

## Who writes the essays?

Essay companies have varied requirements for getting on their books as a writer. Many advertise for writers with a degree but do not ask for proof of qualifications, so applicants can easily lie. A number of companies employ in-house writers, which means the essays produced are unlikely to be written by someone suitably qualified.

All Answers currently has 8,614 freelance researchers, all with a minimum 2:1 degree. Some 961 are professionals, including lawyers, teachers and lecturers. They are well paid, earning up to £80 per 500 words for their work. But does the role infringe on their professional integrity?

One of our writers, Steve G, responds: 'The objective of my work is to enable my clients to produce an outstanding piece of work by expertly assembling and interpreting all the relevant sources and ideas. This removes all the time-consuming tasks from the academic process, enabling them to produce an excellent assignment every time without fail.'

Many researchers on our books share the same view: that their work is a beneficial example for the student to learn from.

## Does it help students cheat?

The custom essay industry is founded on one of the oldest cheats in the book – paying (or bullying) someone to write your essay or coursework for you. It is not surprising that it continues to enjoy a bad reputation. Adverts for 'academic aids' were banned by Google in May 2007 (to the delight of institutions everywhere), alongside adverts for weapons, prostitution, drugs and tobacco.

All Answers says it does not allow students to use the essays to cheat. In reality, it is very difficult to police. Because the work is original, it will not be detected if run through a plagiarism scanner like Turnitin or Viper. So all we can do is advise the student on how best to use the essay.

I know many of our customers do use the work to help them write their own answers, partially through collecting marketing data, and partially because we offer a marking service so they can get their own work checked. Sadly, I also know that the service is abused some of the time. Students do not achieve the grade they want and then send us their marked paper – the exact one we supplied. Often, the student fails because the lecturer knows it is not the student's own work.

## Is it difficult to cheat?

Although it is hard for us to police how students use the service, cheating is not as easy as you might think. For a start, lecturers are well aware of the abilities of students within their group, and will quickly identify a change in standards or writing style. A few questions directed to the student on the subject will reveal whether or not they truly understand what 'they' have written.

Then there is the supply of inaccurate work – unscrupulous offshore companies are prevalent in the industry, supplying low-quality essays to unsuspecting students. If students just hand in the essays verbatim, the work could be grossly off topic, below par or plagiarised from a past paper.

My lecturer for my LL.B told me that one international student handed him an essay on bonsai trees. Thinking she had made a mistake, he phoned her to give her the opportunity to submit the correct paper – but she insisted that she wanted it to be her submission. Exasperated, he had to award her a zero.

Last but not least, most courses have an examinable component worth at least 50% of the course marks, and students cannot cheat on the exam. As added protection, some institutions insist that you achieve, say, 70% in both the exam and the coursework, to attain a 2:1 equivalent grade. Other institutions only count your exam score towards your final mark, stamping out any possibility of cheating at all.

## The price of cheating

Cheating on your course – by paying someone else to write your essay and then simply handing it in – is a high-risk strategy. The possibility of being caught, as outlined above, is high. If it happens, you face the shame of a plagiarism investigation, with the possibility of being thrown off the course and missing out on the opportunity to get your qualification. Even if you do not get caught, you miss out on the opportunity to develop valuable research and analysis skills.

Aside from the practical risks, in my view, cheating seriously impacts the integrity of professional qualifications. If potential employers know that there are thousands of people out there who can attain the same qualification that I have by getting someone else to write their coursework, suddenly, my qualification does not seem as valuable.

## Is it worth it?

After all that, you might be wondering if it is ever worth using a custom essay company. My view is that, if used

properly, a custom essay can be extremely beneficial. That is why I sometimes write essays for the company, as well as working for it.

With a custom essay in front of you, you can learn from the experience and knowledge of an expert in the subject, in the best way possible: by example. This is the learning process most characteristic of humans, and indeed, most effective.

I do, however, firmly believe that more needs to be done to stamp out abuse of the service. The solution that many educational institutions would like to see is to ban the industry altogether. I do not think this is a good option.

Firstly it infringes on students' rights to study and learn in the way they choose. As noted, learning by example is a legitimate and effective way to improve. Secondly, such a move could send the industry underground. In that case, students would be more likely to use offshore companies and when ripped off, may have difficulty getting their money back.

In absence of a ban supported by legislation, students are going to use custom essay companies, no matter how many warnings are issued. This leaves academic institutions with a choice: carry on as they are (which has proved ineffective at curbing cheating) or collaborate. So what are the options?

## The way forward

There are a number of ways cheating could be minimised. The first and perhaps easiest would be to move towards an exam-only score. Of course, this would badly affect our business and we would have to evolve into new markets.

The second would be to reach an agreement with companies like ours (which could perhaps also be supported by legislation) so that educational institutions do not condemn our service. In return, custom essay companies would supply institutions with copies of the essays written, so students could never cheat.

With this kind of controlled use, all parties would win. Students would benefit from learning from the experts, and from additional support that institutions cannot provide. Institutions could stop worrying about cheating. Our business could carry on operating and would likely do well from the lifted university restrictions.

I look forward to the day when we can move towards such a solution, so that our business can more widely be regarded as a 100% ethical and legitimate study aid.