



## Thinking About Cheating? Think Again, Moron

By [Bill Savage](#)

As you begin your college career, you will be bombarded with lots of information: dorm regulations, the location of the library, cultural diversity, how to avoid STDs, etc. Amid all of this will surely be a lecture about academic dishonesty.

Welcome to [The Stranger's](#) version of that lecture. Pay attention.

Penalties for plagiarism vary from school to school, but all academics take plagiarism very seriously--and therefore so should you. The academic hierarchy is based on credentials granted for intellectual work, and when you pass off someone else's work as your own, you are a thief. Besides the quaint moral notion that one shouldn't profit by stealing anything short of a presidential election, you shouldn't commit plagiarism for one very practical reason: It can destroy your academic standing and derail your long-term career plans.

Confidentiality laws preclude me from talking in any detail about specific cases I have experienced, so instead I'll discuss some of the reasons students commit plagiarism:

**Arrogance.** Some students think they are smarter than the prof or TA. Now, statistically speaking, some of you sitting at your desks taking notes are smarter than us folks in front of the room writing on the blackboard. But we have years of experience and really good memories--even the greenest TA has read more than you have. Think about it: It's my job to know things, and to know how to find out things I don't know. So even if your brain is bigger than mine, I've read more books than you have, and I've read the books and essays written about the books I teach. So when you try to pass off Cliffs Notes or some journal article as your own brilliant insights, I will nail your cheating hide to the wall, Brainiac.

**Laziness.** Ah, the Internet. Papers, papers everywhere, and nary a thought to think. Once upon a time, paper mills that sell "research assistance" sent their products on colored paper, which forced you to retype them, but the computer age has eliminated this terrible burden. Any number of sites--[www.schoolsucks.com](#) is my favorite--sell all the papers on *The Great Gatsby* anyone will ever need. Zap a few electronic bucks their way, cut and paste, and voilà, you have a paper, freeing your time for the drunken mating ritual that is Quarter Beer Night. If you can somehow dredge up the energy to think ahead, keep in mind that if I spend one fraction of a minute doing a Google search using a few key terms or phrases from such a paper, your lazy

ass is history.

**Ignorance.** You take sloppy notes. You looked up some stuff online and read a few pages in some books someone left around the dorm lounge, and some phrases in your paper aren't yours, but you aren't sure exactly where they came from, and what the hell, who will notice? I will. Experienced readers of student work recognize uncharacteristic language, and so you're off to the dean's office for a very uncomfortable interview. Here's a simple rule of thumb: If you ask yourself the question, "Should I cite this?" you should cite it.

**Fear.** The flip side of arrogance, this is the one cause of academic dishonesty that most profs and administrators can sympathize with, to the extent that our reptilian hearts are capable of human emotion. College can be an intimidating and competitive environment. You think that you're not smart enough, you're afraid that your idea for the paper isn't good enough, and that means you won't get an A and will therefore fail to get into Harvard Law School. So you go online or to the frat files out of fear of failure. Just don't: Go to your prof or TA instead. We have office hours for this very reason. We have e-mail, we have phone numbers. Admit your fear, ask for help with your paper, and your prof should help you (if your prof doesn't, by the way, you should raise holy hell with the department chair and the dean. Whatever their research agendas, it's the job of all profs to help their undergraduate students succeed).

Class dismissed.

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