

Third Party Academic Misconduct Guidelines – Actions and Responsibilities for Markers

About this document

A reminder of what is considered to be third-party academic misconduct (i.e., contract cheating using a person, essay mill company or GenAI to produce work to submit for academic credit) as outlined in the CCCU [Student-Academic Integrity-Policy.pdf](#)

Contract cheating occurs when a student asks a third party (this can include a person, essay mill or GenAI) to complete a piece of work, and the student then submits the work for assessment. It means the student submits work not produced by themselves. Examples of where contract cheating takes place include (but are not limited to) where a student:

- pays, or promises to pay, another person to do the work
- swaps a piece of work with another student;
- asks a family member, friend or acquaintance to do the piece of work, in whole or in part, as a favour without paying them;
- downloads a paper from an essay site (with or without payment);
- contacts, pays, or promises to pay, money to a business (sometimes called an essay mill) to:
 1. complete a piece of work, in whole or in part, on their behalf
 2. uses GenAI to produce work in its entirety, or excessively, and without clearly referencing or acknowledging that this is not their work.

It is possible that the contracted person or company, and not the student themselves, may use GenAI to produce the work.

During the marking process – responsibility lies with the marker

(check with Academic Integrity Officer/ marking team / Module Lead / Course Director as appropriate)

If you are marking and an assignment concerns you because something doesn't feel right but Turnitin is not showing any clear indication of academic misconduct, look at the checklist below and ask yourself the following:

1. The marker may have cause for concern that the work was not written by the student in one or more of the following:

- a. It is unlikely that a student at the level of study would use such complex arguments, or the range of sources cited/used.
- b. The work does not use key resources as expected – these may have been recommended, be set texts or in a reading list.
- c. The work does not align with the assessment title.

- d. Use of methods, equations etc. to solve problems have not been used in teaching.
- e. Different styles and voices are apparent in different parts of the assessment.
- f. Subject terminology is generic, there may be unusual spellings and/or formatting.

2. A more in-depth checklist is below:

a. What is the Turnitin similarity score *with references excluded*?

If the score is very low (1-3%) or there appears to be no similarity – including in the reference list – this may indicate that an essay mill or other contracted third party has worked to make the assessment ‘Turnitin proof’ or ‘plagiarism free’ often boasted about on essay mill advertisements.

b. Are the references as expected?

- a. Has the writer used the expected reference style, e.g., Harvard, APA, Chicago, Oscola, as you would expect? If this has been recommended and is an expectation and you or other tutors have also covered how to reference in the required style it would be odd to use a different system.
- b. A mix of referencing styles or formats may indicate a ghost writer not being aware of the expected referencing style.
- c. Generic references can show that the contracted writer has limited access to academic sources or is adapting a previous assignment from a stock supply.
- d. References all being old or all from books can also indicate a ghost writer as these sources are less likely to be flagged in a Turnitin similarity report.
- e. Expected key resources have not been referenced
- f. GenAI may make a number of errors using references:
 1. false references – check titles and DOIs match.
 2. inaccurate references (this can be because of poor prompts from the writer)
 3. unrecognisable reference format or mix of reference types

c. Does investigation of the originally submitted file in Turnitin Feedback Studio reveal any anomalies?

Please note that you need to download in Word/Adobe as necessary but don't save the file as this will reset the document properties. Checking the document properties consider the following:

- a. 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).
- b. If the majority, or all, the 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.

- c. In the Statistics pane, do the “Total editing time”, “Revision number”, “Created” date align with expectations?
- d. A “Created” date that predates the assignment being set can indicate a ghostwriter has adapted a previous assignment “from stock”.
- e. A very long total editing time and/or high number of revisions can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment “from stock”.
- f. A very short 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/they have submitted.
- g. Check the document language setting, e.g., British or US (or other variant of) English.
- h. If this is not an anonymised assessment is this what you would expect from the student, given the trajectory of expected development and improvement in writing? Is it consistent with other assignments, given expected improvements? (please note that you can still consider this once work has been de-anonymised).
- i. Check the [flag](#) feature for deliberately hidden text or text using mixed fonts, Cyrillic characters etc.

4. Does the work align with the assessment title?

If the writing is generic, i.e., only talks in general about the topic, not answering the question or not fulfilling the assessment brief can indicate a third-party writer with limited access to relevant sources or adapting an existing assessment from their archives. It can also indicate a student writing an assessment at the last-minute relying on a quick Google search for sources, or poor use of GenAI outputs.

None of these steps are conclusive proof of academic misconduct by a third party but if you feel the assessment should be investigated further follow the Academic Misconduct Procedures after consultation with the appropriate Academic Integrity Officer.

Adapted from Crockett, R (2020), [Contract Cheating: some things to look out for](#)

Please remember that all evidence and discussion about the assessment will be shared with the student if the potential contract cheating case progresses to a formal panel/investigation.