

Contract cheating detection for markers: checklist of strategies and features commonly found in assignments produced through contract cheating.

This checklist is a synthesis of experience and expertise from academics based at six higher education institutions in the UK. This resource draws on existing checklists found in academic literature and other associated documentation. It is important to note that the 'red flags' which are presented in this checklist, when taken individually, may not be indicative of contract cheating. However, when several of these 'red flags' appear together, it adds weight to the claim that the work may be the result of contract cheating, and should be investigated. This list should not be considered exhaustive, and markers need to use their discipline-specific knowledge and academic judgement to identify other possible 'red flags' in the assignments they are marking.



Text Analysis



A close analysis of the text submitted by the student may reveal red flags that could be indicative of contract cheating. Aspects of the text that a marker may want to pay attention to include:

- Unusually low or high quality relative to the standard expected of that student
- It displays a higher-level knowledge than expected (e.g. the work is comparable to that of a practitioner in the field, or a Master's/doctoral student)
- Discrepancy with the (English) language level of the student
- Discrepancy with the demands and expectations of the relevant academic discipline
- Discrepancy with genre
- The material is often irrelevant to the set task
- The work is inauthentic and inappropriate task response
- The text submitted is too vague or general
- Key content is either not included, or there is only a superficial coverage of it
- The unconventional use of quotations
- Unnatural or software-generated language (e.g. from article spinners, translators, automated paraphrasing tools, text inflators)
- Commercial writing indicators (verbose, jargony, vague, padded, repetitive, low information content)

To watch the accompanying videos, click on the video icons.

Referencing and Use of Sources



A careful review of both the quality and accuracy of the sources used and referencing format may reveal possible red flags. Aspects of the referencing and use of sources that a marker may want to pay attention to include:

- The use of non-standard referencing formats
- Not following a university referencing style, or a style expected for a particular academic discipline
- Unusually wide reading and number of sources cited
- Unusual referencing style (in-text or reference list)
- Misrepresented citations
- The falsification and/or fabrication of references
- Incorrect references (e.g. wrong publication year)
- Old references with new dates
- Unexpected and unusual sources (e.g. wrong discipline or foreign language sources)
- Untraceable sources
- Other anomalies, such as no in-text citations and the absence of access dates
- References to key discipline or task-specific texts missing (excludes key content and/or the superficial coverage of key content)

Turnitin Similarity and Text Matching



Even though Turnitin is primarily a text-matching tool, it can be used to identify possible red flags in work that may be indicative of contract cheating. Aspects of the Turnitin similarity report that a marker may want to pay attention to include:

- An unusually low text-matching score, or even a text-matching score of zero
- Discrepancies in the text-matching similarity scores for main body and the reference list - for example, no text-matching in the main body, but text-matching in the reference list
- Turnitin will flag anything unusual in a document detected by its algorithms. These should be investigated. However, the absence of a Turnitin flag does not necessarily mean that the work is not the product of contract cheating

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Document Properties

An examination of document properties (meta-data) may reveal possible red flags. Aspects of the document properties that a marker may want to pay attention to include:

- An unusually low editing time relative to the time that such a paper should take to produce
- Metadata (authors, creation date etc.)
- Format and formatting
- Unusual template (e.g. borders and placeholders), especially if the template differs from that which the students are expected to use

Comparison with the Student's Previous Work

By comparing a piece of work that is suspected to be the product of contract cheating with other work submitted by the same student, it may be possible to identify differences between them that we would not expect to see if they were written by the same person. Aspects of a student's writing style that a marker may want to pay attention to include:

- Differences in referencing style and format
- Differences in writing style, such as paragraph indentation, spaces between paragraphs, line spacing, inconsistent use of academic abbreviations such as *et al.*, and *ibid.*
- Significant improvement in written expression and academic skills

Writing Process



If a piece of work is authentic then a student should be able to provide evidence to support this, such as notes and drafts. If a piece of work is the product of contract cheating, then it is unlikely that a student will be able to produce these, or if they do, they are fabricated. Aspects of a student's writing process that a marker may want to pay attention to include:

- No drafts
- No notes
- Non-engagement with academic support services, such as library skills sessions, yet still able to produce work of a higher than expected standard

Comparison to Cohort

- If a piece of work makes unusual mistakes relative to the class or academic discipline, it may be worthy of further investigation.

Related Considerations

- Many universities have specific procedures to following regarding allegations of academic misconduct, including suspected contract cheating. If you are unsure of what the procedures are at your specific institution, please seek advice and guidance.
- It is important to distinguishing between legitimate proofreading and contract cheating

This checklist draws from the following sources:

Bloomsbury Institute, Contract cheating checklist.
Popoola, Olumide. "Marker detection of Contract Cheating: An Investigative Corpus Linguistic Approach In European Conference on Academic Integrity and Plagiarism 2021, 2021
https://academicintegrity.eu/conference/proceedings/2021/book_of_abstracts2021.pdf#page=131
Rogerson, Ann M. "Detecting Contract Cheating in Essay and Report Submissions: Process, Patterns, Clues and Conversations." *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 13, no. 1 (December 2017): 10. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-017-0021-6>.
TESQA, Substantiating contract cheating: A guide for investigators. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/substantiating-contract-cheating-guide-investigators.pdf>
University of Manchester, Detecting contract cheating: tips for markers. <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=50362>
University of Southampton, Contract cheating checklist

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