

How To Counterfeit

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Studying within the English undergraduate program at Davis, I have written many essays analyzing novels I've been assigned. But in English 104C (Journalism) we were given free reign in terms of our chosen subject matter. I'd long been yearning to write an unorthodox piece, something different from the archetypal essays of thematic analysis. Around the same time, the *California Aggie* printed an article describing the controversy over fake drivers' licenses. The article was brief and included no information on the process of producing the ID's. I knew that one of my good friends had a background in counterfeiting, but we had never discussed the subject in depth. I contacted him, and we agreed that the subject had great potential, especially if the article specified the basic procedures of counterfeiting. I began my interviews with him and from there I converted his stories into the essay. I was briefly worried that the article would be too risky or deviant to turn in, but then realized it was the unconventional piece I'd wanted to write for so long. I owe a great deal of thanks to my friend, who was flexible enough to share his secrets.

—*Albert Hsueh*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: As Albert says in his introduction, I give students "free reign" in choosing subjects for their articles in English 104C (Journalism). While good writing is a necessary qualification for a successful article, it is not a sufficient one. The journalist needs above all to find a story worth telling. Albert found such a fascinating story in the tale of "Grayson Boucher," high school counterfeiter, and he wrote the story well.

In 2001, Grayson Boucher* would rise from his bed every morning to print out a handful of fake twenty-dollar bills. From there he'd stop by gas stations and various businesses to make small purchases, receiving change from the bills he gave the stores. Clothes, jewelry, and other such accessories accumulated in Boucher's home, and he laughed at how easily he had attained them. For months he'd been producing bills, approximately one thousand dollars' worth a week. If he had pleased, he could have printed bills all night and "earned" thousands in a week.

The Beginning

Boucher is now a third-year undergraduate at the University of California, Davis, studying mechanical engineering. He is tall and blonde, with a confident and witty demeanor. He speaks sensibly, never revealing an irrational or reckless personality. Reminiscing on his senior year at high school, Boucher says, "I can't believe I was crazy enough to pull that kind of stunt. But I was rather unclear of the laws and penalties surrounding the act of counterfeiting, so I kept on with my activities." Boucher first conceived the possibility of counterfeiting late in high school. Though he was not frustrated with his job working at a car audio shop, Boucher wanted more money with less labor. Out of curiosity, with no real intentions, he began searching the internet for information on counterfeiting practices. These searches led him to an enormous forum of experts, many revealing precise details of basic counterfeiting procedures. "I was able to find hundreds of different articles on the field—it was incredible," Boucher says. "The internet gives everyone a voice—including criminals. It's a bit disturbing that any child

with internet access could get to this sort of information, but that's the enormity of the World Wide Web." Boucher immersed himself in the counterfeiting information, realizing how basic the process could be.

The Process

Counterfeiters, according to Boucher, use four main methods. Surprisingly, three of these involve only a computer, a scanner, and a certain type of printer. The most basic and rough method uses an inkjet printer. "The inkjet style is satisfactory if you're not planning to produce a large number of bills," says Boucher. "At first glance, and even after brief inspection, it'll look realistic, but if the bill is rubbed hard, the ink will smear and reveal its forgery." Boucher used the inkjet method early on but was caught by a sharp-eyed attendant who marked the bill with a counterfeit detector pen. The pen's line showed black, indicating a suspect bill. The attendant also noted the bill was missing the government-issued strip marking its authenticity. "I just acted utterly confused towards the clerk," Boucher says. "I tried to seem more confused than he was and kept saying I just withdrew the bill from an ATM machine."

A very efficient but not fool-proof method uses a laser printer. "Laser printers are better than inkjet printers," says Boucher. "The ink is injected into the paper with a laser, so there is no possible smearing on the bill, as opposed to the inkjet process." The process is as simple as scanning the sides of the bill and printing them out. If the scanner used is a high-quality one, the image will be nearly duplicated in Adobe Photoshop. On some occasions, a tinkering process will be necessary, mainly to refine the precision of the bill's color. Other times the bill being scanned may have blemishes, which can easily be brushed up on Photoshop.

After the image of the bill is perfected, it needs to be

printed on paper with a texture similar to that of actual bills. Every bill of American currency is produced on thin strips of Levi's Strauss fabric, the same fabric used in producing Levi's Jeans and other products. Access is restricted for the exact fabric used in currency production, so a substitute paper must be used. Boucher's research led him to use silk paper, a very fine but sturdy paper. "The texture has a thickness comparable to actual bills," Boucher says. "The printed bills come out crisp and brand new, so I crumple them and rough them up to achieve a worn look."

The problem with laser printers is that they cannot replicate the government-issue strips, as is also the case with inkjet printers. So Boucher began to implement a more effective process, one which would print the bills to include the government-issued strips. The procedure required the use of a dye-sublimation printer, a semi-rare type. Sublimation is a chemistry term describing the process of a solid turning into a gas. With the dye-sublimation printer, the dry ink is vaporized into a gas, which seeps into the paper and re-solidifies as it's printed. "This process removed any possible ink smears," Boucher explains. "All I was required to do was tinker with the brightness and contrast of the scanned bill. Photoshop allowed me to perfect the exact appearance of the bill." For the semi-invisible strip, Boucher had to tinker with his nearly finished bill. It already looked authentic, but an extra few minutes would add the government-issued strip. Using pearlex powdered paint, Boucher would carefully dust over the section where the strip would be placed. He would then revert back to the original file of the bill and delete everything, leaving only the government strip. He then sent the bill through a second printing process which vaporized the pearlex paint into the bill, making the government strip holographic and transparent on both sides. The paint accomplished the "hid-

den” aspect of the strip, and was practically authentic to the naked eye. As a final touch, Boucher blow-dried the excess pearlex paint that was dusted on but not used for the printing of the strip. “I used the dye-sublimation procedure throughout my brief counterfeiting career,” Boucher says. “I never had a single person hassle me about those bills. After a while I forgot I was even using fake bills.”

The fourth process, though practically never used, uses the Xerox color copier. Xerox is the superior photocopier, but the machines cost up to tens of thousands of dollars each, and businesses such as Kinko’s or Mail Boxes Etc. are required to register each of their printers with the government. In addition, a microscopic inscription of the copier’s serial number appears on every copy, allowing officials to trace any item printed on one of these copiers back to its source. All of these precautions have deterred counterfeiters from using the Xerox method, which is by far the most effective procedure for counterfeiting.

Time for Shopping

The money piled up quickly, as Boucher began printing bills with reckless abandon. “At first I’d be very careful, just buying a candy bar with a twenty-dollar bill,” Boucher says. “My paranoia began washing away as the weeks went on. I remember one time being so impatient, I just bought a dashboard monitor for my car with nearly \$1,000 in fake twenties.” Boucher piled up as many toys as he could without his parents growing suspicious—hundreds of DVDs, CDs, books, posters, sports memorabilia, alcohol, clothing, and jewelry. “My parents assumed I was still working part-time at the audio store,” he says. “A few times they asked if I was overspending, but I told them I had a large amount saved up.” Boucher rarely

made outlandish purchases, and when he did the items remained hidden. "I have a \$2,000 Omega watch that my parents have never seen," Boucher says. "I also have a gold necklace and a few other things."

Life was rather enjoyable for Boucher at that time. He would regularly bring a dozen friends to the theater, paying for all their tickets. They'd also walk in with alcohol and gourmet foods hidden beneath their clothes. "With my closest friends I always bragged about the counterfeiting," says Boucher. "With other friends, I'd just say my dad got a huge promotion and began giving me a generous allowance."

Recreation

Boucher ate out at fancy restaurants, attended all types of concerts, watched various Bay Area sports teams, and one time financed a plane trip to Mexico for a weekend excursion. He told his parents that he was sleeping over at a friend's for the weekend. "I'll never forget the Mexico trip," Boucher says. "Funny I say that, because I barely remember any of the actual moments. My friends and I were in a perpetual state of drunkenness. I threw around fake bills with no fear at all. The locals never bothered any of us."

On many weekends Boucher would rent out a couple of hotel rooms and set up enormous celebrations. He purchased huge amounts of alcohol and marijuana, and invited dozens of guests to the festivities. "A few times I arranged for a performance of some sort," Boucher says. "Strippers came through, as did a magician and a clown. I remember the stripper being so overjoyed when I flipped her a bunch of bills. My entire lifestyle was just ludicrous for an 18-year-old."

Burnt Out

Boucher became accustomed to buying the newest accessories, and the counterfeiting became routine. He continued to print fresh bills on a daily basis, always prepared to pay. On one weekend night, he was on a private dinner date at a luxurious restaurant, looking forward to a quiet and romantic meal, but constantly receiving calls on his cell phone from friends or acquaintances, wanting things. Some wanted to go to a concert, some wanted to go to the movie theater, some just wanted alcohol. None were planning to pay. Boucher was being called every few minutes for ridiculous requests, and so he shut off his cell phone. "I set down the phone, rolling my eyes, thinking of the demands," Boucher says. "Then the girl started asking me if we could go to the shopping mall. I think I winced, but then I excused myself to use the restroom."

Boucher washed up and collected his thoughts. "I was basically supporting my friends and a whole bunch of acquaintances," Boucher says. "I thought I was being cool or friendly, but I realized that most of the people were just leeches." That included the girl he was on the date with. Boucher returned to his seat and relaxed himself. Their meals were nearly done, and a few minutes passed before the waiter placed the bill on the table. The girl was in the middle of a lengthy monologue and her eyes reacted to the bill, but she continued her discourse. "I asked her if we could split the bill," Boucher says. "She gave me a dumb-founded look." In confusion, she stuttered, "I . . . aren't you . . . going to pay?" Boucher smirked. "Weren't you the one that suggested this place? The total is \$50— that's pretty steep." The girl quietly admitted she had not brought any money.

After that night, Boucher quickly changed his mentality, decreasing his production and rejecting random money requests. "I started restricting my spending, only going to pricey

events with my close friends,” Boucher says. “Instead of going to every concert or every basketball game, I began choosing only the hyped-up ones. The same went for electronics or DVDs and CDs—I only bought the most important ones.” Boucher had already accumulated numerous worthless items, and he no longer felt the need to own everything. “I started being really conservative with my money,” he says: “I made sensible purchases only, and soon realized that I didn’t even need to print bills anymore!” He realized that he did not need any money to enjoy himself. The jewelry, the clothing—none of it was important for his fulfillment.

Boucher returned to a more stable lifestyle, increasing his studying time. Upon his acceptance into UC Davis, he promised himself he would never print another bill. “The stakes were too high,” he says. “I couldn’t risk ruining my life; I had too much to look forward to.”

One day in his freshman year, Boucher was chatting with some new friends in his dormitory lounge. The discussion was lively, every participant racing to say something cool about whatever topic was being addressed. Someone was talking about fake IDs, and Boucher piped in: “I used to do a bit of counterfeiting.” A boisterous peer shrugged him off and said “Whatever, man, it’s hella impossible to do that!” Boucher remained silent as the discussion rose again, smiling to himself. “Maybe I’ll take these guys out sometime,” he thought. “Somewhere pretty nice, and I could pay for it . . .” And then he laughed to himself and brushed away the thought.