

The Shadow Scholar: The man who writes your students' papers tells his story

By Ed Dante

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Editor's note: Ed Dante is a pseudonym for a writer who lives on the East Coast. Through a literary agent, he approached The Chronicle wanting to tell the story of how he makes a living writing papers for a custom-essay company and to describe the extent of student cheating he has observed. In the course of editing his article, The Chronicle reviewed correspondence Dante had with clients and some of the papers he had been paid to write. In the article published here, some details of the assignment he describes have been altered to protect the identity of the student.

The request came in by e-mail around 2 in the afternoon. It was from a previous customer, and she had urgent business. I quote her message here verbatim (if I had to put up with it, so should you): "You did me business ethics proposal for me I need proposal got approved pls can you will write me paper?" I've gotten pretty good at interpreting this kind of correspondence. The client had attached a document from her professor with details about the paper. She needed the first section in a week. Seventy-five pages. I told her no problem.

It truly was no problem. In the past year, I've written roughly 5,000 pages of scholarly literature, most on very tight deadlines. But you won't find my name on a single paper. I've written toward a master's degree in cognitive psychology, a Ph.D. in sociology, and a handful of postgraduate credits in international diplomacy. I've worked on bachelor's degrees in hospitality, business administration, and accounting. I've written for courses in history, cinema, labor relations, pharmacology, theology, sports management, maritime security, airline services, sustainability, municipal budgeting, marketing, philosophy, ethics, Eastern religion, postmodern architecture, anthropology, literature, and public administration. I've attended three dozen online universities. I've completed 12 graduate theses of 50 pages or more. All for someone else.

You've never heard of me, but there's a good chance that you've read some of my work. I'm a hired gun, a doctor of everything, an academic mercenary. My customers are your students. I promise you that. Somebody in your classroom uses a service that you can't detect, that you can't defend against, that you may not even know exists. I work at an online company that generates tens of thousands of dollars a month by creating original essays based on specific instructions provided by cheating students. I've worked there full time since 2004. On any day of the academic year, I am working on upward of 20 assignments.

In the midst of this great recession, business is booming. At busy times, during midterms and finals, my company's staff of roughly 50 writers is not large enough to satisfy the demands of students who will pay for our work and claim it as their own. You would be amazed by the incompetence of your students' writing. I have seen the word "desperate" misspelled every way you can imagine. And these students truly are desperate. They couldn't write a convincing grocery list, yet they are in graduate school. They really need help. They need help learning and, separately, they need help passing their courses. But they aren't getting it.

For those of you who have ever mentored a student through the writing of a dissertation, served on a thesis-review committee, or guided a graduate student through a formal research process, I have a question: Do you ever wonder how a student who struggles to formulate complete sentences in conversation manages to produce marginally competent research? How does that student get by you?

I live well on the desperation, misery, and incompetence that your educational system has created. Granted, as a writer, I could earn more; certainly there are ways to earn less. But I never struggle to find work. And as my peers trudge through thankless office jobs that seem more intolerable with every passing month of our sustained recession, I am on pace for my best year yet. I will make roughly \$66,000 this year. Not a king's ransom, but higher than what many actual educators are paid. Of course, I know you are aware that cheating occurs. But you have no idea how deeply this kind of cheating penetrates the academic system, much less how to stop it. Last summer *The New York Times* reported that 61 percent of undergraduates have admitted to some form of cheating on assignments and exams. Yet there is little discussion about custom papers and how they differ from more-detectable forms of plagiarism, or about why students cheat in the first place. It is my hope that this essay will initiate such a conversation. As for me, I'm planning to retire. I'm tired of helping you make your students look competent.

It is late in the semester when the business student contacts me, a time when I typically juggle deadlines and push out 20 to 40 pages a day. I had written a short research proposal for her a few weeks before, suggesting a project that connected a surge of unethical business practices to the patterns of trade liberalization. The proposal was approved, and now I had six days to complete the assignment. This was not quite a rush order, which we get top dollar to write. This assignment would be priced at a standard \$2,000, half of which goes in my pocket.

A few hours after I had agreed to write the paper, I received the following e-mail: "sending sorces for ur to use thanx." I did not reply immediately. One hour later, I received another message: "did u get the sorce I send please where you are now? Desprit to pass spring project"

Not only was this student going to be a constant thorn in my side, but she also communicated in haiku, each less decipherable than the one before it. I let her know that I was giving her work the utmost attention, that I had received her sources, and that I would be in touch if I had any questions. Then I put it aside.

From my experience, three demographic groups seek out my services: the English-as-second-language student; the hopelessly deficient student; and the lazy rich kid. For the last, colleges are a perfect launching ground—they are built to reward the rich and to forgive them their laziness. Let's be honest: The successful among us are not always the best and the brightest, and certainly not the most ethical. My favorite customers are those with an unlimited supply of money and no shortage of instructions on how they would like to see their work executed. While the deficient student will generally not know how to ask for what he wants until he doesn't get it, the lazy rich student will know exactly what he wants. He is poised for a life of paying others and telling them what to do. Indeed, he is acquiring all the skills he needs to stay on top.

As for the first two types of students—the ESL and the hopelessly deficient—colleges are utterly failing them. Students who come to American universities from other countries find that their efforts to learn a new language are confounded not only by cultural difficulties but also by the pressures of grading. The focus on evaluation rather than education means that those who haven't mastered English must do so quickly or suffer the consequences. My service provides a particularly quick way to "master" English. And those who are hopelessly deficient—a euphemism, I admit—struggle with communication in general.

Two days had passed since I last heard from the business student. Overnight I had received 14 e-mails from her. She had additional instructions for the assignment, such as "but more again please make sure they are a good link betwee the letecture review and all the chapter and the benfet of my paper. finally do you think the level of this work? how match i can get it?" I'll admit, I didn't fully understand that one. It was followed by some clarification: "where u are can you get my messages? Please I pay a lot and dont have ao to faile I strated to get very worry." Her messages had arrived between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. Again I

assured her I had the matter under control. It was true. At this point, there are few academic challenges that I find intimidating. You name it, I've been paid to write about it.

Customers' orders are endlessly different yet strangely all the same. No matter what the subject, clients want to be assured that their assignment is in capable hands. It would be terrible to think that your Ivy League graduate thesis was riding on the work ethic and perspicacity of a public-university slacker. So part of my job is to be whatever my clients want me to be. I say yes when I am asked if I have a Ph.D. in sociology. I say yes when I am asked if I have professional training in industrial/organizational psychology. I say yes when asked if I have ever designed a perpetual-motion-powered time machine and documented my efforts in a peer-reviewed journal.

The subject matter, the grade level, the college, the course—these things are irrelevant to me. Prices are determined per page and are based on how long I have to complete the assignment. As long as it doesn't require me to do any math or video-documented animal husbandry, I will write anything. I have completed countless online courses. Students provide me with passwords and user names so I can access key documents and online exams. In some instances, I have even contributed to weekly online discussions with other students in the class.

I have become a master of the admissions essay. I have written these for undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs, some at elite universities. I can explain exactly why you're Brown material, why the Wharton M.B.A. program would benefit from your presence, how certain life experiences have prepared you for the rigors of your chosen course of study. I do not mean to be insensitive, but I can't tell you how many times I've been paid to write about somebody helping a loved one battle cancer. I've written essays that could be adapted into Meryl Streep movies.

I do a lot of work for seminary students. I like seminary students. They seem so blissfully unaware of the inherent contradiction in paying somebody to help them cheat in courses that are largely about walking in the light of God and providing an ethical model for others to follow. I have been commissioned to write many a passionate condemnation of America's moral decay as exemplified by abortion, gay marriage, or the teaching of evolution. All in all, we may presume that clerical authorities see these as a greater threat than the plagiarism committed by the future frocked.

With respect to America's nurses, fear not. Our lives are in capable hands—just hands that can't write a lick. Nursing students account for one of my company's biggest customer bases. I've written case-management plans, reports on nursing ethics, and essays on why nurse practitioners are lighting the way to the future of medicine. I've even written pharmaceutical-treatment courses, for patients who I hope were hypothetical.

I, who have no name, no opinions, and no style, have written so many papers at this point, including legal briefs, military-strategy assessments, poems, lab reports, and, yes, even papers on academic integrity, that it's hard to determine which course of study is most infested with cheating. But I'd say education is the worst. I've written papers for students in elementary-education programs, special-education majors, and ESL-training courses. I've written lesson plans for aspiring high-school teachers, and I've synthesized reports from notes that customers have taken during classroom observations. I've written essays for those studying to become school administrators, and I've completed theses for those on course to become principals. In the enormous conspiracy that is student cheating, the frontline intelligence community is infiltrated by double agents. (Future educators of America, I know who you are.)

As the deadline for the business-ethics paper approaches, I think about what's ahead of me. Whenever I take on an assignment this large, I get a certain physical sensation. My body says: Are you sure you want to do this again? You know how much it hurt the last time. You know this student will be with you for a long time. You know you will become her emergency contact, her guidance counselor and life raft. You

know that for the 48 hours that you dedicate to writing this paper, you will cease all human functions but typing, you will Google until the term has lost all meaning, and you will drink enough coffee to fuel a revolution in a small Central American country.

But then there's the money, the sense that I must capitalize on opportunity, and even a bit of a thrill in seeing whether I can do it. And I can. It's not implausible to write a 75-page paper in two days. It's just miserable. I don't need much sleep, and when I get cranking, I can churn out four or five pages an hour. First I lay out the sections of an assignment—introduction, problem statement, methodology, literature review, findings, conclusion—whatever the instructions call for. Then I start Googling. I haven't been to a library once since I started doing this job. Amazon is quite generous about free samples. If I can find a single page from a particular text, I can cobble that into a report, deducing what I don't know from customer reviews and publisher blurbs. Google Scholar is a great source for material, providing the abstract of nearly any journal article. And of course, there's Wikipedia, which is often my first stop when dealing with unfamiliar subjects. Naturally one must verify such material elsewhere, but I've taken hundreds of crash courses this way. After I've gathered my sources, I pull out usable quotes, cite them, and distribute them among the sections of the assignment. Over the years, I've refined ways of stretching papers. I can write a four-word sentence in 40 words. Just give me one phrase of quotable text, and I'll produce two pages of ponderous explanation. I can say in 10 pages what most normal people could say in a paragraph.

I've also got a mental library of stock academic phrases: "A close consideration of the events which occurred in ____ during the ____ demonstrate that ____ had entered into a phase of widespread cultural, social, and economic change that would define ____ for decades to come." Fill in the blanks using words provided by the professor in the assignment's instructions.

How good is the product created by this process? That depends—on the day, my mood, how many other assignments I am working on. It also depends on the customer, his or her expectations, and the degree to which the completed work exceeds his or her abilities. I don't ever edit my assignments. That way I get fewer customer requests to "dumb it down." So some of my work is great. Some of it is not so great. Most of my clients do not have the wherewithal to tell the difference, which probably means that in most cases the work is better than what the student would have produced on his or her own. I've actually had customers thank me for being clever enough to insert typos. "Nice touch," they'll say. I've read enough academic material to know that I'm not the only bullshit artist out there. I think about how Dickens got paid per word and how, as a result, *Bleak House* is ... well, let's be diplomatic and say exhaustive. Dickens is a role model for me.

So how does someone become a custom-paper writer? The story of how I got into this job may be instructive. It is mostly about the tremendous disappointment that awaited me in college. My distaste for the early hours and regimented nature of high school was tempered by the promise of the educational community ahead, with its free exchange of ideas and access to great minds. How dispiriting to find out that college was just another place where grades were grubbed, competition overshadowed personal growth, and the threat of failure was used to encourage learning.

Although my university experience did not live up to its vaunted reputation, it did lead me to where I am today. I was raised in an upper-middle-class family, but I went to college in a poor neighborhood. I fit in really well: After paying my tuition, I didn't have a cent to my name. I had nothing but a meal plan and my roommate's computer. But I was determined to write for a living, and, moreover, to spend these extremely expensive years learning how to do so. When I completed my first novel, in the summer between sophomore and junior years, I contacted the English department about creating an independent study around editing and publishing it. I was received like a mental patient. I was told, "There's nothing like that here." I was told that I could go back to my classes, sit in my lectures, and fill out Scantron tests until I graduated. I didn't much care for my classes, though. I slept late and spent the afternoons working

on my own material. Then a funny thing happened. Here I was, begging anybody in authority to take my work seriously. But my classmates did. They saw my abilities and my abundance of free time. They saw a value that the university did not. It turned out that my lazy, Xanax-snorting, Miller-swilling classmates were thrilled to pay me to write their papers. And I was thrilled to take their money. Imagine you are crumbling under the weight of university-issued parking tickets and self-doubt when a frat boy offers you cash to write about Plato. Doing that job was a no-brainer. Word of my services spread quickly, especially through the fraternities. Soon I was receiving calls from strangers who wanted to commission my work. I was a writer!

Nearly a decade later, students, not publishers, still come from everywhere to find me.

I work hard for a living. I'm nice to people. But I understand that in simple terms, I'm the bad guy. I see where I'm vulnerable to ethical scrutiny. But pointing the finger at me is too easy. Why does my business thrive? Why do so many students prefer to cheat rather than do their own work? Say what you want about me, but I am not the reason your students cheat. You know what's never happened? I've never had a client complain that he'd been expelled from school, that the originality of his work had been questioned, that some disciplinary action had been taken. As far as I know, not one of my customers has ever been caught.

With just two days to go, I was finally ready to throw myself into the business assignment. I turned off my phone, caged myself in my office, and went through the purgatory of cramming the summation of a student's alleged education into a weekend. Try it sometime. After the 20th hour on a single subject, you have an almost-out-of-body experience. My client was thrilled with my work. She told me that she would present the chapter to her mentor and get back to me with our next steps. Two weeks passed, by which time the assignment was but a distant memory, obscured by the several hundred pages I had written since. On a Wednesday evening, I received the following e-mail: "Thanx u so much for the chapter is going very good the porfesser likes it but wants the folloing suggestions please what do you thing?: "The hypothesis is interesting but I'd like to see it a bit more focused. Choose a specific connection and try to prove it.' "What shoudwe say?"

This happens a lot. I get paid per assignment. But with longer papers, the student starts to think of me as a personal educational counselor. She paid me to write a one-page response to her professor, and then she paid me to revise her paper. I completed each of these assignments, sustaining the voice that the student had established and maintaining the front of competence from some invisible location far beneath the ivory tower.

The 75-page paper on business ethics ultimately expanded into a 160-page graduate thesis, every word of which was written by me. I can't remember the name of my client, but it's her name on my work. We collaborated for months. As with so many other topics I tackle, the connection between unethical business practices and trade liberalization became a subtext to my everyday life. So, of course, you can imagine my excitement when I received the good news: "thanx so much for uhelpp ican going to graduate to now".