

## Contract-cheating: some things to look for.

Here is a list of pointers that can help to differentiate ghost-written (i.e. contract-cheated, commissioned) assignments from those where students have copied or colluded.

As a starting point... An assignment has caught your attention because it somehow doesn't look right but might not be showing the usual Turnitin/other indicators of plagiarism. So, from there, noting that some of these can arise as a result copy-and-paste plagiarism.

1. What is the Turnitin similarity score – or equivalent – with references excluded?
  - If it is anomalously/atypically low, e.g. 0-1-2%, then that can be an indicator that an essay-mill or ghost-writer has taken care to make the assignment “plagiarism free”, “Turnitin proof”, or similar, as many essay-mills advertise.
2. Check the references. Are these presented in Harvard (or other) referencing style as you indicated or would expect? Are all the references focused on the assignment or are they “generic” on the general subject area rather than specific to the core matter of the assignment?
  - Different reference format, particularly if the references themselves are correct and consistently presented, can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment or taken a previous reference list “from stock”.
  - Generic references can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment “from stock”.
3. Does the assignment focus on the assignment brief or is it (well-written) “generic”, addressing the general area but missing the specific focus of the assignment?
  - Generic and not-quite-meeting the assignment brief can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment “from stock”.
4. Is the assignment written in the right ‘voice’? Is the style and level of the assignment as expected for a student at that stage of their course or, for example, does it look like an undergraduate assignment that’s been written by someone with a command of the subject more aligned with postgraduate qualifications or equivalent?
  - Inappropriate ‘voice’ can indicate a ghost-writer has written the assignment.
5. Does the assignment contain unnecessarily circuitously worded phrases where “standard” wording/phrasing would be acceptable, or even better, but would be seen by Turnitin etc.?
  - Unwieldy but correct wording/phrasing can indicate a ghost-writer is trying to ensure the assignment is “plagiarism free”, “Turnitin proof” etc.
6. Is the quality of the written English demonstrably better than, or otherwise different to, the English in the student’s other assignments, emails etc.?
  - Distinct, identifiable differences in quality and use of English can indicate that someone other than the student has written. For example (not an exclusive list):
    - Quality and consistency of spelling.
    - Range of vocabulary.
    - Different use of first-person, third-person.
    - Different use of formal terminology against more colloquial English.
7. Are punctuation and grammar consistent with the student’s other assignments, emails etc.?
  - Distinct, identifiable differences in these aspects of writing style can indicate that someone else has written. For example (not an exclusive list):
    - Different use of commas, apostrophes, hyphens, dashes, colons & semi-colons, single & double quotes, 1 or 2 spaces after full-stops, etc.
    - Different spelling conventions, e.g. changes within or between assignments between British and US English (as labelled by Microsoft and others), other changes in “s” and “z” spellings (e.g. plagiarise, plagiarize) as otherwise occur.

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8. Download the “Originally Submitted File” via the download button on Turnitin’s Feedback Studio, or equivalent in other software. Open it in MS Word, Adobe Reader etc. as appropriate, taking care not to save the file when you close it as this will reset the document properties (meaning you’d have to re-download). Then:

- Check the document properties (e.g. “Properties...”) in MS Word, LibreOffice, Adobe Acrobat Reader etc.
  - Are the “Author” on the Summary pane and “Last saved by” on the Statistics pane (as labelled in Word, equivalents in other software) the student’s name/ID or do one or both appear to be someone else?
    - One or both not being the student’s name/ID can indicate ghost-writers (but can also arise from a student borrowing someone else’s computer).
    - It might be possible to identify author names by searching online...
    - If most or all of this information is blank, that’s a good indication that an essay-mill, ghost-writer etc. has taken deliberate steps to redact it to avoid detection.
  - In the Statistics pane, do the “Total editing time”, “Revision number”, “Created” date look reasonable or are these out of kilter with what you would expect?
    - A “Created” date that predates the assignment being set can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment “from stock”.
    - A very long total editing time and/or high number of revisions can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment “from stock”.
    - A very short, effectively zero, editing time can indicate that a student or ghost-writer has copied-and-pasted from another document, possibly ghost-written, into the document he/she has submitted.
- Check the document language setting, e.g. British or US (or other variant of) English.
  - Is this what you would expect from the student? Is it consistent with other assignments?

And... A ghost-written assignment might not show any of the above, and, conversely, an entirely honest assignment could show some of the above.

Robin Crockett  
Reader in Data Analysis  
Academic Integrity Officer  
Faculty of Arts, Science & Technology  
University of Northampton

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