



Getting the most out of Turnitin

<http://www.screencast.com/t/3VKn4Mlx>

Transcript

Introduction: Welcome to this tutorial on ‘Getting the most out of Turnitin’ from the University of Reading Study Advice team. The tutorial is designed for you to go through at your own pace and you can pause it at any time.

What is Turnitin?: Before you submit your coursework assignments, you’ll have the chance to put them through Turnitin to help you check that you have used your references correctly. But what is Turnitin? And how can it help? Turnitin is an originality checker. So it checks your writing against all the writing it holds in its data bank to see if it can find any matches. That will include books, journal articles, websites, and assignments written by other students and submitted through Turnitin. But it can’t include every text you might consult – perhaps not even every text on your reading list. Your tutor will know the literature in their field and will be able to spot things that Turnitin misses. So it’s vital that you make sure you know what’s expected of you in terms of referencing before you start writing, and make sure you keep good records so you don’t make accidental errors. You can’t rely on Turnitin to do this for you.

You might think of Turnitin as a bit like a metal detector – it gives its user an idea of where to look but it doesn’t identify what it’s found, and it can’t dig it up. Turnitin can give you and your tutors information that can show where there might be problems with your referencing. But it can’t tell you if what it’s found is plagiarism, and it can’t put it right. To decide whether these problems constitute plagiarism – whether intentional or unintentional – someone will need to take a closer look. Having the chance to put your work through before you submit it to your tutors means you can be the person who looks more closely, identifies the problems, and solves them. So, what are you looking for?

Things to look out for... percentages: Don't focus too much on percentages. You may have a high percentage of matches but on closer examination you find, for instance, that there are a lot of common phrases that have been picked up, as in the example here. Or you may have a lower percentage but the one thing that Turnitin is picking up is a big error that could have serious consequences – perhaps a whole chunk of text without it being marked up or given a citation. Whatever the percentage is, you still need to go through the report and check the results against your work.

Things to look out for... missing details: Are there any direct quotes that you have forgotten to mark up with quotation marks? Or that you have marked up, but you've forgotten to include the citation to show where the quote came from? These are both easily corrected.

Things to look out for... paraphrasing: Have you tried to paraphrase something you read by just changing a few words? This is never a good idea, and the worst thing you can do to put it right is to try to get your score down by using a thesaurus to change words. The words the thesaurus will suggest are not identical to the original word – using one will change the meaning of what you're saying – sometimes even turn it into nonsense. Better to write the whole thing up again in your own words. Or choose a short phrase from the original to mark up as a direct quote and build it into a sentence. And always remember to include a citation.

Things to look out for... missing source: Have you described something you read in your own words but forgotten to say where the idea came from? You must acknowledge the source of any idea you got from your reading with a citation – even if you do write it in your own words. This is the kind of error that Turnitin will not pick up – but your tutor probably will. So you must be careful to check for yourself.

Things to look out for... over-quoting: Do you have a lot of direct quotes – or a lot of long quotes? Remember that what your marker will be interested in is your words, not someone else's. Your marks will be based on the way you interpret, question and communicate the ideas you have read while researching your assignment – not on showing that you can copy someone else's words, however well-chosen and correctly referenced they may be.

Things to look out for... formatting errors: Have you formatted your references correctly? One thing Turnitin won't tell you is if you've used the right

format, so you'll still need to check for yourself. It's always best to check your course or programme handbook for examples and instructions on the style and format of referencing preferred by your department. If you are studying modules in more than one department, you will need to check the instructions given by both departments as they could be quite different. Don't rely on previous experience, or referencing software, or what a friend does. Referencing at school or college is usually a much simplified version of what you do at university; referencing programmes can't tell what your department wants; and your friend may be studying in a different department or school where a different style of referencing is preferred.

Why does it matter so much?: So it might seem like a lot of hard work - why does all this matter so much? It might seem petty that we should worry so much about things like getting the date in the right place, or the authors in the right order. But getting your referencing right is more than just acknowledging the authors who have informed your ideas - though of course that's important. It shows that you can work with accuracy and care; that you can learn a new set of academic skills and put them to use; and that your work has academic integrity. Turnitin can help you to understand and develop these skills - but it can't do it for you.

To sum up: Turnitin can be a useful tool to help you to develop your referencing practices by drawing attention to some of the common errors that are made. But there are things it can't do, and errors it may not find - you will need to check and correct these errors. It's always going to be up to you to learn from what you find and remember it for next time. Unless you have a trained referencing monkey, of course...