Tips for using Turnitin to improve your writing

Tip 1: Don’t panic: Originality reports provide useful information about your writing

The originality report provides feedback on your writing before you submit assignments.

Use the originality report as your final editing phase to double check that you have used paraphrases, quotes and referencing correctly.

Tip 2: Submit a ‘good version’ of your assignment through Turnitin

The originality report will give you the most useful feedback about your writing if you submit a ‘good version’ that meets the marking criteria and contains:

- clearly worded sentences
- coherent paragraphs
- your best attempts at paraphrasing and quoting sources
- correct in-text referencing and reference list.

Turnitin will generate an originality report within a few minutes the first time you submit work through the assignment drop box. However, it will take up to 24 hours for an originality report to be generated if you submit your work through the same drop box again (e.g. a second or third time).

Tip 3: Allow plenty of time for editing phases

Close and careful editing phases can improve your work by up to two grades. Editing can take longer than we expect. Make sure you:

- allow plenty of time for editing
- schedule editing time for the assignment into your weekly study schedule
- use the originality report as your final editing phase to closely check how you have used sources.

These strategies will help you to polish your work to best advantage and get the grades you deserve.

Tip 4: Don’t worry too much about the Similarity Index

The Similarity Index (or percentage score) tells how much of your entire submission matches sources in the Turnitin repository. This score can be easily skewed by a number of factors including:

- settings used by your lecturer when the drop box was set up
- when you submit your assignment (closer to due date = higher percentage as there are more assignments for your work to match to)
- digital assignment cover sheets
- whether a cover sheet is attached to the assignment
- common assignment questions and report headings
- properly referenced and formatted direct quotes
- common disciplinary concepts and specialist terms.

To be clear, the Similarity Index measures matched text. It is NOT a measure of plagiarism. Turnitin cannot detect plagiarism. This means there is no ‘safe’ score, or match percentage that indicates the assignment is free of plagiarism.
Turnitin works by comparing text (e.g. strings of words) from your submission with sources held in its repository. The originality report is an overview of all of the matched text it finds. BUT Turnitin does not have the capacity to make judgements about the nature of the matched text it identifies. It can't tell whether you have followed the set referencing style, or if paraphrases and quotes are correct. This is why it can’t detect plagiarism.

This means:

• it is our job as students and teachers to interpret the originality report to decide whether sources have been used correctly or not
• it is a good idea to note the Similarity Index, but not worry too much about it.

Tip 5: Focus on the highlighted sections of your writing in the originality report

Every highlighted section in your originality report is a word-for-word match to a source from the Turnitin repository. However, not every section of matched text is problematic.

If you submit a ‘good version’ of your assignment it should be a fairly quick process of elimination to go through and double check every highlighted section where you have used a source. Make sure that you have used paraphrases, quotes and references correctly.

Expect matched-text in your report, and remember that not every section of highlighted text will be cause for concern.

The remainder of this guide offers examples and prompts to help you decide whether sections of matched text in your originality report need editing.

Tip 6: Interpret highlighted sections: ask if matched text is the result of ‘disciplinary language’?

Disciplinary language is made up of common phrases relevant to your topic, author and place names, as well as disciplinary concepts (abstract ideas) and specialist terms. You need to use disciplinary language to write your assignment and your marker understands this.

These kinds of matches are expected in university assignments. Using the concepts and specialist language of your field demonstrates your understanding to the marker.

Instances of matched text caused by disciplinary language are short (usually no more than 3–6 words).

If the highlighted section is disciplinary language you do not need to edit your work. However, make sure you use it as a chance to check you have:

• provided referenced concept definitions from disciplinary sources (e.g. usually unit readings or text book) before you use them (this demonstrates your understanding to the marker)
• acknowledged when using ideas, information, data, or words from a source (via referencing).

Tip 7: Check highlighted direct quotes are correct and referenced

Direct quotes are word-for-word extracts from sources. Even properly formatted and referenced direct quotes can show as matched-text in your report. Your job is to double check that you have used the quote according to disciplinary writing style and your referencing style guide.

Ask yourself if the quote is:

• correct (e.g. is it a word-for-word match to the original source)?
• inserted into a sentence?
• formatted according to your referencing style (for short and long quotes)?
• correctly referenced (e.g. in-text APA referencing includes author, year, and page number)?
• used as a piece of evidence to back up or develop the point of the paragraph?

If you answer ‘yes’ to all these prompts, you can move onto checking the next highlighted section in your assignment. If you answer ‘no’ to any of the prompts, you now have the chance to edit this section of your assignment before the marker sees your work, and avoid losing ‘easy marks’.
Tip 8: Double-check highlighted paraphrases in your assignment

In the originality report, a poor paraphrase shows as a ‘patch-work’ sentence made up of highlighted and non-highlighted words.

Paraphrasing is where you put the meaning of the source into your own words. It is really hard to paraphrase complex sources used in university assignments. Even after multiple edits, our paraphrases can stay too close to the original wording (e.g. we have only changed a few words around). This is a type of plagiarism called ‘plagiphrasing’

When you see a patch-work section it is very important you go back and check the source that you used to write that section of the assignment. If necessary, you can re-work the paraphrase (and reference properly). This will help you improve your writing and get the grades you deserve.

Six steps to make writing paraphrases easier:

1. Make sure you are paraphrasing small sections (one sentence not a page) while learning to write university assignments.
2. Re-read the original source again and again until you feel you understand what the author is saying.
3. Cover the source so that you can ignore the wording and write down key words that capture the meaning of the section.
4. Look at your paragraph and develop the key words you have written down into a sentence that works to back up the point you are making.
5. Re-visit the original source to make sure you have only kept concepts or specialist terms, and that you have kept the meaning of the source (e.g not over-stated or understated the claim).
6. Check your referencing against the referencing style guide. Have you provided correct referencing details in-text (author and year of publication)? Is this source also noted in your list of references?

As you can see from the list above, paraphrases are written in phases. Or rather, they are written and re-written until they take their final shape. Most academic writing is a process of writing and re-writing.

Tip 9: Edit referencing using a referencing style guide and the originality report

Turnitin CANNOT recognise whether your referencing is correct or consistent. It does not have this capacity. This means it is up to you to double-check your referencing is correct and consistent.

Practising academic integrity means carefully acknowledging when you use others’ work, and clearly showing where your work ends and others’ work begins. This means, every time you use ideas, information, data, examples, claims or words from sources, you need to acknowledge this via referencing.

Each source cited (referenced) in your assignment needs to be included in the reference list (provided at the end of the assignment).

You do not need to memorise the referencing style guide. Instead, print out the style guide then edit your referencing against the style guide as one of your editing phases.