

# Cheating in Online Courses

---

One of the most painful issues for any instructor is that of student cheating. Trying to prevent or prove cheating is time-consuming and difficult. The effort shifts the focus from supporting and encouraging students who are actively engaged in learning, to policing those who would abuse the system. Quite simply it wastes your time and expertise, and reduces your ability to teach effectively. Resources allocated to cheating come at a cost to all students who are paying for a real education.

The following strategies may help you take "reasonable" steps to prevent cheating without too much allocation of time and resources. Please send your own suggestions and modifications so that this becomes a rich source of best practices that serves all of us.

### **Time your Tests and Exams**

This does not apply in all cases, but if you are able to use short-answer questions that depend on understanding (see below) rather than requiring extensive writing, then you can reduce the time for your tests, and that in turn reduces the time that students can spend looking up answers. Blackboard allows students to go over the allocated time, but provides this information to you as an instructor so that you apply penalties or make allowances for individual students.

### **Randomize Online Tests**

Students receive the same set of questions but these are presented in a different random order for each student. This makes it more difficult for students to compare or copy answers, and is also useful if a student must retake a test. Randomizing the questions is especially useful when the test is timed.

### **Test for Understanding**

Don't ask questions that allow student to "dump" answers from a textbook or Web site. Rather, ask questions that require them to make a choice. Interestingly, multiple choice and true/false questions are more effective in some ways than essay or short answer questions. For example: rather than ask student to "describe a wetland bog," use a multiple choice question in the form of: "What type of environment is described by the following?" The student must correctly interpret your description, which requires their understanding. Even questions that, at first glance, appear to demand descriptive answers can often be turned around to a "choose the right answer" format that assesses the student's understanding and removes any temptation to plagiarize.

## Use Question Pools (Test Banks)

It is time-consuming to create test banks, but the effort can yield significant long term value. Once you have question pools, you can change your test frequently (every semester, or for different sections) and pull questions randomly for each student. You also gain quality control over your assessments by selecting questions that exactly meet your assessment requirements. A team approach can reduce the workload, where instructors share test questions in a common pool that can be modified and customized as needed by each instructor for their own purposes.

Apply plagiarism-testing tools. As an instructor you will have a good eye for plagiarism, but that does not make it easy to prove. There are a number of plagiarism testing tools on the Web, (Blackboard provides SafeAssign), which test essay submissions for plagiarism and provide a report when you grade your student work.

## Shine Some Light on the Problem

Apply the light test. When you are concerned with outright copying, a simple light test can be very revealing. This test may be especially useful in technical, science or math-related courses. Simply print out the submissions of two students and hold them up to the light to look for formatting consistencies. Even if the students have modified some content (for example in a programming course, variable names may have been changed), a relatively low match can indicate a copy, since the likelihood of consistent spacing, wording and paragraphs is extremely low. If you find this in multiple assignments, you can feel sure that you have identified a problem.

## Ask the Students to Explain What Happened

If you feel sure that two students are cheating, your first question is whether both students are responsible, or whether one copied from the other. If the latter is the case, then of course the question is whether this student was a willing participant, whether he or she experienced some social or other pressure to "help", or whether he or she was completely ignorant of the copying. Often an effective approach is as follows:

1. Approach two other instructors or staff members who can confirm your suspicions based on the evidence.
2. Notify your department chair to avoid any surprises (your chair may recommend that you escalate the matter to Student Services).
3. Inform the two students using separate emails that you have satisfied yourself that there has been a cheating incident, without giving any details. Tell them that you cannot assign a grade until the matter is resolved, and that you need to know whether both students were involved or only one so that you can handle the matter fairly. Let the students know that if they have

concerns you are willing to escalate the issue to the campus level for resolution. Keep your note short and non-specific.

**Copy your chair and BE SURE TO SEND SEPARATE EMAILS TO EACH STUDENT** so that (1) the students are not made aware of each other's names or involvement, and (2) so that the students have the opportunity to respond individually. In many cases, the guilty student will admit responsibility. If one student admits responsibility, and there is any question regarding the involvement of the other student, it is better to assume the best for the second student and avoid any penalty. If the students challenge your assertion of cheating, be prepared to escalate the issue.

4. Maintain a complete record of the communications, and copy your Chair (or Dean if you are a Chair) on all messages.