# UNDERSTANDING TURNITIN AND THE SIMILARITY REPORT

## TURNITIN: WHAT IS IT?

Turnitin is an efficient way to identify common writing issues and deter plagiarism in course assignments.

**Turnitin is available in Quercus.** Instructors using this tool can create a Turnitin Assignment in their Quercus course to which students submit their assignments electronically. Those wishing to use Turnitin must adhere to the Conditions of Use for the University of Toronto.

## SIMILARITY REPORT: WHAT IS IT?

The Similarity Report (formerly the Originality Report) highlights textual similarities found within an assignment and provides links to sources that contain similar text. Similarity Reports highlight passages that may be of concern, but do not automatically report whether a paper has been plagiarized. **Determining if plagiarism has occurred requires analysis by the instructor**. The Similarity Report can be viewed side-by-side with the original paper to facilitate comparison. Thus, Turnitin is part of a larger set of tools and resources that assist students with developing their writing and citing skills.

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

### STEP 1:

Each submitted paper is checked for textual similarity against sources stored in the Turnitin database. Sources include:

- current and archived pages from the public Internet;
- journal and periodical databases;
- every student paper ever submitted to Turnitin at the University of Toronto

### STEP 2:

Once the paper has been checked (analyzed) Turnitin will generate:

- Similarity Score (percentage)
- Similarity Report

## WHY AND HOW TO USE TURNITIN?

- Turnitin is an efficient way to identify plagiarism and common writing issues, and an effective way to deter plagiarism, particularly in large courses.
- Turnitin is most effective at reducing instances of plagiarism when combined with educational approaches, such as quizzes, educational modules, feedback on writing, and writing-focused tutorial sessions[1].
- Use of Turnitin provides an opportunity to promote academic integrity and writing development within overall pedagogy.
- Assignment design contributes to the effectiveness of Turnitin.[2] For example, topics where popular material is widely and readily sourced online are good candidates for Turnitin. Relevant assignments with clear criteria and specification can reward and promote original work.
- Reviewing Turnitin reports is a valuable way of learning how students are coping with writing assignments and identifying any common issues that can be addressed in class or tutorial.

# UNDERSTANDING THE SIMILARITY SCORE

The Similarity Score is often indicative of the nature of issues within the paper.
A spot-check will show whether plagiarism is likely.

### Null/Low Range

**Extremely rare:**
No match to sources previously submitted to Turnitin, or sources used are not in the Turnitin database

- Warrants a direct review
- Low matching scores are not normally a concern

### Mid Range

**Most common score range:**
Often trace matches to several sources, but with 1 or 2 sources that stand out; references and bibliography items are commonly matched

- Requires a brief spot-check for large-scale patterns

### High Range

**Cautionary Score range**:
Very little of the text is original, may be an entirely compromised paper

- Signal of severe and/or systemic problems

**TIP: Matches are influenced by Turnitin assignment settings, which determine the threshold score**

## HOW TO SPOT-CHECK AREAS OF CONCERN?

The Spot-Check process is a method of quickly reviewing Similarity Reports for common visual patterns, to determine if the paper may be plagiarized.

- Scan for one of the 3 most common visual patterns:
  - **Blocks** of highlighted text
  - **Close tracing** of sources that leave "patchwork" style patterns, and
  - **Frequent matches to one source** above all others.
- Check for quotation marks or misleading or disguised references.
- Confirm if matches to other student papers are innocuous (e.g. a match to common source materials otherwise unavailable in the database).
- Confirm if matches to other papers are of concern (e.g. use of previously-submitted or purchased material).
- Reserve about 30 seconds per paper.

## Spot-Check Tips & Strategies for Instructors and TAs

- Make sure to budget time according to hours allocated within grading time
- If time is limited, start with the highest-scoring papers first
- Set aside or make a note of any papers that "fail" the spot-check
- Grade the papers that do not appear to be problematic
- Probe questionable papers further (usually in the midrange scores) with a Google search.
- Problems may also be discovered by critical readings during grading, independently of Turnitin.
- Report papers of concern, following the process in the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (*PDF*)

## Partners and Resources

- Academic Integrity at U of T: academicintegrity.utoronto.ca
- Students with questions about academic integrity should contact their Registrar's Office
- Teaching Assistants should contact the course instructor
- Turnitin questions can be sent to divisional contacts or q.help@utoronto.ca

[1] Owens, C., & White, F. (2013). A 5-year systematic strategy to reduce plagiarism among first-year psychology university students. *Australian Journal of Psychology*. 65: 14-21.
[2] Heckler, N.C., Forde, D.R., & Bryan, C.H. (2013). Using Writing Assignment Designs to Mitigate Plagiarism. *Teaching Sociology*. 41: 94-105.