**How serious is essay plagiarism?**

In an age of online referencing and essay mills, it’s easier than ever for students to plagiarise (wittingly or not). How big is the problem – and can it be prevented?

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[[](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/dec/30/is-plagiarism-really-a-growing-problem-in-universities#img-1)](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/dec/30/is-plagiarism-really-a-growing-problem-in-universities" \l "img-1)

Jessica Johnson\* was on the way to a funeral when she received an email from her university saying she’d committed a very serious offence: she’d plagiarised an essay.

“I was completely shocked because I hadn’t realised I’d done it,” she says. She thought students who plagiarised bought essays from dodgy websites, or stole work from their friends – things she’d never do. Instead, the then 18-year-old first year, studying international development, says she’d taken sloppy notes and failed to reference properly. She’d been given a brief online tutorial about plagiarism by the university and hadn’t fully realised what it was, or how easy it is to do by accident.

The following months were a “living hell”, Johnson says. After a series of hearings, where the seriousness of cheating was drilled into her, she was given the most lenient punishment the university could offer, which was to re-write the essay. Her university experience has since been “dominated by anxiety” about unwittingly doing it again, she says.

Reports suggest plagiarism is rife in universities. The internet has provided a “wealth of information that can be plagiarised”, says Wendy Sutherland-Smith, an expert in plagiarism from Deakin University. As a result, [a Times investigation](http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/uk-universities-in-plagiarism-epidemic-as-almost-50000-students-caught-cheating-over-last-3-years-a6796021.html) two years ago found almost 50,000 students were caught cheating in the previous three years, amounting to a so-called “plagiarism epidemic”. The government and universities are meanwhile [desperately trying](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/09/universities-urged-to-block-essay-mill-sites-in-plagiarism-crackdown) to crack down on essay-mill websites, which write essays for paying students.

But what can go unacknowledged is that a lot of students who plagiarise claim to do so “accidentally”, like Johnson did. Shame or embarrassment around being called out for cheating can be upsetting, if you had good intentions. “There is definitely a stigma around it,” says Johnson. “When I told people, their reaction made it feel worse, even though it was a genuine mistake.”

Simon Bullock, an expert on the subject from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), says much of the data on cheating doesn’t distinguish between those who have deliberately bought essays, and those who have merely referenced poorly. “You can’t really drill down into it to see how many are copying and pasting text, or who is buying essays,” he says.

Sutherland-Smith says she doesn’t believe that all students deliberately cheat. “Most students don’t do it to get an unfair advantage,” she says. Instead, it’s often due to being new to the university’s style of academic writing, she says. “Because, really, where else do you write in this bizarre kind of way, with citations? It’s quite a unique and rather strange thing to come to grips with.”

As more resources have been made available online, it has become easier to plagiarise – unwittingly or not. “There’s more option to cut and paste,” Sunderland-Smith says. “Correct attribution practices can also be more difficult to understand, particularly when seemingly free, widely available online information still requires referencing.”

[Last month, QAA said](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/09/universities-urged-to-block-essay-mill-sites-in-plagiarism-crackdown) that to tackle the problem universities should provide more support for struggling students. This should include more information about academic writing, says Bullock. “Some students are coming in without a strong set of research, writing and referencing skills.”

Sunderland-Smith says the internet is a “double-edged sword” for universities when it comes to plagiarism; it provides the opportunity, but also part of the solution. “Online tools, such as Turnitin and Urkund, and sophisticated searching strategies, allow teaching staff to find text matches,” she says.

Thomas Lancaster, an associate dean at Staffordshire University and one of the UK’s leading experts on essay cheating, points out students must take responsibility too. “Students arrive and they’re bringing bad habits with them,” he says. Lancaster suspects some students skip lectures and modules that give advice on referencing. “By its nature any kind of module on writing more academically isn’t going to be the most exciting on the syllabus,” he says. But this doesn’t mean universities should have to nag students, he says.

Paul Greatrix, a registrar at the University of Nottingham, adds that universities need to more thoroughly explain what plagiarism is in all its different forms. For instance, essay-mill sites work by trying to trick students into cheating unwittingly, he says. “It’s very easy to be duped into thinking you’re not plagiarising when in fact you are. These sites convince you it’s all above board and they’re just helping.”

Their advertising has also become more aggressive, Greatrix says. [Students](https://www.theguardian.com/education/students) can be geo-targeted on Facebook based on where they study and their age. They can also be contacted in their native language and encouraged to refer friends. Laura Stephenson, a postgraduate student at Northumbria University, says emails offering to “help” write her dissertation were even sent to her university email address.

As [universities crack down on plagiarism](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/09/universities-urged-to-block-essay-mill-sites-in-plagiarism-crackdown), some students feel anxious about it. “Some people panic,” says Stephenson. “They think that if they don’t reference perfectly, they might get kicked out.” She says she’d prefer universities to talk to students about it in a polite way, rather than scaring them.

Dominic Curry, a postgraduate student at Newcastle University, says the severity of plagiarism is really “drummed into” first-year students, in an “almost comedic” way. He says it’s good to talk about, but it “can be daunting”.

The Times labelled international students as the worst offenders. But Sutherland-Smith says students from vulnerable groups need extra support, rather than stigma. “Some students haven’t had much experience,” she says. For example, refugee students who have had their courses disrupted, or students who are studying in a foreign language.

What students need is a safe place to fail, the experts say. A practice assignment early on could be a good solution, says Lancaster. Sunderland-Smith adds that it takes patience. “These things don’t come overnight and it’s not something anybody gets right the first time,” she says.

For Johnson, more support would have helped. “In my first year I needed more guidance,” she says. But after the trouble she got in, she’s tightened up her note-taking and taken the time to reference properly. She hasn’t been called in for plagiarism again.

**How to avoid plagiarism**

• Don’t get someone else to do you your work for you, no matter how much pressure you’re under. “Please don’t go to any of these places that say they’ll help and do it for you,” says Sunderland-Smith. “Or you’ll just end up in deep water.”

• Educate yourself on good academic practice and on how to reference properly. If your university provides extra modules or lectures on this, make sure you attend. “If there isn’t that support, let the university know,” says Lancaster.

• Take careful notes and reference as you go. “If you’re writing an essay and using loads of different resources, it can be easy to forget the reference,” says Stephenson. If you think that’s happened, rather than panic, email the lecturer. “I’ve done it in my time,” she says.

• Ask for help when you need it. “Students are under an enormous amount of pressure from all directions,” says Greatrix. So go to your course tutor or the campus tutoring if you’re struggling.

\*Name has been changed to protect identity.