

# Bait and switch: The search engine optimization content practises of contract cheating websites

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## Introduction

It has been widely discussed in the literature and popular media, that students subcontracting out the production of their assessments is one of, if not the greatest integrity challenge faced by educators today. In fact, it is serious enough that some countries, such as Australia have proposed outlawing the practice (Ross, 2019). This subcontracting process, first termed *contract cheating* by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), has become increasingly accessible and economically rational to students via a number of technological developments. Take for instance the explosion of secure and encrypted messaging services (Whatsapp, Signal and so forth) that allow small scale services to operate with relative impunity. On a larger scale, and the focus of this paper, there are sophisticated online businesses that utilize encrypted and anonymous payment and cloud technologies to make contract cheating for students as easy as buying a mousepad off Amazon (Rowland et al., 2018).

Recently, research into the contract cheating industry has proliferated. Insights into perceptions among faculty (Harper et al., 2019), the economic rationality of such cheating for students (Rigby et al., 2015), the business practices of such operations (Ellis et al., 2018), have all increased our overall understanding of this multifaceted issue. From a marketing point of view, the research is more limited. Areas of investigation have included the use of Twitter agents to engage directly with students searching for help (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019), the different engagement approaches of contract cheating companies on Twitter (Amigud, 2019), and the psychological persuasion techniques employed on the websites themselves (Rowland et al., 2018). Though strong progress has been made, especially in the area of social media engagement, more fully understanding how students are made aware of these services, and then converted into paying customers is off the utmost importance in the fight to reign in this practice. The present study examines this issue from the perspective of one of the most pervasive technologies in today's society - the search engine.

## Search engine optimization

Given that the most common way that individuals gather information is currently via search engines such as Google and Bing (Berman & Katona, 2011), it is clearly important for contract cheating websites to be visible to prospective clients on these sites. In general, the higher a page ranks on a search engine for a particular search, the more likely that the searcher will click that page (Berman & Katona, 2011). One study by Barry & Lardner

(2010) found that the first ranked link on a search results page received five times the number of clicks compared to the second link. Currently, search engines have two methods in which a page can be seen by users, paid search advertising (SEA) and organic search engine optimization (SEO). The important distinction here is that a company cannot directly pay a search engine to rank higher organically (the non-advertisement results). Instead this must be achieved by a wide array of best practices. This includes on-site activities such as content creation as well as off-site link-building from other websites. The focus of this research is exclusively on the on-site organic SEO activities of contract cheating websites.

On-site SEO is focused on the creation of keyword relevant content for search engines to identify as a good fit for the user's search query. This is the key component behind the practice of blogging - creating blog posts that search engines can match to a specific query. So for instance if a website wants to rank on the search term "*buy essay*" – then there should be a page on that site that is optimized for search engines to attempt to rank highly. Similarly, if a website wanted to rank on the search term "*argumentative essay topics*" a keyword optimized blog post about 100 unique essay topics would have a good chance at being ranked by the search engine.

The current body of knowledge that relates to the search engine activities and presence of contract cheating websites is extremely limited. Lancaster (2020) conducted an exploratory study of the types of websites that rank in the top ten on the SERP for Google on discipline specific search terms such as "business essay", reporting that 39.5% of the search results belonged to contract cheating businesses. This is a disturbing trend, but limited to just 19 search terms. Thus, the question - how entrenched in the search engine space are these sites?

### **Research aim and objectives**

The aim of this study was to explore the search engine marketing strategy of contract cheating websites. Specifically, the first stage of this research was to identify the sites that had the highest search engine visibility. The second stage was to analyze the keywords (or search terms) that the 10 largest sites are targeting. In order to achieve this, we employed the same method that these websites would be most likely to use when engaging in measuring and optimizing their search marketing activities. The next section provides a brief overview of search engine marketing as it relates to the aforementioned research objective.

### **Methodology**

This study is based on the idea that contract cheating websites operate using the same digital marketing techniques that any other business might employ. As such, the data used in this study was obtained via the same platform (SEMrush) that major digital marketing agencies, contractors, and in-house digital marketers would use in their SEO procedures. The collection of this data via SEMrush was conducted in a multi-stage process, that is described

in-depth in the following paragraphs. It should be noted that to ensure that language, and geographical differences were minimized, the data was limited to be from the United States database, and only for the year January 1st 2019 through December 31st 2019. This parameter set remained in place for all the data in this study.

## Results

The first stage of this research required the construction of a comprehensive list of contract cheating websites with visibility on Google. A simple Google search within a private browser for “business essay” (following the Lancaster 2020 procedure) produced a list of results. Taking the first website listed in the organic search an overview of the organic reach of this site (in this case the site ranks on 50,139 keywords, has 17,549 organic competitors and has an average monthly organic search engine traffic of 244,476 visits). By exporting the data of the 17,549 organic competitors it was then possible to start constructing a competitive set. This set was filtered via the SEMrush metric “competitor relevance” to ensure that sites such as Wikipedia didn’t enter the competitive set. This process was replicated for the 18 biggest organic traffic contract cheating websites identified in this process - iteratively creating a master list. In total there were 52 sites identified that had organic traffic above 9,000 visits per month (with many more below this threshold)– accounting for a total of 2,017,103 estimated monthly visits.

Next we extracted the search terms for which the 10 largest sites (by traffic) ranked organically within Google (i.e. within the first 100 results). This resulted in 298,921 keywords in total. In order to focus the analysis on the most meaningful results, given the almost 30,000 keyword results per site on average, the following parameters were set: a) the keyword search volume was above 4,000 visitors per month, and b) the 10 sites needed to account for more than 15% of the combined traffic for a given keyword. The top 20 (out of 45) of these keywords are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Table description (Times New Roman 10-points, italics)*

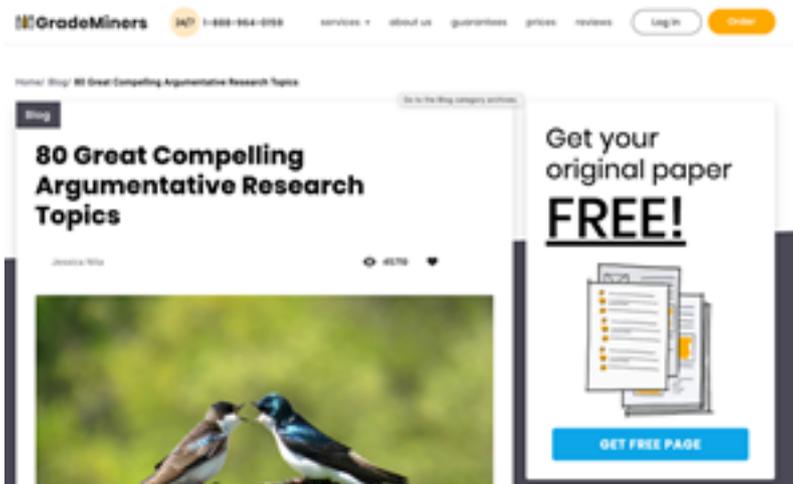
<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Ave. Position</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>URLs</i>	<i>Search Vol.</i>	<i>Traffic</i>	<i>% of Traffic</i>	<i>Keyword Difficulty</i>
<i>essay writing</i>	<i>10.4</i>	<i>2-20</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>74,000</i>	<i>18,944</i>	<i>26%</i>	<i>74.07</i>
<i>persuasive speech topics</i>	<i>8.4</i>	<i>4-14</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>60,500</i>	<i>10,889</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>68.54</i>
<i>informative speech topics</i>	<i>3.8</i>	<i>1-7</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>40,500</i>	<i>27,135</i>	<i>67%</i>	<i>62.66</i>
<i>argumentative essay</i>	<i>4.0</i>	<i>2-6</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>33,100</i>	<i>5,958</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>80.11</i>
<i>argumentative essay topics</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>1-12</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>27,100</i>	<i>19,322</i>	<i>71%</i>	<i>71.68</i>
<i>edubirdie*</i>	<i>1.0</i>	<i>1-1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>27,100</i>	<i>21,680</i>	<i>80%</i>	<i>63.93</i>
<i>essay format</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>1-10</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>18,100</i>	<i>9,050</i>	<i>50%</i>	<i>75.07</i>
<i>write my essay*</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>5-12</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>18,100</i>	<i>3,312</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>61.31</i>
<i>buy essay*</i>	<i>5.8</i>	<i>1-10</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>14,800</i>	<i>9,176</i>	<i>62%</i>	<i>56.81</i>
<i>essay outline</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>1-8</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>14,800</i>	<i>9,324</i>	<i>63%</i>	<i>75.84</i>
<i>persuasive essay topics</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>1-11</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>12,100</i>	<i>6,255</i>	<i>52%</i>	<i>68.43</i>

<i>essay help</i>	4.0	1-6	4	9,900	6,336	64%	64.45
<i>essay writing service*</i>	6.7	1-11	3	9,900	5,415	55%	59.53
<i>how to start an essay</i>	4.7	3-7	3	9,900	1,980	20%	72.42
<i>persuasive essay</i>	2.5	2-3	2	9,900	2,178	22%	74.99
<i>precis</i>	5.3	2-8	3	9,900	2,079	21%	84.82
<i>research topics</i>	7.3	2-11	3	9,900	2,049	21%	74.60
<i>thesis generator</i>	5.7	3-10	3	8,100	1,539	19%	62.48
<i>argumentative topics</i>	3.5	1-6	4	6,600	4,488	68%	73.67
<i>buy essay online*</i>	3.5	2-5	2	6,600	1,188	18%	58.89

## Discussion and conclusion

The results of the keyword analysis are disturbing at best. While indeed the expected search terms for contract cheating, such as *write my essay*, *buy essay*, and *essay writing service* were present – they were only a small portion of the search traffic to these sites. Far more worrisome were the seemingly innocent search terms such as *informative speech topics*, *argumentative essay topics*, and *essay outline* that made up the bulk of the traffic. For instance, the search term *argumentative essay topics* averaged 27,100 monthly searches in 2019, with 71% of these queries resulting in someone clicking on a link to a contract cheating site. Six of the ten focal sites featured pages in the top 12 results on Google. Examining these six pages tells the story of the strategy employed. Each page is an informative piece of useful blog content, for instance one is titled “80 Great Compelling Argumentative Research Topics” – clicking the link leads the interest searcher to both the answer to the query and a page employing many of the persuasive techniques identified by (Rowland et al., 2018), see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Above the fold screenshot of argumentative essay blog post



The conclusion of this study is that contract cheating websites are not only adept at ranking on search terms specific to their service, but also at searches that are potentially completely innocent. These informative blog posts lure students to the page with this bait, and then

bombard them with persuasion techniques in order to convince them to switch to having someone else do their work for them. This finding has significant implications for practice.

Firstly, educators need to be aware of this practice. A brief analysis (separate to this paper) showed that many educators actually (and inadvertently) link to these posts – essentially endorsing the site to students. Further, students should be made aware of these practices. In the same way that parents might teach their youth about illicit substances in order to inform them of the dangers, so to must educators acknowledge the existence of these sites to students so that students can be forewarned. Finally, it is incumbent upon educational institutions to create their own content that will push these contract cheating sites down the rankings on these innocent searches. This is possible (the keyword difficulty column in Table 1 demonstrates this) but would require an investment in content marketing similar to these sites. The limitations of this study are that we have relied upon data from just one tool (SEMrush), and have limited the investigation severely into the highest-ranking sites. This was in part due to space limitations. The use of SEMrush is mitigated by the fact that these findings rely on trends, rather than the raw data.

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