Interpreting Turnitin Originality Reports

This guide explains how to interpret work submitted through the Turnitin ‘plagiarism’ software on Blackboard and covers the following:

- understanding the produced Originality Report,
- checking the quality of work,
- viewing both the online and printed copies of the report.

What is Turnitin?

Turnitin provides an indication of similarities between a piece of work submitted by a student and a database of previously submitted work, websites, journals, essay banks and other sources.

If a match between a submitted piece of work and another source is found, Turnitin will highlight the matching text and provide a summary within a document called the Originality Report.

The originality report is NOT a plagiarism report

The matching text found is not an assessment of plagiarism. Originality Reports can help students and staff to locate potential sources of plagiarism. The decision to deem any work plagiarised should be made only after careful examination of both the submitted paper and the sources highlighted.

It needs to be emphasised to students that plagiarism can be detected without the aid of Turnitin’s originality checking service. As the Originality Report is not a plagiarism report, a low percentage of matching sources does not guarantee that you will not detect plagiarism. Many resources are not in the Turnitin database and tutors with their subject knowledge may still detect plagiarism including previous student’s work.

Why do originality reports need interpreting?

It is likely that Originality Reports will contain some matches as students will have discussed the work of others. If an assignment does not contain matches this could also indicate that a student has not done enough reading around the subject and referencing of other sources. Therefore, all Originality Reports need careful interpretation depending upon the nature of the assignment.

Academic skills—check your work for plagiarism

All Students have the opportunity to check work using an Turnitin assignment within the Academic Skills area on Blackboard accessed from the ‘Check my work for plagiarism’ link on the home tab. Work submitted to Turnitin through this assignment will not be added to the Turnitin database, so that when students submit their final work to an assignment on Blackboard it does not find a 100% match to their work added previously. Both staff and students have access to this area with a ‘student view’ so that staff cannot view students submissions.

When the Originality Report is available to view a percentage icon will appear in the Assignment Inbox. Originality Reports currently being processed will say ‘Processing’. Originality reports are usually available around 5 minutes after submission but during busy assessment periods it can take up to 24 hours especially for resubmissions.
Interpreting the originality report

Percentages of matching text: The Overall Similarity index
Turnitin takes the overall number of matches and calculates a percentage of matching text or the overall similarity index. The percentage is viewable at the top of the page in both the online and print versions of the originality report.

There are no rules as to the correlation between matches and plagiarism, any percentage could indicate plagiarism. All work will probably contain some words from other sources unless it is a reflective piece such as journal/portfolio work.

As a guide a returned percentage below 15% would probably indicate that plagiarism has not occurred. However, if the 15% of matching text is one continuous block this could still be considered plagiarism. A high percentage would probably be anything over 25% (Yellow, orange or red). Again to deem work plagiarised will depend on the students work and the requirements of the report or essay. Students bringing work with a 100% match will probably be in danger of being approached for potential plagiarism.

Matches that appear in the originality report are also influenced by the assignment settings. The assignment setting for the assignment on Academic Skills are to ‘exclude quoted’, ‘exclude references/bibliography’ and ‘small matches up to 5 words’. This is to gain a more accurate overall percentage. This means that Turnitin will ignore any text after the words References or Bibliography and any text between quotation marks.

You will need to consider the originality report in more detail and look beyond the percentage of the Overall Similarity Index.

Basic methods: checking students academic competence
Next you should check any matches you find by reading through the matched text and consider the following relating to their writing skills:

**Quotation and Referencing**
If the matching source is a quotation ensure the text is enclosed in quotation marks. The originality report gives an opportunity to check that work is correctly referenced.

**Paraphrasing**
Is the highlighted text poorly paraphrased? If appropriate provide feedback to the student to gain help with paraphrasing the work of others.

**Common words and phrases**
Commonly used jargon and terminology may be matched by the Turnitin system, this is normal and should be taken in to account when viewing the Originality Report. Turnitin should not return small matches this is currently set to 5 words.

**Students reusing work and potential collusion**
Final work previously submitted via a Turnitin assignment will be added to the Turnitin database and will be matched in the Originality Report. If a students work has been submitted previously to the database this will be indicated, the Originality Report will show you from which institution the matches came from. In this case it is worth asking the student if they have submitted any aspect of the work in question to an assignment previously. The work would normally be in one continuous highlighted block. Collusion between peers can also be identified in this way once all
students have submitted their work to a Turnitin assignment. How to view the source of matches is discussed next. Remember work is not added to the database from Academic Skills.

Viewing originality reports online

The Document Viewer

Student papers submitted through Turnitin will return a copy with a summary of matching sources overlaid on their submitted work, Turnitin calls this the Originality Report. The originality report will open in a screen within Turnitin called the Document Viewer, it has four distinct areas:

1. The top bar contains summary information of the document being displayed in the document viewer, check that the Originality tab is highlighted in red on the left. On the top right you will see a summary of the similarity index.
2. The middle of the document viewer will contain the submitted document and information on any matches highlighted within the text.
3. The bar to the right of the document text contains an overview of the original source or location. The information presented in these areas therefore provides a summary of matches and their sources.
4. The bar on the bottom contains the options for printing/downloading, and filter options for changing the originality report settings.
Viewing highlighted sources in detail

Begin by exploring the document and scrolling down the text to view any highlighted matches, you are able to view the original source from both an ‘internet source’ and a ‘publication’. To do so click on the number next to the highlighted text this will open up a pop up window with a summary of the matching text source. To view a full source click on ‘Full Source View’. This will open in the area to the right, close it when you are finished.

If you wish to follow the sources of a match in more detail go to the ‘Match Overview’ to the right of the originality report. Hover the cursor over the resource you want to view and click on the arrow to ‘View Match Breakdown’, this will show you every source found by Turnitin for that particular text match. Again remember to check for missing quotation marks and poor paraphrasing.

Save and print Originality Reports

Open the Originality Report then click on the ‘Print/Download’ icon located at the bottom left of the originality report.

Select to ‘Download PDF of current view for printing’.

The Academic Skills site can only keep one Originality Report when further work is submitted it will be overwritten. It is worth reminding students of this if they want to save their report before overwriting it with another, they can also submit a previously submitted assignment again.

Viewing paper/PDF originality reports

Downloaded Originality Report will not have any of the interactive features discussed above. It will provide a static version of the highlighted sources in the text and a summary of the primary matching sources. The summary of primary sources identified as matches will appear at the end of the document. The numbers next to the highlighted text will correspond to it’s source in the list of primary sources. It will not be possible to view the matches from the printed document, or view a detailed breakdown of all identified sources of that match.
Checklist

- Ask to see the assignment criteria. This will provide you with the context of the essay. For instance, a critical evaluation of others' work or a subject area should contain some matches as it discusses the work of others. If it does not, check to see if the student has discussed and referenced the work of others enough. A reflective piece of work should contain very low highlighted matches if any.

- For blocks of highlighted text, check for missing quotation marks first and ask if the section should be a quotation. Otherwise, check the source of the text and discuss why they have used this section. Advice on paraphrasing may be required.

- Check for a missing References or Bibliography title. Turnitin will ignore all text after these titles if they are present.

- Submitted work with high matches especially 100% are very likely to be investigated for plagiarism. Ask if the student has submitted the work previously first. The essay will probably need substantial reworking based upon basic academic skills. Provide advice on; using quotations, paraphrasing, writing skills, etc. all within the context of the assignment criteria. It may be necessary for the student to seek the advice of their tutor on the correct format and expectations from them in completing the assignment. Tutors would probably rather deal with issues now than deal with a plagiarism case later.

- Tutors may still detect plagiarism from sources not within the Turnitin database using their subject knowledge. It is worth reminding students of this.

Further Guides on the Help tab of Blackboard include:

- Submitting a Turnitin Assignment (Student)
- Interpreting Turnitin Originality Reports (Staff). This current guide is an adaption for Library staff.
- Creating an Turnitin Assignment (Staff)