# Understanding Turnitin

## I don't understand what Turnitin is telling me about academic misconduct?

This pack will explain what Turnitin does and how it is used to highlight plagiarism. In addition the pack explains, briefly, the role of the SAMO (School Academic Misconduct Officer) briefly and the procedures involved if you are accused of plagiarism.

## What does Turnitin actually do? What is it looking for?

Turnitin is text-matching software which seeks out text in your assignments that appears elsewhere, such as in books, journal articles, websites and other student's' work. It is used by many universities as a means to highlight plagiarism.

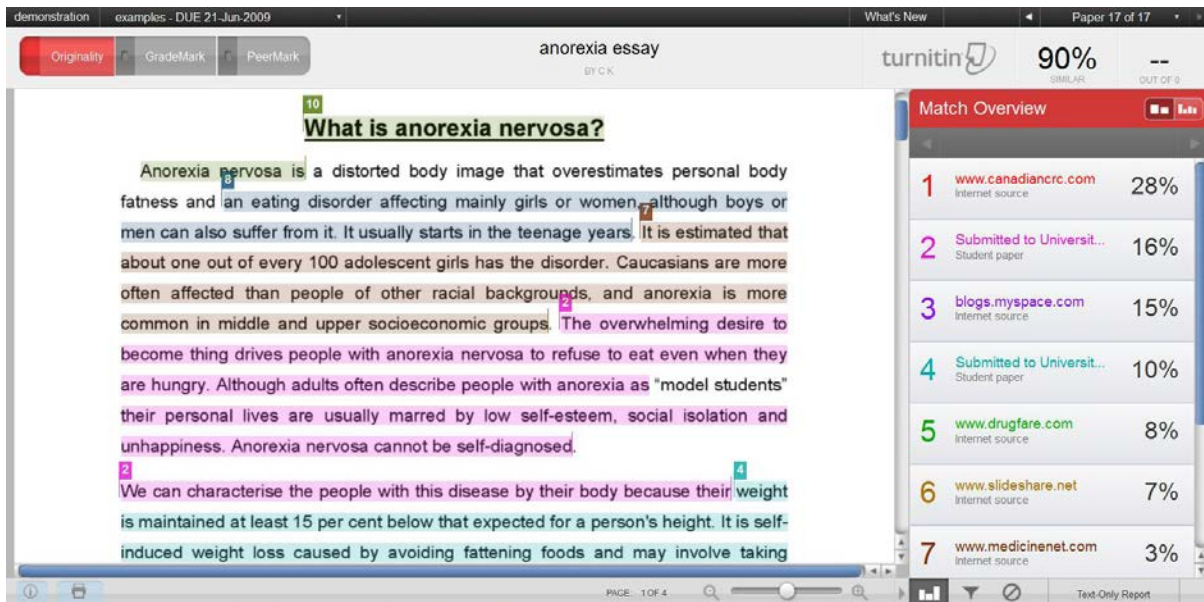When it generates a report it looks something like this:



Fig 1: University of Wolverhampton (2015) Turnitin Originality Report.

Each colour and number corresponds to a source on the right hand side e.g. the pink (2) content in this student's assignment comes from a paper submitted by another student at the University.

This example shows extensive plagiarism. The student has copied and pasted chunks of text from multiple sources and therefore, has a 90% similarity rating. This student should expect to be accused of academic misconduct.

## How quickly is a report generated?

Normally a report takes 24 hours to generate so there are two things you need to ensure:
1) That your tutor is allowing multiple submission attempts. If not only submit your **final** piece of work, you **will not** be able to resubmit.

2) That you submit a **minimum** of 48 hours in advance in order to allow time for the report to generate and for you to make changes accordingly. A week in advance would be better.

**What is a 'safe' percentage on the report?**

Really there is no such thing. Turnitin, itself, is not interpreting the results it sends back; it is necessary for both you and your lecturer to do this.

For example often the following types of scenario happen:

**"I have a very high Turnitin score but it is only highlighting my reference list, citations and direct quotes – what should I do?"**

Please note that many lecturers, in order to try to avoid this problem, will set up Turnitin so that it doesn't look for the things this student is mentioning.

However, this is not always the case and so sometimes reference list information, citations and direct quotes will be highlighted. This is because obviously this information does exist elsewhere (in publishing information, probably on Amazon where the books are sold and in other texts that have referenced the same works). Therefore, Turnitin, rightly, highlights them when it looks for text it can match.

For example, in the image below you can see that Turnitin has highlighted a section, which is in fact, a quotation and a citation.
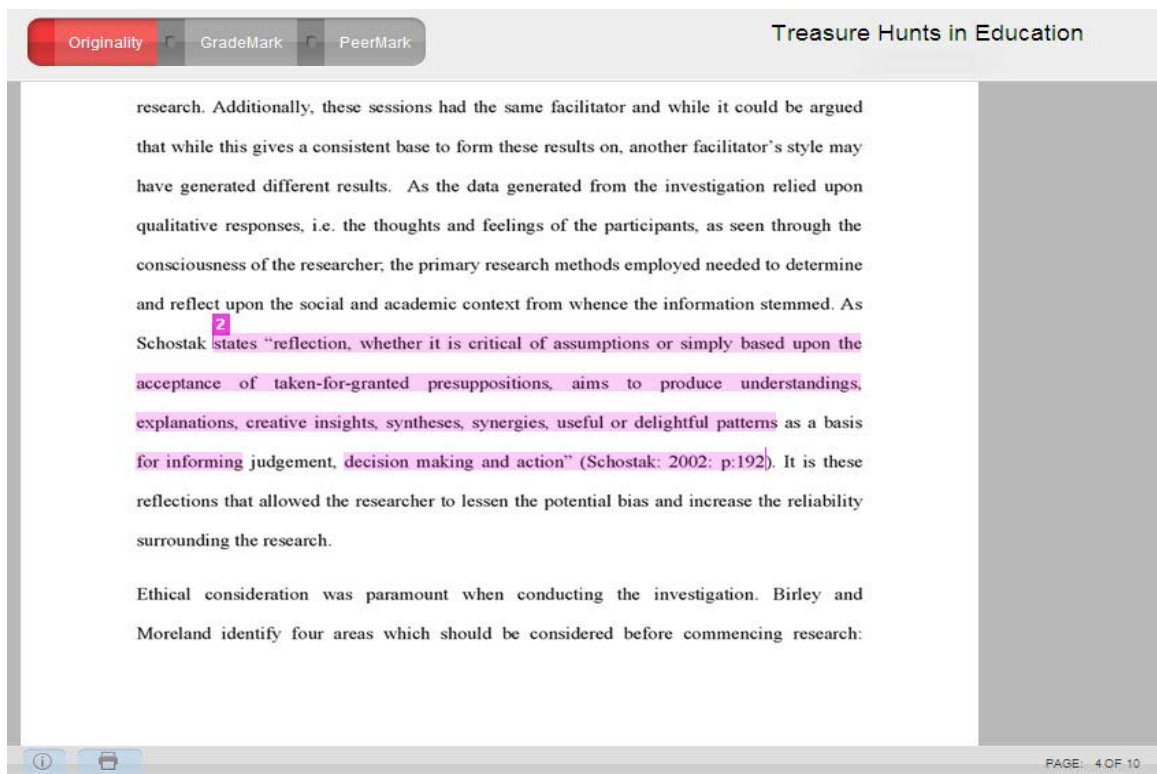


Fig 2: University of Wolverhampton (2015) Turnitin Originality Report.

In this example, the student can **justify** what they have done because they have referenced and placed the quotation in quote marks. Therefore, this element of their percentage report will not count against them.

Ironically, in this instance Turnitin is, in a sense, highlighting the student's good practice. The fact that the references are showing means the student has probably* referenced them correctly and Turnitin is recognising the words and layout from the publishing information which exists elsewhere. In this instance, as long as there are **no other** areas highlighted in the student's work (apart from those already discussed) there is **nothing** the student needs to do.

*Be cautious that you are using University of Northampton's own referencing guides because they may be different to the standard system e.g. Harvard. So in this example the student may be using **a** correct referencing system (which Turnitin is text-matching from elsewhere) but it is not **our** correct system. Always double check; **do not** rely on Turnitin as proof of any good practice.

**"My score on Turnitin was less than 5% but I have been sent a letter telling me to see a SAIMO (School Academic Integrity and Misconduct Officer). Why has this happened?"**

Here, the student was lulled into a false sense of security. They assumed that a low number meant they had not plagiarised. This is not the case. Here, the student needed to look at **what** the report highlighted not just how much.
If any of your writing is highlighted that is **not** one of the following then you need to check it back for plagiarism:

1) A citation e.g. (Jones, 2014, p.5-6)
2) A reference e.g. Jones, S. (2014) The trouble with Turnitin. *Interpreting Data.* **36**(5) pp.4-12
3) A direct quote e.g. "Turnitin does not interpret the percentage for you." (Jones, 2014, p.5)

For example:

> When looking at the positives and negatives of digital assignment submission technologies, it is necessary to evaluate the potential of the software available (Smith, 2015, p.6-7). In fact, Jones (2014, p.4-6) argues that one of the key problems is interpretation of the data these types of software produce, in that numeric results do not, necessarily, indicate the "underlying qualitative impact"(Jones, 2014, p.5).

The things highlighted in blue are not a problem because they fall under the categories mentioned above and have been accurately referenced. The student is not trying to pass any work off as their own which is not. The student has referenced accurately and placed words which are not their own in quotation marks.

However, if it were to look like this:

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(Smith, 2015, p.6-7). In fact, Jones (2014, p.4-6) argues that one of the key problems is interpretation of the data these types of software produce, in that numeric results do not, necessarily, indicate the "underlying qualitative impact"(Jones, 2014, p.5).

Here, the student has a plagiarism problem. The words marked in pink are not in quotation marks – this way of writing is supposed to indicate a paraphrase to the reader. By paraphrase, this means that the student has put the ideas of Smith in their own words. The fact that Turnitin is highlighting this part of the text means, that they have in fact, **not** done this - it is a direct quote. In this instance the student is trying to pass off someone else's words as their own. This is plagiarism. Even one instance of this means a student is liable to be subject to the University's policies on academic misconduct, which could include being asked to see a SAIMO (School Academic Integrity and Misconduct Officer).

This is equally the case even if it looked like this:

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What this reveals is that the student is probably changing every other word or so of the text they are trying to paraphrase. This is still plagiarism. To paraphrase correctly you must avoid using any of the wording **and** phrasing of the original text. Instead you should provide a summary of the ideas the writer is putting forward.

Please refer to the 'How to uses sources' pack for more on this subject.

**Other common problems:**

**"It says I copied a University of _____ student but I haven't copied! I have never even heard of them"**

Within certain subject areas there are topics that are fundamental to competency in that subject (e.g. Midwifery, Nursing). As a consequence, all universities in this country that run that course are likely to have similar requirements for an assignment. This situation increases the likelihood that another student has used the same reference material as you. Again, if this happens Turnitin is doing its job by text-matching that this material exists elsewhere. You then need to interpret how much of a problem this is.

**For example:**

| Quotation highlighted | Is it an 'obvious' choice of quote? | If **Yes** consider:<br>● Do you need it?<br>● Could you rework it; summarise instead?<br>Consider deeper analysis by drawing out more nuances that are likely to be a less obvious approach to answering the question.<br><br>If **No:** Why might you have hit on the same quote? Can you find an alternative or better still paraphrase it instead. |
|---|---|---|
| Reference highlighted | Is it a 'seminal' (fundamental) text? | If **Yes**: It can't be helped, it is a necessary part of answering the question.<br><br>If **No**: Consider justification for use, why might you have both hit on the same text? |
| Paraphrase highlighted | Is it highlighting words you have used?<br><br>The whole phrase? | If **Yes** to words: It is likely that you have both paraphrased incorrectly (staying too close to the original text) and as a result, happen to have chosen similar synonyms. If this is the case then you need to work on changing that section.<br><br>If **Yes** to phrase: As above. In addition is it an overly simplistic or obvious argument? Consider deeper analysis by drawing out more nuances that are likely to be a less obvious answer. |

**"It's highlighted _____...but that's the official term for it! How else can I say that?!"**

This is a common problem in many subjects where there are specific terms and definitions that cannot be avoided. Remember that writers, and indeed other students, do not own the English language itself. If that is the correct term for what you are talking about then you need to use it. If it's highlighting a definition then consider whether it is necessary to include it, especially given you are writing for an informed audience.

**Final note on Turnitin:**

The key thing to remember is that Turnitin is simply software to highlight text that exists elsewhere - it **cannot** and **does not** interpret those results – you must! Also you must learn to know when you have plagiarised for yourself by learning to reference well and to paraphrase effectively. Do not rely on Turnitin to make these judgements. If you are accused of plagiarism based on Turnitin results, don't panic, you have the chance to justify your position (See below sections about procedures). Therefore, ensure you have checked the results thoroughly, not just relied on the percentage.

**Who or what is SAIMO?**

A SAIMO is a School Academic Integrity and Misconduct Officer and it is their role to assess the cases of any student accused of academic misconduct.

**So, what happens if I am accused of academic misconduct?**

If a student is suspected of academic misconduct the tutor refers them to the SAIMO. If you are referred for an investigation it can be a positive thing as it can help you become a better student by sharpening up your academic skills and awareness of what academic misconduct and plagiarism is about. So firstly, try not to panic.

This is how the process works:
- The SAIMO arranges a meeting with the student, via the Student Centre, to hear the student's version of events.
- The student will be contacted via letter, email or text informing them of the investigation and date, time, place of the meeting.
- Student turns up to the meeting where they discuss the case with the SAMO. (*DL students will be invited to undertake a telephone interview.)
- A Viva (interview) will, normally, be convened with at least two tutors present. (*For dissertations this will be the supervisor and second-marker or other module/year tutor.)
- At the interview the SAIMO considers the evidence from the student and the tutor, the SAIMO is impartial.
- The SAIMO will decide if academic misconduct has taken place and whether or not the student is guilty of plagiarism/ academic misconduct.

If **no** Academic Misconduct is deemed to have taken place, the case goes no further and the original grade awarded to the work stands.

If **yes,** Academic Misconduct is deemed to have occurred, then the SAIMO sends the outcome to the course team.

At this point a range of sanctions are available. These range from:
- reducing the grade by one grade (e.g. B+ to C+)
- giving the work concerned a grade of F or G. (Sanction applies only to the *item of assessment*, **not** to the whole module.)

The right to resit the work *may* be affected. You *may* be expected to undergo further training regarding academic skills and plagiarism awareness.

More serious offences, and second offences, are referred directly to a panel by the SAIMO.

In these cases panels can impose more stringent penalties such as:
- failing the module
- withdrawing the right to repeat the module
- termination of studies.

**Do I have the right to appeal the decision?**

In all cases the student has the right to appeal against the SAIMO's decision (within 5 days). That appeal is heard by a panel drawn from across the university. The panel may overturn the decision or uphold it.

**Where do I go for help if I know I struggle with any of this?**

If you know you struggle with paraphrasing, referencing or the concept of plagiarism please seek help from the following teams:
- CfAP (Centre for Achievement & Performance)
- Academic Librarians
- PAT (Personal Academic Tutor)

**References:**
Fig 1: University of Wolverhampton (2015) Turnitin Originality Report. University of Wolverhampton [online]. Available at: http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/turnitin/quotations.jpg (Accessed on 2nd June 2015)

Fig 2: University of Wolverhampton (2015) Turnitin Originality Report. University of Wolverhampton [online]. Available at: http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/turnitin/quotereferenced.jpg (Accessed on 2nd June 2015)