

# The Ten Most Wanted Test Cheaters

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**C**heating on tests, especially on high-stakes exams used for licensure, certification, and admissions, is as widespread as it is deeply troubling to all thoughtful evaluators of the testing process. Why is cheating so problematic? Let us count some of the ways.

First of all, cheating is profoundly unfair to the majority of test takers who behave honorably and play by the rules. They work and study hard to learn the skills and content covered by important tests. Cheaters may then earn high scores without actually acquiring the knowledge and skills measured by the test. Cheating also substantially undermines the value of a test as a protection for the public against unqualified practitioners. Licenses or credentials frequently signify that an individual has demonstrated a significant level of competence in specified domains. The cheater's credential provides no such assurance. How would you feel about going to a doctor who cheated on his medical board exam, or an attorney who cheated on the bar exam, or a financial advisor who cheated on his NASD licensing exam? In addition, cheating threatens the viability of testing programs. Even the suggestion that a credential does not reflect actual competence, undermines the reputation and value of a testing program.

How then are those responsible for maintaining and enhancing testing programs to thwart cheaters? We believe that shining a spotlight on cheaters in many different settings, using a variety of communication styles, can combat this indefensible problem. In this article, we borrow a practice long followed by law enforcement agencies and give you our personal "ten most wanted cheaters" list. We have given each of these test-taking thieves' miscreants a name, not out of a sense of affection for them, but as a shorthand way of highlighting some prevalent methods of cheating.

## 1. The Impersonator

When a person who registered for a test under the name "Jane R. Smith" shows up to take the test and presents her identification materials, how can we be sure who is really taking the test? Impersonators, also known as proxy test takers, try to mislead proctors for virtually all major high stakes examinations. The larger the exam, and the broader its global scope, the more serious the problem tends to be. For example, individuals were recently caught proxy testing for TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam. This exam for individuals who have learned English as a second language is given to more than 500,000 examinees per year and is used as a college entrance requirement. When proctors personally know all test takers, the task of checking and verifying identification is very different from a situation where the proctor has never seen any of the test takers before the actual administration of the test.

Impersonators can range from the friend or family member who is "helping out" on a one-time basis, to dedicated professionals; some of whom are brazen enough to advertise their services on the Internet and elsewhere.

## 2. The Smuggler

The practice of carrying forbidden materials across borders

in violation of laws and regulations has been observed across countries and cultures over the millennia. In the testing world, the smuggler brings into the test setting, materials or devices intended to provide an advantage over honest examinees. A packet of facial tissues may contain formulas, diagrams, or prepared answers to free-response questions. A pencil, a pair of eyeglasses, or wrist watch that may appear innocent enough, can serve as storage devices for enormous amounts of information that can be used by the cheater. A cell phone may be employed to send (or receive) answers to or from someone else sitting for the exam. Any test program sponsor can recall an anecdote or two about a smuggler's ingenious method for carrying some version of a "crib sheet" into a testing room.

## 3. The Storyteller

We have used the label "Storyteller" for the individual who memorizes test items only to 'retell' them later to others. The storyteller isn't likely to memorize an entire exam in one sitting. There simply isn't enough time. Instead, storytellers take an exam multiple times and memorize a few items in each testing session. The sharing of items from the storyteller may range from telling just a few colleagues to selling items over the internet – often boasting to would-be buyers about having "authentic items from the actual test."

## 4. The Chain Gang

Whereas Storytellers work alone, we have dubbed another group of evildoers "The Chain Gang," borrowing from the concept of prisoners linked together to work on roads or other projects. In the case of a testing chain gang, the group memorizes and sells items, typically through the Internet. As is the case with the storytellers, they collect and memorize items. The difference is that the chain gang members work in concert, often employing carefully developed and coordinated strategies for stealing particular parts of the test or item pool.

## 5. The Time Traveler

In the movie "The Sting", a key element of the movie is the creation of a situation where it appears that it is possible to transmit the results of horse races to a bettor before the race is announced to the betting house. Voila! One can bet on a "sure thing"; a prospect that many an unscrupulous gambler would relish.

In our global testing environment where many exams are given during the same day, across multiple time zones, the illegitimate sharing of test questions, keys, and similar test content information is aimed at producing a "big score" or at least a passing or qualifying one for those in earlier time zones. In some instances, examinees have been apprehended with complete answer keys at the start of an exam that proved to be derived from tests given within the last few hours elsewhere in the world. Of course, just as in "The Sting," not all evil schemes turn out as planned. For example, the answer key supplied to an individual may be appropriate for a different version of the test than the one they are taking. This is the case when different forms of the test are used in each time zone, so that the key for the later time zone is not the same as the key for the earlier time zone.

## 6. The Collaborators

A great deal of important work is accomplished by teams of people. Much as we applaud productive cooperation, though, we scorn those who try to pass off the contributions of others as their own work. In the academic environment as well as other settings, the label “plagiarist” is one that is very damaging to an individual’s reputation.

In the testing arena, when we set out to test an individual’s knowledge of a domain, we want the results to accurately reflect his/her own knowledge. Some cheaters devote extraordinary effort to employ collaborators within a testing site so that test administrators are unable to determine the actual level of proficiency and knowledge of each examinee.

One family of collaboration strategies can be likened to the device that school children learn about regarding Paul Revere’s midnight ride. How did he know what route the British forces would follow? He simply observed how many lanterns were lit—“one if by land and two if by sea.” Many cheaters use hand signals or their equivalent to communicate within group testing settings as they work to undermine the efforts to maintain a level playing field for all.

The not-too distant cousins of the Collaborators are the Photographer and the Radioman. These individuals bring to the test setting electronic devices that can be used to steal the items. Unlike Collaborators or Storytellers, these individuals do not depend on memory, but use modern technology to steal the items.

## 7. Robin Hood

Some cheating occurs after testing is completed; without the active participation of the test taker. A teacher or other grader reviews an answer sheet for a paper and pencil-based test and “fixes” responses to clarify what the student really intended. The opportunity is great to give an advantage to one or more students over others. This cheater may view himself or herself as a modern-day Robin Hood – giving answers to the poorer students to inflate their test standings, often at the expense of all the other students who sat for the exam.

A similar problem can occur when a test is being administered orally to an individual or group. The reader’s facial expressions, tone of voice, or body language can easily lead test takers toward particular answers.

This can also happen when the test administrator or proctor is also the trainer, whose pay depends on maintaining a minimum pass rate for a test. Such individuals may walk around the test administration site and “assist” examinees to insure that they meet or exceed their passing quota.

## 8. The Hacker

In the movie “Sleepless in Seattle” a precocious, computer-savvy daughter of a travel agent helps a young boy fly across the US alone by inserting misleading information into his travel profile. When the boy protests that he just doesn’t look old enough, the young lady says “Don’t worry, they will believe anything if it is in the computer.”

Hackers have devoted enormous amounts of effort to infiltrating computer systems, including ones very carefully designed and tested to be resistant to such manipulation. Managers of testing programs face a high tech version of the classic practice of dishonest students borrowing the teacher’s grade book or school file in order to alter test scores or grades. Students once turned “Fs” into “Bs” by essentially adding the number three to the original (F plus 3 in the same space on a form equals B, try it and you will see). Nowadays, hackers who obtain unauthorized access to records can now make virtually any change within systems that do not have the proper safeguards or internal consistency checks.

## 9. The Ticket Scalper

The Ticket Scalper sits for an exam’s beta test for the sole purpose of obtaining a free voucher. The voucher, once obtained, is then resold for less than the legitimate price of the exam. It is not uncommon to find exam vouchers for sale on eBay and other electronic auction houses. The Ticket Scalper may seem like a milder form of cheating. However, the results of their actions are quite substantial to testing programs in terms of test development and delivery costs. This is principally because many Ticket Scalpers do not make an honest attempt at answering the beta test questions correctly, thus providing misleading information about the quality of the test or test items.

## 10. The Insider & The Fence

We want to close our list with a pair of cheaters who represent some of the most common and, unfortunately, some of the most damaging classes of attackers of test security, the Insider who steals test content and the Fence who sells the results. Sometimes, of course, it is the same person or group playing both roles.

It is unfortunate, but test content can be compromised by people participating in the development or administration of the exams. When controls and restrictions are not carefully developed and maintained, the repercussions of this problem can be staggering. When groups of items are compromised, the overall test or bank can gradually become virtually useless as a fair gauge of knowledge and skills.

Be on the lookout for the Ten ‘Most Wanted’ Cheaters. You won’t find their photographs hanging in the post office, but there are many clues in your test development practices and testing data that can help you find them.

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