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# The New York Times

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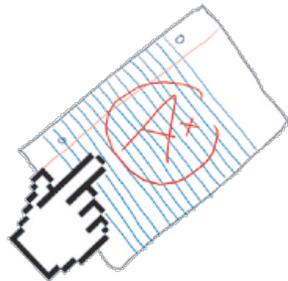


### OUTSOURCING HOMEWORK

## At \$9.95 a Page, You Expected Poetry?

By CHARLES McGRATH  
Published: September 10, 2006

THE Web site for an outfit called Term Paper Relief features a picture of a young college student chewing her lip.



Jeanne Verdoux

“Damn!” a little comic-strip balloon says. “I’ll have to cancel my Saturday night date to finish my term paper before the Monday deadline.”

Well, no, she won’t — not if she’s enterprising enough to enlist Term Paper Relief to write it for her. For \$9.95 a page she can obtain an “A-grade” paper that is fashioned to order and “completely non-plagiarized.” This last detail is important. Thanks to search engines like Google, college instructors have become adept at spotting those shop-worn, downloadable papers that circulate freely on the Web, and can even finger passages that have been ripped off from standard texts and reference works.

A grade-conscious student these days seems to need a custom job, and to judge from the number of services on the Internet, there must be virtual mills somewhere employing armies of diligent scholars who grind away so that credit-card-equipped undergrads can enjoy more carefree time together.

How good are the results? With first semester just getting under way at most colleges, bringing with it the certain prospect of both academic and social pressure, The Times decided to undertake an experiment in quality control of the current offerings. Using her own name and her personal e-mail address, an editor ordered three English literature papers from three different sites on standard, often-assigned topics: one comparing and contrasting Huxley’s “Brave New World” and Orwell’s “1984”; one discussing the nature of Ophelia’s madness in “Hamlet”; and one exploring the theme of colonialism in Conrad’s “Lord Jim.”

A small sample, perhaps, but one sufficient, upon perusal, to suggest that

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papers written to order are just like the ones students write for themselves, only more so — they're poorly organized, awkwardly phrased, thin on substance, but masterly in the ancient arts of padding and stating and restating the obvious.

If they're delivered, that is. The "Lord Jim" essay, ordered from [SuperiorPapers.com](http://SuperiorPapers.com), never arrived, despite repeated entreaties, and the excuse finally offered was a high-tech variant of "The dog ate my homework." The writer assigned to the task, No. 3323, was "obviously facing some technical difficulties," an e-mail message explained, "and cannot upload your paper." The message went on to ask for a 24-hour extension, the wheeziest stratagem in the procrastinator's arsenal, invented long before the electronic age.

The two other papers came in on time, and each grappled, more or less, with the assigned topic. The Orwell/Huxley essay, prepared by Term Paper Relief and a relative bargain at \$49.75 for five pages, begins: "Although many similarities exist between Aldous Huxley's 'A Brave New World' and George Orwell's '1984,' the works books [sic] though they deal with similar topics, are more dissimilar than alike." That's certainly a relief, because we couldn't have an essay if they weren't.

Elsewhere the author proves highly adept with the "on the one hand/on the other" formula, one of the most valuable tools for a writer concerned with attaining his assigned word count, and says, for example, of "Brave New World": "Many people consider this Huxley's most important work: many others think it is his only work. This novel has been praised and condemned, vilified and glorified, a source of controversy, a subject for sermons, and required reading for many high school students and college undergraduates. This novel has had twenty-seven printings in the United States alone and will probably have twenty-seven more."

The obvious point of comparison between the two novels is that where Orwell's world is an authoritarian, police-state nightmare, Huxley's dystopia is ostensibly a paradise, with drugs and sex available on demand. A clever student might even pick up some extra credit by pointing out that while Orwell meant his book as a kind of predictive warning, it is Huxley's world, much more far-fetched at the time of writing, that now more nearly resembles our own.

The essay never exactly makes these points, though it gets close a couple of times, declaring at one point that "the two works vary greatly." It also manages to remind us that Orwell's real name was Eric Blair and that both he and his book "are misunderstood to this day."

The paper does make a number of embarrassing spelling errors ("dissention," "anti-semetic") but William H. Pritchard, an English professor at Amherst, who read the paper at The Times's request, shrewdly suggested that, in this day of spell check, they may have been included deliberately, to throw suspicious teachers off the track. If confronted with such a paper from one of his own students, he wrote in an e-mail message, he probably wouldn't grade it at all but would instead say "come see me" (shuddering at the prospect).

The Hamlet essay was a trick assignment, or perhaps a poorly worded one.

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Ophelia's genuine madness, as opposed to Hamlet's feigned craziness, has become a touchstone in [Shakespeare](#) studies, especially among feminist and gender studies scholars who read in Ophelia's songs and fragmentary utterances a coded response to the irrationality and sexual repression of the Elizabethan patriarchy.

The author of the four-page paper, supplied by Go-Essays for \$127.96, approaches the question more literally and concludes, not incorrectly, that Ophelia is literally driven crazy by her father, brother and lover — or as the essay puts it: “Thus, in critical review of the play, Ophelia mentally suffers from the scars of unwanted love and exploitation rather than any singular or isolated cause.”

The paper goes on to repeat this point with so much plot summary and quotation from the text that it soars right to the assigned length. It's also written in language so stilted and often ungrammatical (“Hamlet is obviously hurt by Ophelia's lack of affection to his vows of love”) that it suggests the author may not be a native speaker of English, and even makes you suspect that some of these made-to-order term papers are written by the very same people who pick up the phone when you call to complain about your credit card bill.

Stephen Greenblatt, a Shakespeare scholar at [Harvard](#) and a confessed “soft touch,” said the grade he would give this paper “would depend, at least to some extent, on whether I thought I was reading the work of a green freshman — in which case I would probably give it a D+ and refer the student to the writing lab for counseling — or an English major, in which case I would simply fail it.”

He added: “If I had paid for this, I would demand my money back.”

As it happens, a refund is just what Superior Papers offered, along with a 10 percent discount on a new paper. Term paper writing is an arduous business, we need to remember, and we shouldn't expect too much. As the author of the Orwell/Huxley essay says: “It is so often that one wants something and in wanting romanticizes it, thus bringing disappointment when the end is finally obtained. They serve as a reminder that it is necessary to have pain to compare with joy, defeat to compare with victory, and problems in order to have solutions.”

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