking which one suspects many consumers find appealing. The implied message is that "You are important!" and that you have more important things to do than write an essay for an introductory course—such tedious chores are for the "little people." Such rhetoric seems clearly aimed at those who perceive themselves as future members of a new entrepreneurial class which recognizes the importance of outsourcing menial jobs to others. Moreover, in this discourse, partying or clubbing is euphemistically

described as "making social connections" and an important way to reduce the stress of petty academic demands and deadlines. Given how the services represent their target audience, it is especially shocking when we occasionally come across a testimonial like the one from Maya S., who says, "Yesterday, I spent the day with my daughter. We haven't had quality time in months. Your service is a complete blessing" ("Customer Quotes" para. 2). However, such glimpses into the lives of nontraditional students and their real-world responsibilities are rare, and the sites almost universally focus on commending student-consumers for their acumen in recognizing the profound importance of partying.

Indeed, custom writing services ruthlessly juxtapose success-story testimonials of students who embrace the new economy's emphasis on efficiency, time management, and outsourcing against the cautionary tales of modern day Clarissas whose unwillingness to adjust to the outsource economy dooms them. For example, Custompapers.com presents the "authentic story" of a student named Jane, a single mother, who has a promising academic career in composition and rhetoric cut short. Her plight is documented with "thick description" of her plight: single mother with an alcoholic boyfriend and a dying mother, overworked and exploited by a graduate school in her dual roles of teacher and student—in short, a captivity narrative in which CustomPaper.com can set one free. Jane, who thinks nothing of spending 140 dollars on a piece of clothing, refuses to spend it on a custom paper, and the consequences are catastrophic: she is unable to finish her dissertation and can only find work as a low-paying adjunct. And, if we extend the site's twisted logic, she is presumably fodder for the term paper mills, destined to one day seek employment at CustomPaper.com, working on dissertations for students who, unlike herself, have the savvy and sense to outsource their work.

Implicit in the rhetoric that use of custom writing services is savvy and sensible is the assumption that plagiarism permeates higher education. Like many industries, custom writing services certainly inflate their claims about how many people purchase their papers, and this “bandwagon appeal” marketing strategy plays into the notion that college students think other college students are plagiarizing more frequently than they actually are. According to a survey conducted by Scanlon and Neumann (2002), while about 8% of students acknowledge they sometimes or frequently take material from web sites or online paper mills, about 50% of students think their peers plagiarize frequently, and the authors note that these results seem consistent with other studies. Scanlon and Neumann label this discrepancy the third person effect, in which people tend to exaggerate the extent of the wrong behavior of others. Obviously, the custom essay services have no interest in dissuading students that the rate of plagiarism may be lower than they actually think it is. That plagiarism is rampant emphasizes a key theme of the custom essay service rhetoric-- the educational system has clearly failed, and the students are well within their rights to aggressively seek to reclaim what they believe is the genuine college experience; as one site’s motto incoherently puts it, “Let you [sic] experience the academic career exactly the way that you want,” as if higher education should subscribe to the ideals of a Burger King.

Outsourcing, Nationalism, and Authorship

As the syntactical breakdowns, missing articles and verb tense errors of the custom writing services’ rhetoric suggest, many of these online business entities are based outside of the United States, and even the most cursory glance at their rhetoric indicates that non-native speakers of English have written and designed the Web copy. A major conflict within the online custom writing services industry first surfaced in 2005 when Essaytown.com, posted the following “Warning about Foreign Sites”:

Consumer Alert: During the last 5 years, the American research industry has become infested with low-quality, fraudulent, foreign companies seeking to make a quick dollar by deceiving unsuspecting customers in the United States. These bogus Web sites from Pakistan, Romania, Ukraine, and the Philippines use their suspiciously low prices and false promises to lure American students into their traps. You should never have to worry about receiving a low-quality, improperly-formatted, outdated, recycled, plagiarized paper with countless errors in spelling and grammar. In contrast, our professional, AMERICAN [sic] writers produce new papers on an individual basis, so our research materials are unique, original, technically precise, and up-to-date. (para. 1).

Essaytown’s claiming of the moral high ground and wrapping of itself in a cloak of nationalism in this part consumer alert, part nativist diatribe shows a stunning lack of self-reflectivity. According to this reasoning, outsourcing one’s course work to an American entity is okay, but off-shore outsourcing is wrong—the patriotic consumer will, of course, choose to “Plagiarize American.” On a number of levels, though, their rhetoric makes perfect sense—the American consumer knows that while a product riddled with English as Second Language (ESL) errors may pass undetected through Turnitin, it would be a dead giveaway to any professor. More tellingly, the custom essay services’ stance on outsourcing meshes with current public suspicions about overseas outsourcing of jobs and services. Essaytown.com and the other custom essay services that identify themselves as American businesses play upon two distinct definitions of outsourcing, and they strongly encourage consumers to embrace one type of outsourcing and to reject the other. Bhagwati, Panagariya, and Srinivasan (2007) describe how in public discourse the meaning of “outsourcing” changed during the last decade from “the situation in which firms expand their purchases of manufactured physical inputs from outside the firm

rather than making them from inside” to a “specific segment of international trade in services—purchase of service from abroad” (p. 2). Thus while self-identified “American” custom writing services go to great lengths to emphasize that the consumer is best served by going “outside” to purchase a custom paper (i.e. not doing the paper themselves), they simultaneously warn against use of “international” entities in these transactions. Essaytown’s emphasis on its writers as “American” underscores the importance to the consumer that the custom essay writer share a similar linguistic background. Many custom writing services stress that their essays are written in America, by American writers, for American consumers. Whereas in her study of the rhetoric of online paper mills, Ritter focuses on the paper mill writers as “nameless and faceless individuals” who produce documents that are “authorless by design,” many custom essay services go out of their way to stress the nationality of their writers, even above their writing prowess and academic qualifications.

The rhetoric of ElephantEssays.com highlights how custom essays services promote and market the American identity of the custom essay writer. Unlike the colorful, bustling imagery of most custom writing web sites, here the lone visual image is a bland stock photograph of the Philadelphia skyline, a geographical reminder of the site of production and the writer’s nationality. Moreover, as ElephantEssays acknowledges, “our website may be dull, but our wit is sharp” and its rhetoric suggests that its attention to the details of grammar and syntax is well above industry standards. Indeed, Elephant is one of the very few sites that demonstrates a reasonable degree of writing prowess: “Our intensively-screened, caffeine-addicted writers leave no modifier dangling and no comma spliced. Indeed, we so thoroughly pacified the passive voice that he left our office to accept a position with the Green Party” (para.2). Here, the service’s claim that their writers will produce mechanically sound prose combines with an indigenously

American political reference, thus testifying to both the quality and authenticity of their product. Given the very low standards of writing on most custom essay service web sites, this is brilliant prose.

The dispute within the industry between “American” sites and “foreign” competitors underscores the questionable credibility and trustworthiness of all custom writing services. Enter Essayfraud.org, a self-proclaimed non-profit consumer group founded in 2005:

EssayFraud.org is a watchdog organization that investigates hypocrisy involving plagiarism in academia. We also dissuade plagiarism by enabling consumers and freelance writers to publish complaints about term paper mills. By reading those complaints, others can protect themselves from deceptive companies (domestic and abroad) that lie about their geographical location, experience, qualifications, and employment of amateur, ESL writers with poor English writing skills (para. 1).

Here, Essayfraud’s claim of objectivity seems dubious—its rhetoric and design suggest a direct affiliation with Essaytown.com. Nevertheless, like the custom essay sites industry itself, in the three years since its inception, EssayFraud has transformed dramatically and has shifted its focus to a new target -- Turnitin. Just as with the custom essay services, Turnitin is represented as powerful, profitable, and pervasive. Thus while Essaytown’s main page still contains a link to list of 550 “foreign” custom essay sites to avoid, the focus on exposing the evils of Turnitin dominate, including a link to a *You Tube* video about how to format a document so as to “beat Turnitin” and a surprisingly well-researched, though hyperbolically written essay, “Guilty Until Proven Innocent: The Well-Known Secret about Turnitin.com” with references to reputable academic critics of Turnitin such as Rebecca Howard.

What gripe does EssayFraud have with Turnitin? Given that, as I have argued, Turnitin's success has increased the value of the custom essay as a commodity, EssayFraud's anti-Turnitin stance is puzzling. Why would the custom essay industry be so adamantly opposed to use of a plagiarism detection service that increases the value of the custom written essay? While the obvious answer is that Turnitin does hamper the ability of these services to recycle previously written papers and pass them off as original products, I e-mailed EssayFraud and asked them why they are so opposed to Turnitin; their response follows:

We vehemently oppose Turnitin's violation of students' rights and intellectual property. Turnitin has absolutely no authority, whatsoever, to unilaterally take control of students' writings, store them indefinitely, and distribute to third parties for profit without students' willing permission and dispensation of appropriate, monetary compensation for each work. (EssayFraud.org, personal communication)

This disappointing and intellectually disingenuous response sidesteps the question, because in its accusation that Turnitin disrespects the intellectual property rights of student writers, Essayfraud never addresses its own glaring hypocrisy in supporting an industry predicated on the view that students can justifiably outsource their academic work.

In the end, more than Turnitin or any other potential antidote to online plagiarism, the most significant barriers facing custom writing services in their efforts to expand their customer base come down to their own trustworthiness or, more accurately, a lack thereof. No matter how desperate many students may be for a quick paper fix, I think there is a limit to the number who will feel comfortable giving their credit card information to an online entity that openly engages in a highly dubious activity--there may indeed be more of an honor among thieves than I suspect, but ultimately, reliability and security remain

major problems for the custom writing industry as they seek to expand their market. Given these barriers, I suspect eBay may become the new front for online custom writing services. Unlike stand-alone custom essay sites, eBay does provide a greater level of financial security for the consumer through its PayPal system; moreover, its Buyer's and Seller's comments allow for more credible measures of the quality and reliability of the custom writer (incidentally, by following the thread of a Buyer's or Seller's comments, you can learn, for example, Goethe 707 is often called "the best of all the eBay writers," another custom writer also sells shirts, and one student bought textbooks in July and August and custom essays in November). While only a few custom writers currently operate on eBay, my sense is that these numbers will increase because consumers will be far more comfortable dealing with eBay-affiliated custom writers. In the end, whether directly through their own sites or via a middleman such as eBay, online custom essay writing services will likely see an increase in patronage, but questions remain about the extent of this increase. It is reasonable to believe the submission of custom essays will never amount to more than a fraction of academic misconduct cases, but it seems equally plausible that we may be at the beginning of a powerful trend towards the outsourcing of academic work.

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NOTES

- ¹ "Patchwriting" is a type of phrase-recombination, composing technique, also referred to as a "jigsaw" approach (St. John, 1987). Such composing strategies involve the use of copied fragments of source texts, synonym substitution, minimal paraphrase (Fanning 1992), and grammatical and other changes to "patch" or piece together a "new" composition.