

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Texts from a Scammer

If you get a puzzling text message from a stranger, you may be the target of 'pig butchering.'

Source: TheWeek.com, December 8, 2025

What is pig butchering?

It's a term used to describe a major global cyberscam in which criminals entrap victims by first sending them seemingly innocent questions via text, Instagram, OKCupid, or some other messaging platform. An estimated 300,000 butchers—who are often based in Southeast Asia—stand ready to establish friendly contact when people respond to these “accidental texts,” gradually gaining the trust of victims and “fattening” them with supposed investment opportunities or flirtatious exchanges promising romance. Then the butchers encourage victims to invest money in a nonexistent fund or crypto scheme. That leads to theft of their investment—the butchering.

If you've received a text message from someone pretending to have the wrong number, a stranger asking something like, “Hey, we met at the bar how are you,” or a simple “Hi” from an unknown number, you've experienced the opening gambit in pig butchering. Because tens of millions of scam texts are sent, even a low percentage of responses makes the scam very lucrative. “We've had people from all walks of life that have been victimized in these cases,” Andrew Frey, a financial investigator for the Secret Service, told *ProPublica*. “The paydays have been huge.”

How much money has been stolen?

Some victims are so embarrassed they do not report being scammed. But the FBI received reports of almost \$13 billion in losses from cyberscams in 2023, and total global losses from pig butchering are estimated to top \$75 billion. In 2024, pig-butchering revenue grew nearly 40% year over year, according to the research firm Chainalysis. Some victims have lost their entire life savings. It can take months to fatten a pig, or build trust. Some victims are fooled by promises of easy money through inside crypto deals. Others are older men and women desperate for connection that the butcher offers along with investment advice. Erika DeMask of Lombard, Ill., was forced to sell her home and everything in it after she lost \$1 million to a pig butcher. The fraudster spent months cultivating DeMask, a widow, even sending her a bouquet of flowers. “He said that he loved me,” she said.

Who's running these scams?

Mostly gangs and organized crime syndicates based in Southeast Asia, but it's spread globally. The scam operators post listings for well-paid customer service jobs to lure young people desperate for work. Fan, 22, was living in China's Fujian province when he answered an ad for a food delivery service in Cambodia, offering \$1,000 a month. When he arrived to start the job, he was locked into a barbed-wire compound with guards. An estimated 150,000 scammers are enslaved in compounds in and around Cambodia, often run by Chinese gangs. About 120,000 more are toiling in Myanmar, and tens of thousands are in Thailand and Laos.

How do these places operate?

Scammers spend up to 17 hours a day sending messages, for little or no pay. At one, rows of hunched workers labored under posters declaring, “One team, one dream.” Supervisors give them scripts to memorize. One manual instructed them to “make the customers feel happy and comfortable,” aim to

“create dependency,” and “make him fall for you.” Sometimes, the butcher will send male targets phony photographs of beautiful women. Butchers who do not meet daily quotas for sending messages are punished with physical abuse and torture.

What happens to them?

An Ethiopian man rescued from a compound on the Myanmar-Thailand border described supervisors using electric probes to deliver agonizing shocks to butchers who didn't perform well. Sexual abuse of women is commonplace, and in Cambodia, bodies of tortured butchers have been discovered in dumpsters. One Taiwanese woman arrived in Cambodia for the promise of a front desk job, only to be threatened with a stun gun and raped. She was sold from compound to compound and repeatedly assaulted. Fan saw a co-worker “half-beaten to death” by guards. “People were saying, ‘Help him! Help him!’” he recounted. “But nobody went up to help him. Nobody dared to.”

Is law enforcement responding?

Yes, but it is facing a problem of massive scale. The U.S. imposed sanctions on Cambodian tycoon Ly Yong Phat in September, accusing him of involvement in cyberscams and forced labor. It also charged Chen Zhi, founder of Cambodia's Prince Holding Group, with organizing an international cyberscam network that scammed 250 Americans. The U.S. seized assets including \$14 billion in Bitcoin, and the U.S. and U.K. announced joint sanctions. China is now getting involved because so many Chinese nationals have been enslaved. Beijing sentenced five people to death for involvement with a gang operating compounds in Myanmar in November. But despite these efforts, the scams continue to rake in billions, and more pig butcher compounds are opening every month in the Philippines, West Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. “As all sorts of attackers learn that they can make serious money doing this, they're going to make those pivots,” says Ronnie Tokazowski, co-founder of Intelligence for Good, a nonprofit that researches online scams. “There is little to no sign of this stopping.”

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the practice of “pig butchering”? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.