

TURNITIN: FRIEND, NOT FOE

TRAIN TO LEARN EFFECTIVELY: TIP SHEETS

Undergraduate students are increasingly being asked to submit their written assignments via the [Turnitin](#) plagiarism-detection service on D2L. You might be anxious to check your similarity score, but you do not have to be! Yes, professors might be using Turnitin to help them detect plagiarism in large classes where hundreds of students submit written assignments, but you as a student should use it as a learning opportunity. After all, Turnitin can help you write and cite sources better.

Tip #1: Understand the similarity score

You have written your assignment, proofread and uploaded it via Turnitin in accordance with instructions provided by your professor. What is the first thing you see? The similarity score. Students often ask what is the acceptable similarity score and always try to elicit a number: 7%, 15%, 22%. The question is so complicated that giving a simple and straight answer is not always possible.

- Some professors have a particular number in mind, while others do not want to commit to any numerical value. The reason for such diversity of opinion is that your similarity score is not necessarily the number that tells the instructor whether you plagiarized or not. It only quantifies the similarity between your essay and other texts in Turnitin's database.
- To calculate the similarity score, Turnitin compares the essay you upload with other essays in the database plus all sources available online (websites, peer-reviewed articles, periodicals, dissertations). Whether you plagiarize by copying the words of others without any citation (very bad) or use a direct quote from the source with proper citation (fine, unless you overuse it), Turnitin will note a similarity and your score will go up.
- In other words, a similarity score in double digits will probably alert your professor or TA to pay attention to your Turnitin report, but the number by itself is not always a sign of plagiarism. The person who marks your essay will pay close attention to your report in order to see whether you relied on external sources a lot or brazenly plagiarized by copying and pasting other people's work.

When you receive your similarity score, look beyond the number and carefully analyze all highlighted similarities to see whether you have copied something improperly, relied on citations excessively or merely used unoriginal expressions found in other people's essays.

Tip #2: Turnitin can help you become a better writer

Despite the policing nature of Turnitin, this tool can also be used to improve one's writing. Don't get me wrong, Turnitin will not advise you on best transition phrases or flag spelling mistakes. Nevertheless, it does come handy when citing other people's material and organizing your references.

- Depending on settings chosen by your professor, Turnitin allows multiple submissions of an essay draft. You can upload your text, get a similarity report and analyze it closely. It shows you the areas where your text is similar to other texts. If you think that you have not paraphrased your sources correctly or forgot to cite, there is a chance to fix your essay and submit it again. The Academic Integrity Office has more information about [avoiding misconduct in written assignments](#).

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- A key point here is that your professor has to set up the Turnitin for your particular assignment in a way that you could submit your draft several times, improve it, and upload the final submission. Reach out to your professor to check if it is possible. I would encourage you to watch the following video of Dr. Tom Griffin, from the Hospitality and Tourism Management program, [explaining the submission process to his students](#). Your professor might set it up slightly differently, so ask about it in advance.

Tip #3: The strategy to avoid high similarity score

You don't have to be afraid of Turnitin, but what if your similarity score is indeed very high (for example 25% or 55%). What should you do? Every case is individual, but the high chance is that your draft has issues with the use of other people's material.

- The most common situation when your similarity score is too high, results from the overuse of direct quotes. Unless your essay requires the extensive quoting of the original material that you analyze later on in your piece, most professors would like to read a text written by you rather than a compilation of quotes. Even if you use quotation marks and organize your in-text citations and references properly, it is not advisable to rely on multiple quotes to carry your message across. Learn how to paraphrase, but do not forget to cite in any case.
- The worst case scenario is, of course, when you use the words of others without proper citation. It happens for many reasons. Often students take copious notes from sources without writing down the author's name and the page number. When you are then trying to incorporate your notes into the essay text it is difficult to distinguish your own words from the chunks of text copied from the original sources. If pressed for time, you might be tempted not to try and track down these particular citations and will end up using the direct quote here and there without proper citation. Be attentive when taking notes to avoid such situations: when you copy a phrase or a sentence, put quotation marks and note down the page number. Always remember to keep track of your sources, whether manually or through a citations manager (e.g. [Zotero](#)).

To cut a long story short, if you have to use Turnitin, start from interpreting the similarity report correctly. Analyse the similar passages and make changes where necessary. Turnitin can indeed be your friend.

Additional resources

Academic Integrity Office. (n.d.). For students. <https://www.torontomu.ca/academicintegrity/students/>

Academic Integrity Office. (2021, July 7). Assignment checklist.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/16H2_EfUMiOnJuz0_PRArYqWjBDvZSHkHPhohhWqQV1Y/edit

Toronto Metropolitan University Library. (2021, August 04). Research Help Guide: What to cite.

<https://learn.library.ryerson.ca/Research/What-to-cite>

Toronto Metropolitan University Student Life and Learning Support. (n.d.). How to paraphrase.

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TMU Connected Learning. (2020, October 16). Brief History of Citations and Plagiarism. [Video].

YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfuy7AR_Z0&t=4s