

# The Turnitin Text Matching System

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## 1. WHAT IS TURNITIN?

Turnitin is an electronic text matching system that compares text in a student assignment against electronic text on the publicly accessible Internet, in published works (including ABI/Inform, Periodical Abstracts, Business dateline, and electronic books), on the ProQuest and Gale commercial databases, and in every assignment previously submitted to Turnitin by students in universities all over the world, including assignments obtained from 'paper mills' (Internet sites which sell papers).

The Turnitin system operates through a web site ([www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com)) accessible by standard web browsers. No additional software is required and the interface is highly user-friendly. Turnitin provides an 'originality report' in which similar text is underlined, colour-coded, and linked to the original source. The system provides the option for students or only the academic staff member to view the originality report. It should be noted that Turnitin is NOT a plagiarism detection system per se; it is a text matching system. This means, for instance, that legitimately used direct quotations are not separated from information that has not been referenced appropriately. The originality report needs to be assessed by a marker to determine whether similar text has been properly acknowledged.

Turnitin has several features that can assist with the process of checking originality reports. For instance, the '**side-by-side**' originality report is a feature which splits the viewing screen so that the submitted document is on the left and any similar text is on the right, thereby making the checking process more straightforward. Also, in a subject inbox, originality reports are colour coded to indicate the percentage of the document containing text that is similar to text on the Internet or Turnitin database. Low percentage reports can be excluded from the list through a filtering system so that the marker can initially concentrate on checking documents with a higher similarity score. Again, the percentage scores cannot be used as a measure of plagiarism; they are a measure of the proportion of similar text in an assignment. The percentage of text which is typically similar in a set of assignments will differ according to disciplines and the extent of quoted text expected in an assignment and the availability of relevant documents in electronic form.

The Turnitin system operates by students or academics submitting assignments in electronic form to the Turnitin web site through a subject portal managed by a subject coordinator (or other staff member). The subject coordinator provides students with a class identification number and enrolment password to access this portal. In disciplines for which Internet text and journal databases are less relevant the system is of use in detecting use of assignments written by other students or submitted from 'paper mills'.

The subject coordinator has the option of submitting assignments (through a 'zip' file or individually through a batch mode) once they have been received through eLearning or email. Assignments submitted by lecturers cannot be viewed by students, which limits the educational benefits of students using the system.

It should be noted that Turnitin does not effectively check assignments consisting of mathematical formula or computer code and does not provide an effective check of the content of diagrams submitted in an assignment. Alternative programs are available for checking computer code and academics in other universities have developed databases of equations submitted in assignments within a particular subject which can be used for detecting plagiarism.

## **2. THE USE OF TURNITIN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

While Turnitin provides a means of strengthening the implementation of the University's policy on acknowledgement practice, equally if not more importantly it can assist in educating students about referencing and plagiarism. In the complex issue of referencing this involves more than teaching the mechanics of citing by appending style guides to subject outlines.

### **I. REFERENCING AND PLAGIARISM EDUCATION**

When students are introduced to the Turnitin system, they can also be taught acknowledgment practice through face-to-face teaching and information on acknowledgment practice in subject outlines and course handbooks. Students can also be introduced to the University Acknowledgment Practice, which can be found at:

<http://www.uow.edu.au/about/policy/UOW058648.html>

Other online resources at the University include:

<http://www.uow.edu.au/student/services/ld/students/UOW021315.html>

<http://www.library.uow.edu.au/resourcesbytopic/UOW026621.html>

In addition, Turnitin also has a **Draft Function**, which allows assignments or theses to be submitted first in draft form to check acknowledgement practice prior to submission of the final version. To use the draft function, the subject coordinator sets up the assignment on the subject portal with a defined period for submission and then sets up a revision of that assignment to be submitted in a subsequent defined period. If necessary, the subject coordinator can set up more than one revision of the assignment. The system only allows students to make one submission for each revision of the assignment. Students can view the originality report for each submission and check that they have properly acknowledged information in their assignments (within the limitations of the Turnitin system). Importantly, by using the draft function the final submission is not checked against the draft submission.

### **II. COPYRIGHT AND PRIVACY AND THE USE OF TURNITIN**

**Important Note:** If a student paper is checked against the Turnitin Student Paper Database, that paper is then retained on the Turnitin Database for checking against subsequent submissions. University use of the Turnitin text matching system must take into consideration the issues of copyright of student work as well as the privacy of students' work submitted to Turnitin. It is essential that staff read the following information carefully before submitting student work to Turnitin.

Legal advice provided by Blake Dawson Waldron to the Caval Consortium (of which the University is a member) for use of Turnitin indicates that students submitting assignments to the University provide an implicit licence for the University to submit

their assignments to the Turnitin database for assessment. Importantly, however, this implicit licence does not extend to assignments being retained on the database. In practical terms this means that the University is entitled to submit any assignment or thesis to the Turnitin system for checking, with or without student consent, but cannot leave the document on the Turnitin database without student consent. In the interest of openness and education it is preferred that staff obtain signed consent from students.

#### **A. SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS WITH EXPLICIT STUDENT CONSENT**

For assignments to be checked against papers on the Turnitin Student Paper Database (and thus be retained on the database), students must provide an explicit licence. Blake Dawson Waldron have suggested the wording of a licence that students must consent to before submitting an assignment to Turnitin. In order to allow a full Turnitin text match, the following statement should be included in the assignment cover sheet or in the text of assignments or thesis submitted electronically so that the University has an express licence to reproduce the student assignment or thesis and communicate it to the Turnitin server:

I declare that this assignment is original and has not been submitted for assessment elsewhere, and acknowledge that the assessor of this assignment may, for the purpose of assessing this assignment: reproduce this assignment and provide a copy to another member of faculty; and/or communicate a copy of this assignment to a plagiarism checking service (which may then retain a copy of this assignment on its database for the purpose of future plagiarism checking).<sup>1</sup>

The word **thesis** should be substituted for **assignment** in the case of thesis submission. Where an assignment is submitted electronically the words set out in the above cover sheet should be required to be added to the assignment by the student before electronic submission.

#### **B. SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS WITHOUT EXPLICIT STUDENT CONSENT**

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<sup>1</sup> Blake Dawson Waldron legal advice, 2003 – for full text of advice, see [http://www.turnitin.com/static/legal/australian\\_legal.html](http://www.turnitin.com/static/legal/australian_legal.html)

If students are concerned about their assignments or these being retained on the Turnitin Student Paper Database because the content of their work is controversial, contains valuable intellectual property or has commercial in confidence content, or staff do not have student consent to lodge an assignment on the database, document checking can be limited to the internet and the Proquest database. This requires the Turnitin user to select an option not to allow the paper to have other papers checked against the submission so that the work is not retained on the Turnitin database.

The only people who can access the text of an assignment are the student and the subject coordinator who sets up the assignment on Turnitin. If that assignment is listed in an originality report for another assignment submitted to Turnitin as containing similar text, it is not possible for the viewer of that report to directly view the text of that assignment, unless the viewer is the coordinator of the subject for which the assignment was submitted. If the viewer of the report is not the subject coordinator, the Turnitin system provides the option of sending an email, requesting access to the assignment, to the coordinator responsible for the subject in which the student assignment with similar text was submitted. In this case, the Turnitin privacy policy states that:

Access to personal information by third parties will only occur via signed consent by registered users as stated in our registration agreement. This approval includes, but is not limited to, one registered user allowing Turnitin to provide his or her contact information to another registered user for document source analysis tracking. For example, if material uploaded to our database matches material from a later upload, contact information related to the former is given to the latter upload's registered user for follow up.

([http://www.turnitin.com/static/legal/privacy\\_pledge.html](http://www.turnitin.com/static/legal/privacy_pledge.html) )

In practice, this contact information is limited to the subject coordinator's name and email address, which appears on the request for a copy of the assignment with similar text.

When students begin to use Turnitin they should be provided with information on how the system works and should be given relevant instructions. Learning Development at the University provides an online, self access resource, which can be found at:

<http://www.uow.edu.au/student/services/ld/students/index.html>

In addition, Turnitin user manuals are available by clicking on the training materials link on the Turnitin homepage.