

# CHEATING THE BUSINESS TEMPLATE: FILLING IN THE BLANKS

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BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS OFTEN use standard templates when composing documents, and teachers of business writing direct students to textbook examples to use as sample formats. At my institution, Business and Professional Writing is a junior-level course offered asynchronously online. If students misuse uploaded electronic documents and templates placed on the course home page, this behavior can—and should—be defined as plagiarism.

In-class peer workshopping is an important component of any writing course. In one situation, a student uploaded her completed memo with accompanying questions for the class. Numerous members of the class responded to her, providing suggestions, format adjustments, and grammatical critique. When memos were due, another student submitted his final assignment to the dropbox with the workshopped student's name after "From:" at the top of the memo. As the professor, I was perplexed. Clearly, the "template copier" had not proofread his own submission—and was so neglectful that the wrong name was written at the top of his assignment.

In another instance, 13 of 24 students used identical incorrect spellings of my last name when submitting letters of application. In searching for the cause, I discovered that one of the two publicly workshopped letters featured that same misspelling in its header. In this situation, I emailed the members of the class a very stern message warning them of the dangers of cutting and pasting a template's contents without editing the final product. The individuals who misspelled my name had used the workshopped student's letter as a fill-in-the-blank template, assuming all the information was "correct as is."

In a summer business writing class, I uploaded a sample formal report to the course home page. A student noticeably used my example

as a fill-in; the student “forgot” to change my sample document’s corporate name throughout her own report. Good instructors do want to provide their students with informative examples of what is expected, especially in an online course environment where students cannot raise their hands during traditional lecture and receive immediate answers. However, when one of the course sample documents is plagiarized, it forces the instructor to assess the cost-benefit of providing such easily plagiarizable material. If students can merely save the file and paste in their own work or—even worse—rephrase the language of the sample document, should instructors upload sample files? More problematically, as Scanlon (2003) notes,

Plagiarism is a . . . widely misunderstood concept for students, and the complicating factor of the Internet, where ease of acquisition too often is taken to mean common ownership, has only widened the divide between faculty and student notions of fair use. (p. 163)

These examples of plagiarism cause instructors to ask, “How much cut-and-paste is too much?” The pedagogical benefits of workshoping on a course discussion board—especially in asynchronous online courses—are documented. Should public workshoping be discouraged for fear of other students plagiarizing those projects? This type of behavior effectively dissuades students from sharing their work: Not only are students insulted that their projects are “stolen” but they also fear being exploited as the “class template,” which decreases overall student engagement and participation in class activity.

Policing our online courses for “students plagiarizing other students” is becoming a new reality. Pragmatically, a teacher of business communication should not deter students from using templates, especially if most employers prefer all official company documents to adhere to the same format. Since digital technology is readily available, students have access to numerous document formats instantly. However, Scanlon (2003) suggests, “Students, reared on the Internet, have come to see text in cyberspace as theirs for the taking” (p. 162). Course documents placed on the home page are part of the online realm and, therefore, may be perceived as “take-able” and not regarded as plagiarism. With cyberspace and its numerous resources, “plagiarism is hard to define, and no one can easily determine its boundaries” (Cabral-Cardoso, 2004, p. 80). Yet

in an academic environment—especially one that exists only online—course materials should be protected. The work products of other students should not become templates ripe for fill-in-the-blank plagiarism.

In composition courses, a unique essay assignment can decrease plagiarism because the topic may be too distinctive to be plagiarized. However, in business writing, the traditional assignments—memos, formal reports, progress reports, letters of application—have little room for flexibility. Teachers of business communication “must find a reasonable and reasoned balance between protection and access” (Grossberg, 2004, p. 1335). This equilibrium inherently depends on the way the discipline defines “plagiarism.” According to Price (2002), instructors “want to make [plagiarism] . . . knowable, pin it down, stabilize it. But plagiarism is not stable” (p. 90).

Accusing a student of plagiarizing a memo, when such documents do indeed conform to a standard template in the business community, may be considered too severe. In all disciplines, students weigh the instructor’s penalties (as stated in the course syllabus) when deciding whether or not to risk submitting a plagiarized assignment. Professors “whose sanctions are so benign that . . . the penalties for detection fail to outweigh the potential benefits of successes” will encounter more situations involving plagiarism than professors with clear, precise, and enforced plagiarism policies (Woessner, 2004, p. 313).

Students need to accept more accountability for their actions. Using a template document to adhere to “format” standards is very different from using a template document and “re-wording” what is already written. Electronic course files should not be perceived as easy fill-in-the-blank homework, and students should not download classmates’ workshopped assignments and submit revised versions as their own. Instructors of business communication have a professional responsibility to explain the dangers of “copying a template” to their students so that they not only learn requisite writing skills but also an appropriate knowledge of workplace ethics.

## References

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