# Pens for Hire

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## Abstract

This is part one of a three part invited article series examining the historical evolution of the “ghost writing” industry, a term that is now widely referred to as “contract cheating.” This article describes the commercial trade in academic work starting in the 1930s through the term paper mills’ heyday of the mid-1970s. The 1960 investigative reporting of Alex Benson of the *New York World-Telegram and The Sun,* receives close attention, as does the field of competing firms active at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1972. The article concludes with a series of questions to help provoke reflection. These questions can be used as discussion topics in courses with students or within professional development opportunities for educators and practitioners.

*Keywords:* academic fraud, contract cheating, ghost writing, history, term paper mills

## Pens for Hire

When the free essay website School Sucks (School Sucks, n.d.) opened its server in 1996, proprietor Kenny Sahr received a welter of media attention (for a representative sample, see Milford, 1997) and precipitated widespread and well-publicized concern over the possible impact of the Internet on academic integrity (for a representative example, see Applebome, 1997). In fact, however, Sahr was simply the latest in a long line of entrepreneurs who made their livings as purveyors of term papers, exams, and other schoolwork. Although it may be an exaggeration to claim that “[e]ssay writing services, of one type or another, have probably been amongst us almost as long as prostitution” (Murray, 1989; Witherspoon, 1995), it is certain that there had by then been a commercial traffic in academic assignments for more than 60 years (and possibly much longer). The issues facing educators in the day of the Internet remain much the same as those with which they have dealt at least as far back as the Great Depression.

## Early Spoor

Although there are indications that contract cheating—then called “ghosting”—may have been common by the 1920s (Benson, 1960f), the earliest known mercantile essay service began in 1933, when a New York ghostwriter who operated under the pseudonym “G. H. Smith” set up shop. Smith claimed to earn as much $10,000 per annum writing papers at rates from $3 for a book report up to $700 for a dissertation (Benjamin, 1939). The fact that Smith was touted as the “king of college ghost writers” (Benjamin, 1939, p. 157) certainly implied that he had no monopoly in the market of the 1930, and later evidence suggests that he had plenty of competition. The New York County grand jury in the Benson case later reported in its presentment, “the shocking disclosure that scholastic ghost-writing had been a widespread practice” for more than two decades by 1960, which would put the industry back to the 1930s (Roth, 1960b, p. 141).

The *American Mercury* published Smith’s story in 1939, relating the details of his business as he chose to give them. Although some information strains credulity (e.g.,the claim to assist “deans, principals, and professors [with] lectures and learned articles”), Smith’s self-serving narrative is consistent with those of later essay mills in several respects. In addition to his willingness and ability to furnish a paper on any topic, Smith offered several levels of grade quality, complete with typical freshman errors or sesquipidalian language, as appropriate to the institution, instructor, and assignment. He assured his customers that each paper would be written from scratch. He also glossed over the essentially corrupt character of his service by offering each client superficial consultation about effective study habits and tips for academic success (Benjamin, 1939).

Smith’s rationalizations about the nature of his business are of particular interest, in that he was the first to articulate the arguments that would be common to others of his ilk:

I am convinced I am aiding the students who use my service. My essays are always thoughtfully worked out and carefully written. If a boy will study them, he will get a lot more out of an assignment than if he had merely waded through old books and copied out meaningless data. (Benjamin, 1939, p. 160)

The fallacies in Smith’s reasoning are obvious. The “if” presupposes that a student who does not wish to read the material necessary to write a paper will study the paper itself closely, which hardly seems likely. As for “wad[ing] through old books and cop[ying] out meaningless data,” this is little more than a claim that his plagiarism is superior to a student’s own. The question he begs, of course, is whether the student would get more out of the assignment were he to complete it honestly himself.

An important element in the justification of Smith’s business (as with his successors’) was criticism of a university education. Although his comments were milder than those of others would be, he put forward what became the standard assertion that professors were at fault for poor teaching practices:

Many students hardly know what a good essay looks like. Professors as a rule fail to discuss them and do not let students read the essays submitted by other members of the class. My papers stand as models and examples for the students. (cited in Benjamin, 1939, p. 160)

Smith’s bravado (he boasted that he once “wrote seven essays on ‘The Murals of Paolo Varonese’ for students in the same class” without detection) conveys the swashbuckling sense of academic piracy in which many ghostwriters indulged over the years. Although from a perspective of sixty years it is difficult to tell whether his self-aggrandizing hyperbole (“he is ‘the best-read man in the country’... his chief worry is what to do with the honors he is sure to get” when he publishes under his own name (Benjamin, 1939, pp. 159-160) was simply flippancy at the reporter’s expense or genuine pretentiousness, Smith’s posturing was not uncharacteristic of later hacks.

In practical terms, Smith advertised on college campuses using a form letter headed by the claim that “Every Man Today Has a Ghost” which assured potential customers that,

[h]aving complete bibliographical guides, great experience, and valuable clippings and research at my disposal, I can often compile an essay in two days that would cause any other person many weeks of fret and care. (Benjamin, 1939, p. 158)

Smith’s overture is that of the serpent in the Garden: the unreasonable imposition of “many weeks of fret and care” contrasted with the so-very-reasonable proposition that it would be very little trouble for Smith to oblige. Later essay services have found it more expeditious to become part of the culture of campus posters (a phenomenon which had not yet developed in Smith’s day), but there is no substantive difference in their approach. The more personal form letter approach sometimes prompted acid replies from the recipients of Smith’s solicitations. These he claimed to keep, filed under “Vicious Retorts” (Benjamin, 1939, p. 160).

As his business grew, Smith began engaging writers and typists to keep up with demand, until by 1939 his 600 clients required a dozen employees to satisfy. Although students were paying for the services of the man who “could think rings around most of the Ph.D.’s in the country” (Benjamin, 1939, p. 159), it appears that many assignments were prepared instead by the assistants in Smith’s stable. As with later operations, close examination of the numbers suggests a certain inflation in the information reported by *American* *Mercury.* Quite apart from the obvious point that his staff of 12 must have been employed for some purpose, Smith would have had to average almost two papers a day (with an average return of $16 per paper)—an unlikely feat for a man who never “rehash[ed] some paper done years ago” because “that isn’t his idea of ghosting cricket” (Benjamin, 1939, p. 158)—in order to have served personally the number of clients he claimed.

Unlike later services, Smith said he guaranteed his work for both “grade and non-detection.” In the absence of any other source of information it is impossible to tell whether he was ever asked to make good on his grade guarantee, but we have his word for it that “no student has ever been caught” turning in a paper which he ghosted. Given that Smith’s clients took some of the same precautions that today’s customers of term paper mills continue to take (e.g.,“a ‘C’ student ask[ing] for a ‘C’ paper so the professor won’t be suspicious at the sudden improvement”) there is no *prima facie* reason to doubt the latter claim (Benjamin, 1939, pp. 158-159).

Professors were not unaware of Smith’s activities. By his own account the President of one college wrote directly to ask him “as a gentleman” to cease and desist, whereas another sought state intervention to have his operation shut down (Benjamin, 1939, p. 160). New York was successful in requiring Smith to register as a business—a typewriting business—but had no legislation on the books barring the nature of the enterprise.

Shortly after the *American Mercury* article academic entrepreneurs were driven from the newspapers by the Second World War, though there is nothing to suggest that they were driven out of business. Such evidence as there is indicates that those in the trade continued to operate quietly. Certainly, both newspaper advertisements and “the long-established practice” (Hastings, 1943, p. 149) of direct-mail solicitations continued during the War. Even while the United States military struggled to hold theirs against the U-boats in the North Atlantic and Japan’s Imperial Navy in the Pacific, notices appeared in the New York dailies with the seductive header:

*We* write it. *You* sign it.

Speeches, reports, dissertations, theses.

Satisfaction guaranteed. Reasonable rates.

*We* write it. *You* sign it.

(as cited in Hastings, 1943, p. 149)

Indeed, since New York State’s 1947 Education Law included provisions banning the fraudulent acquisition of a degree (Laws of New York, 1947), it may be inferred that ghostwriting had continued fundamentally unabated at least since the 1930s. Samuel J. Michelson, whose business was disrupted during the 1960 scandal in New York City, claimed at that time to have been in continual operation for 25 years, and there is no reason to doubt that claim (Roth, 1960a).

## The World-Telegram and The Sun’s scoop

The “ghostwriting” industry did not again attract front-page attention until 1960, when Alex Benson, a *New York World-Telegram and The Sun* reporter, went undercover to expose several New York City firms in a series of seven articles.

Benson’s story began on December 8, 1959, when a college acquaintance called to tell him that when she answered a *New York Times* advertisement for “freelance writers and researchers” she was asked to write a short undergraduate paper on *The Iliad* (Benson, 1960b, p. 1). With the approval of his editor, Benson used this contact to become an employee of this ghostwriting firm himself. On January 14, 1960, Benson went to the apartment which doubled as its office and met the Columbia Teachers College student for whom he would take a psychology exam (Benson, 1960g). The client gave Benson his text and class notes, assured him that handwriting would not be an issue because the exam would be multiple choice, and advised him to be sure to write the exam in the room proctored by the professor, because the teaching assistant might notice the substitution (Benson, 1960g).

By this time Benson was working with the District Attorney’s Office, who asked him to go through with the imposture. If he was detected or did badly, the District Attorney (DA) would raid the agency; if successful, Benson would continue his “employment” to acquire more evidence (Benson, 1960a). Benson successfully wrote the exam on the 18th, and that evening returned text and notes to the client—who expressed anxiety only about being given “a flunk” if the scam were detected (Benson, 1960e). Four days later Benson met with the two assistant DAs monitoring the investigation, and subsequently sent letters to nine other bureaus, selected on the basis of their ads in the rival *New York Times* (Benson, 1960e)*.*

Incredibly, the owner of one of those agencies offered Benson a partnership early in February (Benson, 1960c). The agency claimed customers at the four largest universities in the city as well as out-of-town custom from other Ivy League schools, but the owner wanted to spend more time with his literary agency than with the ghostwriting branch of the business. The deal was that Benson would keep the first $100 of income per week in lieu of salary, splitting every dollar above that 50/50 with the owner, who paid all the overhead expenses out of his share. Benson could take the “plum” assignments himself, and farm out other work “to our freelance staff, retaining our 20 per cent commission” (Benson, 1960c, p. 3). Although work did not pour in immediately—thesis season came later in the term—Benson had access to company files and found evidence of two or three years of ghostwriting for students. These included the names of clients and individual ghostwriters alike. He also found a file in which one hapless client, a doctoral candidate, was threatened with exposure unless he made up his arrears in payments. With all this in hand, Benson quit the business and went to the DA (Benson, 1960d).

DA Frank S. Hogan’s men raided four ghost-writing agencies on February 25 (allowing the *World-Telegram and The Sun* to scoop the *Times* by leading that day’s edition with the story) (Prall, 1960), bringing Benson’s investigation to a close. Acting on warrants issued by General Sessions Judge Gerald P. Culkin, the DA’s men seized some two tons of evidence and brought eight agencies before a grand jury (New York Times, 1960g). Originally only four agencies were charged (New York Times, 1960e), and it is not known how that list doubled within the week. The grand jury began hearing evidence on March 15 (New York Times, 1960a), and two weeks later received a two-month extension because of the volume of evidence and the anticipated number of witnesses still to be heard (New York Times, 1960d). The grand jury was able to complete the investigation well before the extended deadline, however, and on April 11, six persons were formally charged with violating sections 224 and 225 of the State Education Law. In all there were 35 counts, involving 25 students at 14 colleges (Roth, 1960a).

Among those arraigned were the Assistant Principal of a Brooklyn public school (who had been operating his Educational Research Association for 10 years before the raid), four other agency proprietors, and a 54-year-old freelance writer who had impersonated a 23-year-old Teachers College student in an examination (New York Times, 1960f; Roth, 1960a). By early November their cases had been decided, typically with a guilty pleas, $500 fines and suspended sentences (New York Times, 1960b; New York Times, 1960c; New York Times, 1960h). Unlike Smith earlier and others later, they were not recent graduates—one was 73—but rather businesspeople whose agencies handled other work in addition to essays. Their prosecution ended a period of two decades of comfortable and profitable obscurity.

The ghostwriters and their employers were not the only ones to suffer consequences in the wake of Benson’s investigation. Within a week of Hogan’s raid, the student for whom Benson wrote the examination was expelled by Teachers College (New York World-Telegram and Sun, 1960a), and one doctoral candidate at Indiana who had hired Benson’s firm was suspended by that university (New York World-Telegram and Sun, 1960b). (It is not clear whether these schools learned of their students’ activities from Benson or from the District Attorney’s office, but with current standards of due process it is doubtful whether any institution would act so precipitately today.) Press coverage of the affair does not mention the academic fate of any other student, although the names of the nine local teachers who had patronized the ghostwriters were apparently reported to the New York City Board of Education (Roth, 1960a).

Public reaction to the scandal seemed to be a mix of outrage and resignation over the mendacity of students and ghostwriters alike, tempered by the rather smug conviction that only poor students plumbed such depths. This was articulated by Benson, who voiced the general belief that

[s]erious forms of cheating are practiced only by inadequate, inferior students, persons who should be off the academic rolls on the score of scholarship alone. Institutions which award degrees to such low-caliber students are cheapening the value of their degrees. (Benson, 1960f)

Sixty years later, the public response to Internet-generated papers is characterized, and compromised, by similar complacency.

This affair not only embarrassed those institutions which had failed to detect the plagiarism but also damaged the credibility of colleges generally. Commentators were inclined to blame “bad teachers”—and, by extension, their employers—for students’ ability to pass in fraudulent work without detection. The more exalted the degree, the greater the calumny. The *Times* opined that

if a professional hack can undertake, even for $2000 or more, to write a scholarly research thesis in a few weeks or months which ought to presume years of previous study and at least a year of specific research, then the real scandal is not with ghostly but with live scholarship. (Hechinger, 1960, p. IV & 9)

Benson editorialized that his own experience proved the existence of a significant problem:

Something is wrong somewhere if an outsider who is far from being a genius can get an A-minus on a final examination in a graduate course on the strength of a few hours of reading and without having attended a single lecture. (Benson, 1960f)

Even the grand jury made recommendations for systemic reforms both within the universities and in the public sector (Roth, 1960c), but there is no evidence that anything came of these.

Term paper companies, if they persisted, kept a lower profile during the 1960s. Academic misconduct continued, to be sure, coming to light most spectacularly in a cheating scandal at the Air Force Academy in the autumn of 1964. A group of cadets formed a ring to steal and sell examinations, and by the time they were apprehended in January 1965, the number of cadets using their wares was conservatively estimated at 300-400, of whom 109 were dismissed (Bride Jr., 1967; Snead Jr. & Shepherd, 1967). The other major service academies have also suffered similar embarrassments: West Point in 1951 and Annapolis in 1992 (Gantar, Patten, & O'Donnell, 1996). During this period, colleges’ continued emphasis on testing as a source of marks probably helped keep term papers out of the limelight. For example, in “A Startling Survey on College Cribbing,” term papers were not even mentioned (Life, 1965).

## The Warren Empire

Shortly after Hogan raided the ghostwriters of Manhattan, the Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh told the *Times* that “the problem of plagiarism... comes in waves... [y]ou must always guard against it” (Hechinger, 1960). The next wave arrived a decade later, and it was again the New York press which drew public attention to it. On July 10, 1971, the *Times* published its own exposé of the term paper industry (Maeroff, 1971). Focusing on Termpapers Unlimited, Inc., the *Times* piece featured interviews with Kenneth and Ward Warren, the firm’s proprietors. The Warren brothers claimed that in their first year of business Termpapers Unlimited had sold nearly 10,000 term papers at rates ranging from $3.50 per page for custom work to $2 per page for off-the-rack essays, with premiums for rush assignments.

The Warrens claimed that their inventory had been built by purchasing ‘A’ essays at $5 apiece, but this cannot be corroborated (Maeroff, 1971, p. 25). The provenance of the stock is an open question, since the Warrens may have trafficked, knowingly or not, in stolen essays. Nearly two dozen papers stolen from Harvard professors at about this time turned up in the inventory of New York firms (Hechinger, 1972; New York Times, 1972), and other colleges experienced similar events. The Warrens boasted that all of their writers were college graduates (many with advanced degrees), and that many were “moonlighting faculty members, graduate students, [and] technical writers” who, as “independent contractors,” earned $2 per page as long as they produced at least 50 pages a week. Purchasers were not guaranteed exclusive use of commissioned essays; each piece produced by Termpapers Unlimited was added to the company’s stock.

Today, of course, we fight fire with fire: a similar system is now used in combatting contract cheating. Each essay submitted to the plagiarism-detection service turnitin.com, for example, can be added to that firm’s resources (Turnitin, 2021).

Information given by the Warrens during interviews cannot be accepted uncritically. Not only are some of their claims questionable on their merits (if peak production was 500 papers a week during May, it seems unlikely that 10,000 essays could have been sold by a company which had only set up shop the previous autumn) or unlikely (e.g.,their declared intention of becoming a publicly traded company), but there were also inconsistencies in the multiple versions of their story. Ward Warren, for example, a Babson undergraduate in July 1971, claimed to be a graduate of Boston University three months later (Wisniewski, 1971). In fact, Warren registered at Boston University for summer courses, but received his degree from Babson in September 1971, and the respective Registrars Offices of these universities confirmed this. Such contradictions make it difficult to credit any of Warren’s statements, such as his claim to be “a self made millionaire” after only a year in business (Wisniewski, 1971)—an accomplishment which, using Warren’s figures and rates, would have required the sale between July and October (hardly peak season for the product) of at least three times the essays claimed sold between September and June. However improbable the details, there is little doubt that Termpapers Unlimited, Inc. was making money, and quickly. Moreover, the company was spreading out, establishing branches at campuses across the country.

One such franchise was Academic Marketplace (a local competitor, Marty Pesham, had previously taken the name Termpapers Unlimited) in Madison, Wisconsin. It was operated by Bruce Inksetter, a former assistant professor at University of Wisconsin who lost his job when he failed to complete his dissertation. Inksetter, a former freelance essay writer who bought the franchise from Warren for $500 (Bingenheimer, 1971), operated out of his apartment and sold chiefly off-the-rack essays from the Warrens’ catalogue of 3,000 titles. There were other players in the field, as well: Pesham specialized in custom work, and a third firm, Quality College Research, also shared the local market (Greenberg, 1972). In addition, there were freelance writers willing to turn their hands to an essay or two—one of whom was the first to place an advertisement in the campus press [“TERM PAPERS originally done, highest quality 251-1976” (Daily Cardinal, 1971, p. 18)].

The most quotable of these entrepreneurs was certainly Pesham. Inksetter, by contrast, was a reluctant spokesman for his industry, and Quality College Research positively shunned the limelight. Like Ward Warren, Pesham was inclined to be flexible with facts: when first interviewed he claimed to employ 150 writers, among them “three dozen TA’s and a dozen professors,” (Bingenheimer, 1971; Wisniewski, 1971) none less qualified than graduate students maintaining a 3.4 GPA, and but he later revised these figures to 60 moonlighting Teaching Assistants supplemented by “a few... unemployed teachers and other specialists” (Greenberg, 1972, p. 11). With this in mind his claims to have an overall rate of 92% ‘A’ grades and a commitment from moonlighting university employees to give an ‘A’ to any paper written by them (Bingenheimer, 1971; Wisniewski, 1971) must be considered warily. Even more questionable (though, given the climate of the 1971-72 academic year, not inherently impossible) is Pesham’s claim to have expanded from his local business to “67 campus franchises across the country” in less than nine months (Greenberg, 1972, p. 11).

The activities of these entrepreneurs were brought to light by the student press in Madison. The *Badger Herald* broke the story (Bingenheimer, 1971)—which ran in the same issue that carried Pesham’s first block ad—and the *Daily Cardinal* picked it up immediately (Wisniewski, 1971). They reported that one could buy a “custom” paper from Pesham for $2.90 a page or shop Inksetter’s catalogue for a “prewritten” essay at $2.50 a page, which precipitated not only demands that the university take action but also a flood of calls from potential customers seeking phone numbers (Greenberg, 1972). Student commentators rejected the term paper mills’ claims to legitimacy (see, for examples, (Dulin & Starr, 1971) and called openly for “the U” to “expel the sniveling scum that have used such services, and fire those teachers who have dishonored their calling by playing the whore to the student body” (JOC, 1971, p. 9).

Despite this public exposure of the industry, the University of Wisconsin at Madison experienced no immediate increase in disciplinary actions. Although Pesham boasted of having sold 3,000 essays in Madison alone during the fall term (Greenberg, 1972) and Inksetter claimed a sale of 430 to various University of Wisconsin campuses (Wisniewski, 1972), none of the dozen or so cases of plagiarism reported to Dean of Students, Paul Ginsberg, during the same period involved a purchased paper (Wisniewski, 1972). Ginsberg thought that professors were probably dispensing individual justice (Wisniewski, 1972), but Pesham had a different explanation: “professors are so involved in their own work that they don’t even know what is going on... You could take a chair out from under most of them and they wouldn’t know it” (Wisniewski, 1971, p. 2). Both men probably had part of the picture.

The *Daily Cardinal’s* follow-up story is especially interesting because it relates one student’s experience with a paper purchased from Termpapers Unlimited. The student, Dale Welch, had been caught turning in the same paper on Ingmar Bergman’s “Virgin Spring” that a student in another section had submitted, but escaped ruin when the TA who detected the fraud allowed him to earn a passing grade by writing another essay in place of the commissioned one. When Welch confronted Pesham about the duplication he was met with prevarication and evasion, balanced by the offer of a credit toward his next purchase (Wisniewski, 1972). This is instructive for what it reveals about the legitimacy of Pesham’s claim to sell only custom work: it may be that the essay in question had been written that semester for that course, but either Welch or the unnamed other student must have purchased a paper which had already been written for another customer.

The *Cardinal* piece also sheds light on the economic forces at work on the Madison campus. The prices quoted in the story suggest that Academic Marketplace had been forced to drop its prices to compete: the price of “copy orders” (*i.e.,* catalogue purchases) fell to $2.25 per page, and the cost of custom work dropped to $3.95 per page (Wisniewski, 1972) from its autumn peak of $4.50 (Bingenheimer, 1971). Termpapers Unlimited’s price, on the other hand, remained constant. Given his apparent practice of selling the same essay to two customers (or more), it is clear how Pesham was able to charge a dollar per page less than Inksetter for “custom” work, pay his writers $2 per page (Mentzer, 1972), and still maintain a healthy profit margin.

## Conclusions

Illicit enterprise prefers to operate in the shadows, and much of what we know about the origins of contract cheating comes from periodic exposure in the media. The *American Mercury* published what it considered a quaint story of general interest, while Alex Benson’s exposé in the *New York World-Telegram and The Sun* was more akin to a sting operation, backed by law enforcement. Student journalists at the University of Wisconsin advocated for institutional action against both producers and consumers but stopped short of calling for criminalizing it. These three vignettes illustrate the changes that occurred in the evolving world of contract cheating prior to its emergence from the shadows, as well as a range of responses to the revelation of its existence. Contract cheating survived and remained lucrative despite changing times, because for at least a century the rewards of being a customer have outweighed the risks.

The earliest commercial enterprise for which we have solid evidence was conducted by the pseudonymous G. H. Smith, who cast himself as a sole operator. By 1960, however, we can say with certainty that an industry existed, with competing firms employing multiple writers. Investigative journalism followed up by legal prosecution drove those businesses farther into the shadows for a time, but by the early 1970s contract cheating had become more brazen, with entrepreneurs advertising and boasting about their exploits. Legislatures as well as universities took note; the second article in this series examines their legal and disciplinary attempts to stamp out contract cheating.

## Food for Thought: Questions for Reflection

* Are the criticisms of the academy that were offered as rationalizations for contact cheating valid? Does poor teaching invite—or even excuse—evasion of course requirements?
* How much responsibility (if any) does an instructor bear for failing to detect that a paper was written by someone other than the student who submits it?
* How similar are contract cheating Internet sites in their blandishments and promises to the firms run by “Smith,” Pesham, Warren, Inksetter, and their contemporaries? Has the industry changed in any way other than means of delivery?

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