

The fine line between “getting help” and cheating

“Hey! Can you help me with my English paper?”

Have you ever said something like that? Probably.

That’s great! Good writers collaborate with each other, get ideas from each other, give each other feedback, and check each other’s work for errors or other problems.

If you do that, good for you.

As long as you didn’t get too much help.

The line between getting help and cheating is a fine one.

Let’s say that you want to get a job as a painter, and the owner of the painting company wants to see how well you paint. So she asks you to paint your brother’s living room, and she’ll come over and evaluate the job you did.

So, you head on over to your brother’s house and ask your buddy Phil to help you. If Phil held the paint can for you while you were on the ladder, and pointed out a few spots you missed, and helped you load your ladder on your truck when you were done, but he didn’t do anything else, you could say that he helped you and that you painted the living room. **It’s OK that Phil pointed out a few spots you missed, because all painters (writers) ask people to check their work.**

But if Phil “helped” you by climbing the ladder and doing part of one wall, and then finished the last part because you had to take a phone call, and then had to repaint one whole wall because you did a sloppy job, then you didn’t paint the living room. **You cheated, because Phil did part of the job.**

No problem? You got the job because you “got help”?

Wrong. Big problem. You’re going to get fired on the very first job when the owner sees you can’t paint well.

(OVER)

Let's change the situation a little bit. Let's say you're in painting school. You don't think you can paint well, so you have your buddy "help" you. When the teacher sees your paint job, she says, "Nice job!" and you get an "A".

But you didn't paint it! Your buddy did! You don't deserve the "A".

THINK ABOUT THIS:

You're going into the hospital for an operation. You find out that your doctor cheated on his medical exams and he doesn't really know what he's doing.

News flash: you'll never get better at painting unless you show your teacher how you paint. Only then can he help you improve.

It's the same with writing. All writers have things about their writing that's good, and things about their writing that needs improvement. Your teacher needs to see both of these things in order to help you improve.

So, when you have a writing assignment, write it yourself. You can have someone give you ideas and point out errors and weaknesses, but you have to write and edit your own work.

Examples of what's OK:

- Having someone proofread your paper, point out the mistakes, and then you fix them.
- Asking someone to give you some ideas about how to organize what you're going to write.
- Asking someone to read your paper and tell you if it flows logically. They tell you what they think is weak. You go back and rewrite it so it flows better.

Examples of what's CHEATING – (NOT "HELPING"):

- Finding something well-written online and copy-pasting it into your paper. This is not only cheating, it's plagiarism.
- Bringing up your paper on your computer, sitting your older sister down at the computer, and having her find and fix all of your typos.
- Having your mom sit at the computer and type what you say, adding words as she sees fit to "clean up" what you're saying.

- Telling your dad that “you don’t know what to write” and have him type out a paper that looks like it might have come from you while you spend most of your mental energy checking out your friend’s Facebook posts.

If you want your coach to help you play a better baseball game, you can’t have your buddy hit the ball and run the bases for you. You have to swing at the ball. You have to run the bases. You have to try to catch the fly ball.

Yes, you may strike out. Yes, you may drop the ball. But in order for your coach to help you, he has to see exactly what you’re doing – especially the mistakes--in order to help you.

It’s the same in English class. Your teacher must see your work, even if you don’t think it’s good. Give it a shot – it works! Turn in what you wrote, follow your teacher’s guidance, and watch your writing get better!

In the space below, write what you “took away” from this activity. What are the big ideas your teacher wants to make sure you remember?
