



# Plagiarism and the Web

Plagiarism is a perennial temptation for students and an eternal challenge for teachers. An event during the summer of 1996, however, seemed almost a re-invention of plagiarism--at least to some who responded to it.

In June 1996 a [message](#) was emailed to fraternity and sorority chapters across the country advertising a new electronic repository for down-loadable college papers. The site was called [schoolsucks.com](#), and featured the slogan "Download your Workload." Members of the Alliance for Computers and Writing (ACW) listserv list fumed and argued about plagiarism in general and schoolsucks.com in particular. Kenny Sahr, the author of the site, joined the discussion for a while, defending his work and adding a page for professors to his site, challenging them to join in the fight against plagiarism. An earlier version of the site included a banner announcing "School Sucks is the largest collection of free but awful homework. School Sucks is 100% against plagiarism. If we wanted to encourage plagiarism, we would a) charge even \$1 per paper and thereby deny educators the right to see them and b) rate or grade the papers."



A little searching quickly reveals that Sahr's site is not the only repository for plagiarizable papers. There are several large sites which sell papers, and even more which maintain small collections available for free. There are even some which promise custom-written papers. I've listed a few sites here. Margaret Fain of Coastal Carolina University has collected an [extensive list](#) of Internet Paper Mills.

- [al-term-paper.com](#)
- [Other People's Papers](#)
- [Free Termpapers International](#)
- [123HelpMe.com](#)
- [The Evil House of Cheat](#)

So what is a teacher to do? Here are some suggestions (many of which also help with the much more common problem of papers borrowed or purchased from friends):

- Let students know that you know about these web sites. Then *do* actually check some of them out. Students will be less likely to submit a paper that they know you may have seen on the web (or that a classmate might also submit).
- Go a step further and take students to one of the sites. Have students look at a weak paper (there are plenty of these on the Web!) and analyze its failures. They will learn something about writing and also see that what's available for downloading may not impress their

teacher.

- Alternately, teach the class to use the papers on the web as sources for their own papers (along with the multitude of other web sources). Show them how to correctly [cite electronic sources](#).
- Regarding advice on avoiding plagiarism: it's best to approach it as an issue of fair use and intellectual property. A discussion about the ways people use (and acknowledge) one another's ideas is better than an ex cathedra "Don't Plagiarize" rule. When presented as a "rule," it gets relegated to the list of other rules (use one inch margins, put commas between items in a list) and students are genuinely surprised when violation carries a stiffer penalty than the other rules!
- Be careful to give specific, non-generic instructions for papers. An assignment to "write about AIDS," for example, might tempt students to use one of the three AIDS papers at schoolsucks.com. A more specific assignment will make plagiarism much more difficult.
- Also try to give writing assignments which will capture your students' attention. If they can develop some interest in the subject, they'll be less likely to cheat.
- Include specific instructions about bibliographies, such as requiring all students to include material from required readings among their sources. Such readings might include web sites. (*suggested by Fred Donnelly of the University of New Brunswick*)
- Require other specific components, such as theoretical, professional, or disciplinary vocabulary learned in course readings; interviews with experts; recent sources.
- If appropriate, use the issues raised by the papermill web sites as a writing assignment on ethics.
- Watch your students write. Ask them to bring notes or drafts to class, have short conferences about the assignment, use peer groups to comment on drafts, ask for drafts to be submitted with the final paper.
- Require a letter of transmittal. On the day papers are due, ask students to write a letter to you reflecting on their process, the features of their papers they're proud of, the things they had trouble with, and the things they learned by writing the paper.
- If you suspect a paper was downloaded from the web, use a search engine to search for the source. Entering key words or a string of words in quotation marks will lead you to any web sites with those words. Since not all search engines index the same sites, it's best to try the search with two or three different engines. AltaVista, HotBot, and Lycos Pro work best in finding strings.

Finally, do *not* write to the maintainers of the web sites to complain or threaten. Kenny Sahr has turned such complaints into publicity for his site, letting the press know how he was being treated. In fact, he got enough publicity that he was able to sell advertising space at

[schoolsucks.com!](http://schoolsucks.com)

He and the others have the same right to publish what they want on their web sites as do the rest of us (and the hate groups and the pornographers). And, as Kenny himself pointed out--at least these papers are available for teachers to access--unlike those collected in files around campus.

*Bruce H. Leland*

<a href="#">Thinking and Talking about Plagiarism</a> , by Nick Carbone: A must read!	
<a href="#">To Bruce Leland's Web Site</a>	<a href="#">To Writing in the Disciplines Site</a>
<a href="#">Internet Research Workshop</a>	<a href="#">Computers and Writing 1998</a>
<a href="#">Workshop at Elgin CC</a>	<a href="#">Purdue OWL handout</a>
Links suggested by readers	
<a href="#">Plagiarized.com</a> , extensive site developed by Gregory Senechal	
<a href="#">Who Wrote this Free-Verse Poem?</a> by Benjamin Rossen (Research on a multiply-attributed text)	
<a href="#">Plagiarism in Colleges in the USA</a> , web essay by Ronald B. Standler	

*Permission granted reproduce (with citation)*

---

*www.wiu.edu/users/mfbhl/wiu/plagiarism.htm  
Latest Update: 01/29/02*