

SparkNotes spark concern

Cheat sheets contain inaccuracy, vague analysis

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Many of us are guilty. Maybe it was that extra long afterschool activity, or maybe we were bogged down with Physics homework. With little time left, and a high chance of a quiz the next day, we scramble. We realize there isn't enough time to read all those chapters of "To Kill a Mockingbird" or "Of Mice and Men" we were assigned, so we take a different approach. We turn to a little website called sparknotes.com

SparkNotes (for those who aren't familiar) is a website designed to provide study guides for various novels and plays. "The Scarlet Letter," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "Twelve Angry Men," if it's in the curriculum, it's there. What's more, these study guides are written by former and current teachers and professors.

In many instances, these so-called study guides are vast. They contain lengthy character analyses, explanations of recurring themes and summaries of entire chapters. Summaries of an entire chapter, hmm... Now, how could summaries of entire chapters possibly help students in any way? Couldn't students just read these summaries instead of the actual material they were assigned?

Even if they did, it'd be okay, right? Maybe someone was able to read most of the content themselves and just used the website to fill in the gaps. Maybe they skimmed through the entire thing and checked SparkNotes for details. There's nothing wrong with that... is there?

After all, the various study guides ARE written by experts on literature. Surprisingly, though, these

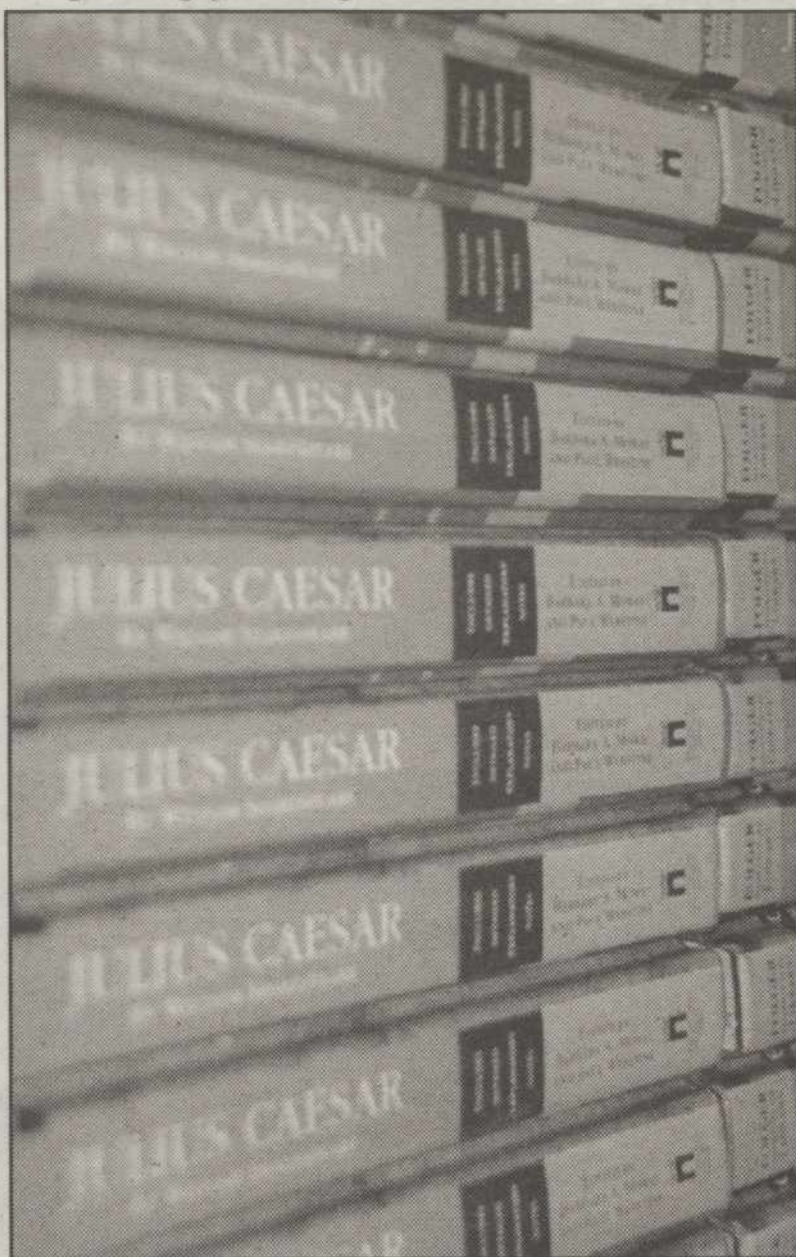


Photo by Libby Kara

Timeless classics, like "Julius Caesar" are required reading for many students. They are becoming detoured by SparkNotes, a multi volume set of books with analyses of the books.

aren't perfect. A friend of mine (who will remain anonymous) even told me that a plot point they read in a SparkNotes chapter summary didn't even happen in the original text. So, we know that SparkNotes isn't completely reliable; it may misrepresent, add false content, or even remove important details from the chapters themselves. This alone should raise some eyebrows.

Even if SparkNotes was perfect, even if it did explain all the events accurately and prepare the students for a quiz, is it ethical? Is it

right to read in a few short paragraphs what many spend hours analyzing and understanding on their own?

Maybe that's just the problem. SparkNotes robs us. Not only does it rob us of the unique writing styles by the original authors, but it robs us of independent thought.

We're teens. We're nearly adults. At the same time, though, we allow information to be spoon-fed to us like infants. We let some professor that lives hundreds of miles away tell us how to interpret a character.

Why do we let others think for us instead of thinking for ourselves? We're perfectly capable of independent thought, but many of us are just too lazy or busy to bother.

The beauty of literature lies in its interpretation. There may be only one solution to an algebra problem, but people can see ideas, themes, and events in the book in very different ways, leading to livelier class discussion and more knowledge for the individual. Reciting lines we were told to believe in SparkNotes is not only restrictive, but it keeps us from thinking and learning.

This isn't to say that SparkNotes is all bad. It

often contains quizzes you can take on the reading to make sure you understood it and even includes sections oriented toward issues with life, such as struggling to find a prom date. Yet, the quizzes are often far easier than the actual tests in the class, leading to a false sense of security. I believe it's rare for students to be using SparkNotes for anything but the study guides.

What can be done, then? Even if SparkNotes was blocked by the school's web filter, students could still access it from home. Teachers

can try to make quizzes and tests "SparkNotes-proof" by asking about content not explained there, but students can do well when asked the "bigger" questions, dealing with themes and motifs, using what they learned from SparkNotes. Ultimately, independent thought is, again, the critical factor. If students choose to break away from SparkNotes, give themselves a bit more time, and perhaps be willing to read at home, they can truly enjoy the content itself and learn that much more as a result.

Soldier alum may be awarded bronze star

Rao

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injured when he stepped out of a truck and an IED exploded nearby. He was scheduled for leave in January. In six months, he was to be discharged and planned to move his family back to the Northwest upon his return.

Rao is survived by his wife, Leah, and 21-month-old daughter, Eliana. They lived in Lawton, Okla. where Rao was based at Fort Sill.

An account has been set up in his memory for his wife and daughter at First Tech Credit Union in Beaverton. Rao will be buried at Willamette National Cemetery with full military honors.



Photo courtesy of KVAL

Elijah Rao, army specialist, was killed in Afghanistan on Dec. 5. Rao stepped on an Improvised Explosive Device while working at a site where another IED had exploded earlier in the day. This was his third tour in the middle east, and he was scheduled to return to Oklahoma in January.

STUDENTS speak out

How do you feel about the holidays?



"The holidays are a soulless celebration of the carnivorous materialism that is chewing on the entrails of America's corrupt remains."

—Emma Kennard, freshman



"I love the holiday season because I can spend time with my family and not do schoolwork."

—Ashley Mumma, sophomore



"I tolerate it only because of the food and the presents which do not go without my appreciation."

—Alex Lanz, junior



"It's a festive time of year and Burgerville has cranberry burgers."

—Katie Dunn, senior

All Photos by Alex Houston