



Discovering unauthorised outsourcing of coursework: 10 questions for the bibliography

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Outsourcing of coursework or assignments to third parties, such as ghostwriters or undisclosed text production by artificial intelligence, are considered difficult to detect. Dealing with literature and references can be used to specifically look for indications of outsourcing. A single indication of potential outsourcing is not proof, but several can provide an illuminating overall picture. These ten questions should help to critically check bibliographies for such clues. Further clues can be provided, for example, by the metadata of electronically submitted documents.

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1. No consistency between the bibliography and the text?

If the bibliography contains titles that are not referred to in the text either in footnotes or by in-text references, this may indicate that parts of the text and parts of the bibliography come from different sources and were written by different people.

2. Does the bibliography contain irrelevant publications?

Does the bibliography contain publications that are not relevant to the discipline, the course or the topic of the paper? Does it contain publications that are very unlikely to be known by participants of the course? This may indicate that the work was written by a person who did not participate in the course.

3. Does the bibliography contain publications in unexpected languages?

Is literature given in languages that the authors of the assignments do not speak?

4. Does the bibliography not comply with the instructions?

Is a different, possibly for the discipline unusual, citation style used than specified? Are other publication types or a much larger number of references used?

5. What access data are given for web sources?

In the case of internet sources, are access dates given that predate the editing period? This can be an indication that parts originate from an older, existing work.

6. Does the bibliography include chronological inconsistencies?

For example, are sources listed as evidence whose year of publication precedes the referred event, the introduction of a named technology or theory? Are current references made in the text that are obviously not up to date (e.g. the current DM exchange rate, EEC instead of EU or similar)? Are technologies referred to as current that are obviously no longer so (e.g. software versions)? This may indicate that parts of an older, existing work have been used.

7. Does the bibliography contain links to sources for which there is no licence at the university?

If there are links in the bibliography to electronic resources to which there is no access at all from the campus network, the access can only have been made via another institution. For example, a student could have used the university library in their home town. However, it may also indicate that another person in a different location with access to other information resources wrote the paper.

8. Does the bibliography contain references to essay mills or similar?

If a bibliography contains entries from essay mills, e.g. portals such as grin.com, hausarbeiten.de or diplomarbeiten24.de, this may also indicate that parts or all of the paper originated from such sites.

9. Are multiple citation styles used?

Is more than one reference style used within a paper? Is there evidence that different reference managers were used? This may indicate that parts of the paper were written by different people on different computers.

10. Does the bibliography list journal titles or publications that do not exist?

For fear of software-based plagiarism detection, texts are sometimes edited with an automated substitution of synonyms. This can result in an actually existing journal, such as The International History Review, becoming a non-existent title, such as The Global History Review. In the use of artificial intelligence, for example, products such as ChatGPT have been known to output such plausible-sounding but non-existent titles. This can also happen with authors when automatic synonymisation tools turn a Charles Fisher into a Charles Angler, for example. This may indicate that AI-generated text passages or parts of an older, existing work were used.

References

The questions are based on:

Ellis, Cath; Rogerson, Ann M.; House, David; Murdoch, Kane (2022): "(Im)possible to Prove". Formalising Academic Judgement Evidence in Contract Cheating Cases Using Bibliographic Forensic. In: Sarah Elaine Eaton, Guy J. Curtis, Brenda M. Stoesz, Joseph Clare, Kiata Rundle und Josh Seeland (Hg.): Contract Cheating in Higher Education. Global Perspectives on Theory, Practice, and Policy, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, S. 185–198.