



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* ADELAIDE

# Guide to Interpreting Turnitin Similarity Reports

Staff Guide | November 2021

**make  
history.**

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# 1. Why Use Turnitin?

From January 2022, the University of Adelaide requires that all assessments must be submitted and monitored through text comparative software where possible. Turnitin can be used for text based assignments submitted via file upload to MyUni.

The information in this guide is provided to help you to interpret and understand the similarity reports generated by Turnitin, and to support students to use Turnitin for their learning.

## What can Turnitin do?

Turnitin is a text-matching software which generates a similarity report by comparing student submissions to published works, web content, and a library of student assignments across the globe. If there are occurrences where a student's writing is similar to, or matches, one of the database sources,

*Using Turnitin can help to identify potential issues with academic literacies or academic integrity. However, **your professional expertise and judgment** are vital to interpreting the Turnitin similarity score and report.*

Turnitin flags this for you to review.

## What can't Turnitin do?

**Turnitin is not a plagiarism detector - you are the detector!** Turnitin matches text, it does not check for plagiarism. Your judgment is crucial to interpreting the similarity report and detecting potential academic misconduct. Turnitin may also help you to identify signs of other breaches of integrity such as collusion or contract cheating. You can learn more about detecting potential academic misconduct in our [Check for Integrity](#) video.

Turnitin cannot tell you whether academic misconduct has occurred. This is a judgment which should be made by an [Academic Integrity Officer](#). If you have a suspicion that academic misconduct may have occurred, see section 5. 'Reporting Suspected Academic Misconduct'.

# 2. Setup

Submission via Turnitin is not automated. [MyUni Support has guidelines](#) on how to set up your MyUni assignments to generate Turnitin Similarity Reports.

If you have questions, you can contact [MyUni Support](#), or request a meeting with an [Educational Technologist](#) or [Learning Designer](#) from Learning Enhancement & Innovation (LEI) for further assistance on using Turnitin.

# 3. Interpreting the Similarity Report

## What to Expect from the Similarity Report

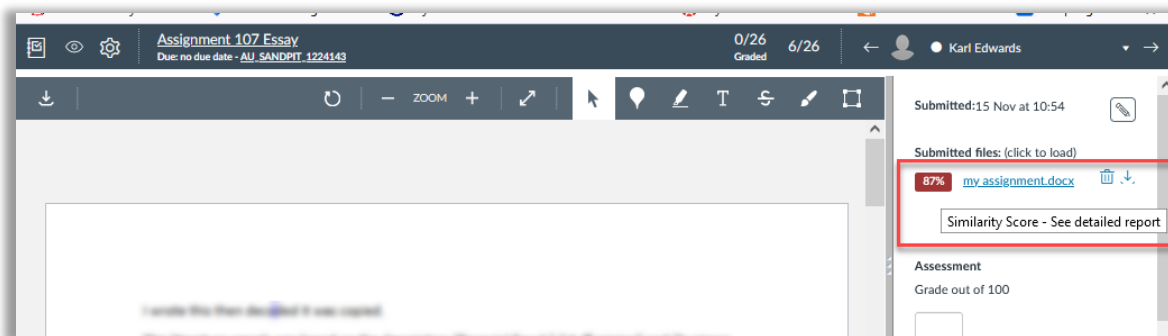
Depending on the assessment type and MyUni submission setup, you may have some idea of what to expect from the similarity report.

- If you have given students a **template** to use, this is likely to contribute to the similarity score since all submissions will contain the same titles, subheadings, or other generic text matches.
- If students include the assessment **question** as their title, this will match with other submissions.
- **Cover sheets** are no longer required as the student's online submission is recorded in MyUni. Cover sheets will also contribute to Turnitin similarity matches.

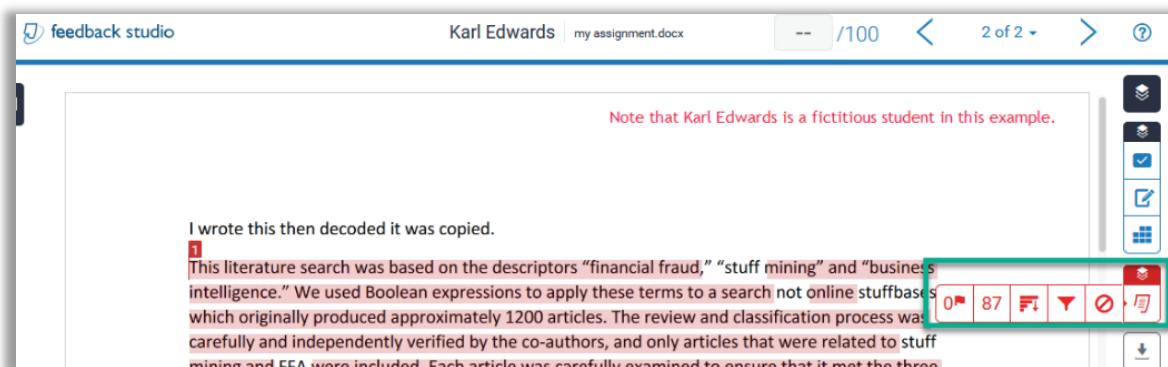
**You should not penalise students or award marks based on Turnitin similarity scores.** If you suspect that academic misconduct may have occurred, discuss this with the Course Coordinator (in the first instance) or an [Academic Integrity Officer](#).

## Accessing the Similarity Report

When marking an assignment in the MyUni SpeedGrader, a coloured box will appear next to the assignment link. You can click this coloured box to view the detailed similarity report.



The detailed similarity report opens via the Turnitin Feedback Studio which has two separate menus. The red menu contains the Turnitin similarity report information. It is possible to view the details of any matching sources, whether there are flagged issues such as hidden characters as well as additional filtering settings via the tabs in this menu. For assignments submitted using MyUni it is recommended that you don't use the other menu items in Feedback Studio.



## Similarity Index

The similarity index shows the percentage of the submitted assignment which matches to other sources. The scores are colour-coded according to the amount of matching text.

<b>Blue:</b> No matching text	Blue indicates no text has been matched. This could indicate that the work has no references at all, that there is little or no use of direct quotes, or that attempts have been made to 'trick' Turnitin's text-matching software.
<b>Green:</b> One word to 24% matching text	Green indicates matches between 1% and 24%. While a Green score might suggest the document is OK, it is simply an indication of the amount of matched text, so potentially, up to 24% of the document could still have been copied without referencing.
<b>Yellow:</b> 25-49% matching text	Yellow, Amber and Red denote percentage matches in bands above 24%. Higher percentage matches may indicate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• An over reliance on direct quotation as a result of poor academic writing.</li><li>• Cutting and pasting from other sources.</li></ul> However, this could also indicate matches to legitimate sources such as an assignment template.
<b>Orange:</b> 50-74% matching text	
<b>Red:</b> 75-100% matching text	

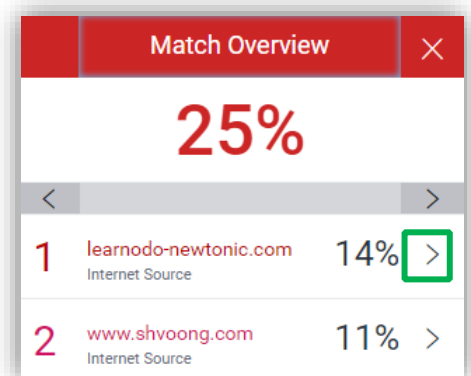
The similarity index alone cannot tell you whether the assignment has been referenced correctly, or whether a potential breach of academic integrity has occurred. **There is no perfect similarity score.** Any amount of matched text without appropriate quotation, paraphrasing or referencing could be a breach of academic integrity.

- A **score of 100%** could indicate copying or collusion, but it could also mean that the student has resubmitted their assignment for a legitimate reason.
- A **very high score** could indicate matches to legitimate sources such as an assignment template, quoted text or items in the reference list.
- A **'middling' score** still needs to be checked to ensure that the highlighted matches are appropriately quoted and referenced and non-highlighted text contains appropriately paraphrased material with referencing.
- A **very low score** could indicate that the assignment is under-referenced, or that attempts have been made to 'trick' Turnitin's text-matching software.

## Match overview and breakdown

Access the [Match Overview](#) by clicking on the similarity score. The overview shows all the matches that have been found on a paper, ordered by highest similarity match to lowest.

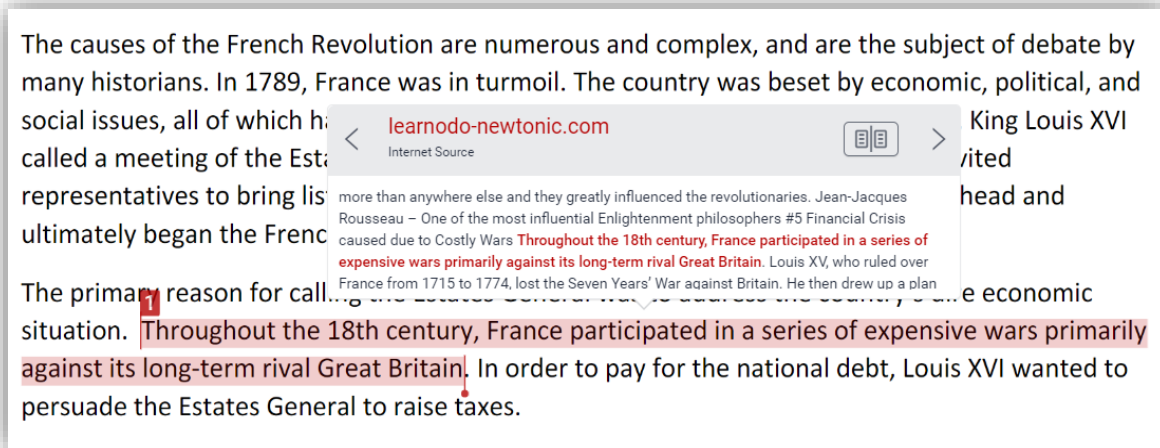
To view the matching text, click on the **arrow** next to each match. The matching text will be displayed next to the highlighted section of the submitted paper.



## Unacceptable Matching Text

### Copied Text

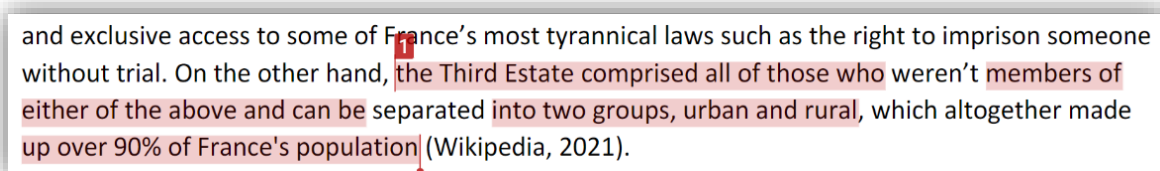
In the example below, the highlight seems to indicate that text has been copied without quotation or attribution. This is plagiarism.



The causes of the French Revolution are numerous and complex, and are the subject of debate by many historians. In 1789, France was in turmoil. The country was beset by economic, political, and social issues, all of which had led to the calling of a meeting of the Estates General. The king, Louis XVI, called a meeting of the Estates General in 1789 to address the financial crisis. The king's representatives to bring his subjects' grievances to the king's attention ultimately began the French Revolution. The primary reason for calling the Estates General was the economic situation. Throughout the 18th century, France participated in a series of expensive wars primarily against its long-term rival Great Britain. In order to pay for the national debt, Louis XVI wanted to persuade the Estates General to raise taxes.

### Incorrect Paraphrasing

Sometimes, a highlighted phrase or sentence will be broken up by non-highlighted words, such as the example below. This shows that the writer has made an insufficient attempt to paraphrase by substituting a few words or by changing the order of the phrases. Even if the writer has included a reference, this is incorrect paraphrasing and is also plagiarism.



and exclusive access to some of France's most tyrannical laws such as the right to imprison someone without trial. On the other hand, the Third Estate comprised all of those who weren't members of either of the above and can be separated into two groups, urban and rural, which altogether made up over 90% of France's population (Wikipedia, 2021).

### How to Improve Paraphrasing?

Students should be encouraged to read the text from the source, understand the concept, and consider any key words which should not be changed (such as technical terms). They should then set the source aside and write the concept out in their own words, keeping any key words. When students are unable to write the concept out in their own words, this may suggest they do not fully understand the concept.

Students should not be encouraged to move words and phrases around and resubmit to Turnitin to try to 'defeat' the text-matching. This is poor academic practice.

The [Writing Centre](#) can also work with students on developing paraphrasing skills.

## Acceptable matching text

Because Turnitin performs text-matching rather than plagiarism detection, highlighted text does not always indicate an issue.

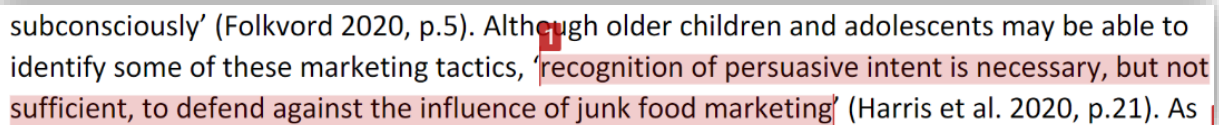
Acceptable matching text includes:

- Quotations which are followed by a reference
- References and bibliography
- Matches to assignment templates or cover sheets
- Table and charts which show copied data, followed by an appropriate reference
- Common turns of phrase, e.g. a match on two or three words of a very generic, phrasal nature
- Technical terms specific to the discipline that must not be changed
- Assessment topic related terms and phrases that must be retained, such as the wording of the question
- Paraphrasing, if the marker judges that the paraphrase is *sufficiently different* from the original, and the paraphrase is followed by an appropriate reference.

Some of these 'acceptable' matches can be excluded from the similarity report either [during assessment setup](#), or while [viewing the similarity report](#).

## Highlighted Quotations

Turnitin may highlight text which is in quotation marks and includes a full reference, as below.



'subconsciously' (Folkvord 2020, p.5). Although older children and adolescents may be able to identify some of these marketing tactics, 'recognition of persuasive intent is necessary, but not sufficient, to defend against the influence of junk food marketing' (Harris et al. 2020, p.21). As

This is acceptable matching text. While including lots of long quotations in a written assignment is not encouraged, the discipline-specific preference for quotation or paraphrasing should be discussed with students.

## Document flags

Document flags show other characteristics of the document that might need to be reviewed. These include:

- **Hidden Text** – Text is the same colour as the background. This may show attempts to inflate the word count or avoid text matching by placing white characters between words instead of spaces. However, this can sometimes flag coloured text in graphs or tables, so the flags need to be investigated on a case-by-case basis.
- **Replaced Characters** – Letters have been swapped with characters from different alphabets to avoid text matching. Turnitin automatically swaps the characters back, but flags the incident.

Read more in [Turnitin's guide to Document Flags](#).

# 4. Using Turnitin as a Teaching Tool

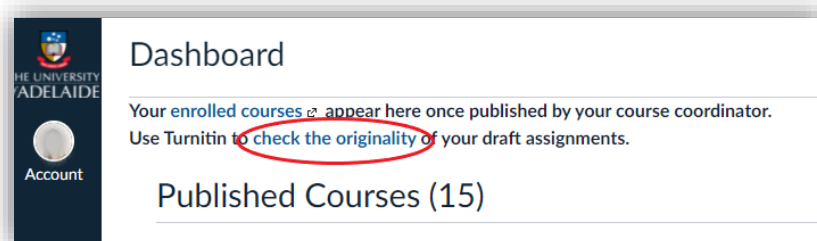
## Explain how Turnitin works

We sometimes assume that students have used Turnitin before and understand its purpose – this is not always the case. Many students think that Turnitin is a plagiarism ‘checker’, or that there is an acceptable score they should aim for. Talking about how Turnitin works can help students to understand its value as a learning tool, and may deter academic misconduct, saving you time and effort later on.

## Show students the Originality Check Course

Encourage students to use Turnitin prior to submitting their assignments. This can help them to understand where their paraphrasing or referencing may be insufficient, and give them an opportunity to improve and correct their draft before submission, or to seek support from the Writing Centre.

The **Turnitin Originality Check** course can be found on the MyUni dashboard. This allows students to check draft assignments for text matching prior to submitting the assignment for marking. The submission is not added to the Turnitin Repository, so it will not match against future submissions.



## Make Academic Integrity and Turnitin information visible

Include information about Turnitin on the same page as the Assignment details. For example:

*By submitting this assignment, you are agreeing to the [Academic Honesty Statement](#). Your assignment will be automatically checked by Turnitin for text-matching and similarity checking. Learn more about Turnitin [here](#).*

Our [website](#) has a range of suggestions and ready-to-use resources for helping students to understand the academic integrity expectation in your course.

## Allow students to see Turnitin reports for submitted assignments

In addition to encouraging students to use the Originality Check, you can [set up your assessment](#) in MyUni to ‘immediately’ show students their similarity score when they submit.



## What if a student resubmits a draft of the same work?

If you are allowing students to submit a draft prior to the submission of a final piece of work, then you must exclude the draft submissions from being added to the Turnitin database. This will prevent false positive matches at the final submission step.

### Good Practice Examples

#### **Create a formative assessment to practice using Turnitin**

*Dr Julia Miller, Academic Integrity Officer for the School of Education, uses a formative assessment in her Academic English course to help students understand how to use Turnitin. Students submit an assessment to Turnitin, and then write an interpretation and reflection on what the Turnitin report shows. They comment on the matches and similarity score, and on what they might change about their text to improve their writing.*

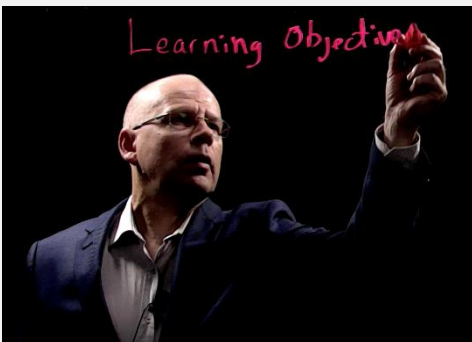
*You can see how this assessment works in this [short video](#).*



#### **Give students the chance to learn from the Turnitin report**

*Dr David P Wilson, Academic Integrity Officer in the School of Biomedicine, provides students with an example Turnitin visualisation and discusses what is acceptable academic practice and how to revise a poor Turnitin report.*

*He gives his students the opportunity to fix any issues flagged by Turnitin at the point of submission and to resubmit the assessment prior to the due date. This allows David's students to demonstrate academic integrity and learn from the Turnitin report.*



## Busting Turnitin Myths with Students

Myth	Reality
<p>If my text is not highlighted by Turnitin, then I haven't plagiarised.</p>	<p>There are different types of plagiarism, including copying without correct attribution, paraphrasing incorrectly, and presenting other people's ideas as your own.</p> <p>Although Turnitin highlights a broad range of matches, your marker is an expert on your subject and may identify other pieces of text or ideas which are familiar to them. The best way to avoid plagiarism is to work on your notetaking, paraphrasing, and referencing skills.</p>
<p>There is an 'acceptable' Turnitin score (e.g. 25% or lower) which I should aim for.</p>	<p>There is <u>no perfect Turnitin score</u>. A mid-range Turnitin score still indicates matched text which may be plagiarised. What matters is what the report shows, and whether you have quoted, paraphrased, and referenced correctly.</p> <p>Sometimes high Turnitin scores are fine, and sometimes very low scores still contain signs of plagiarism. You have to look at each text match to decide whether it is acceptable.</p>
<p>I should keep editing and resubmitting my assignment until I reach 0% similarity</p>	<p>You should not try to 'trick' Turnitin by making small edits to avoid text matching – this is poor academic practice.</p> <p>Look at the highlighted text in the report and decide whether you have quoted, paraphrased, and referenced correctly. If you paraphrase is too similar, go back to the original text, reread it, and then put it aside and write your own interpretation of the information in <u>your voice</u>. Make sure that you use synonyms, change the structure or grammar, and your own words.</p> <p>You should not aim for a low similarity score – this can still indicate plagiarism or poor academic practice. Instead, focus on what the text highlights are telling you.</p>
<p>My matched text is referenced, so that's ok</p>	<p>You need to ensure that matched text is in quotation marks, or is a paraphrase which is significantly different from the original text <u>as well as</u> referencing.</p>
<p>My tutor uses Turnitin because they don't trust students.</p>	<p>Your tutor uses Turnitin as part of their marking process. It is one of many tools they use (including rubrics) to assess your work and your use of sources and evidence.</p> <p>Turnitin is also a useful learning tool for students. It can help you to improve your academic writing, referencing, and to ensure that you are working with integrity.</p>

## 5. Resources for Students

- The Writing Centre: <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/>
- Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS): <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/pass/>
- Studiosity: <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/success/studiosity>
- Library Referencing Support: <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/library/referencing-support>
- Paraphrasing – What, When & How?  
<https://myuni.adelaide.edu.au/courses/48926/pages/lecture-3-paraphrasing-what-when-and-how>
- Academic Integrity information: <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/success/academic-integrity-for-students>

## 6. Reporting Suspected Academic Misconduct

At the University of Adelaide, there is an [impartial process](#) for investigating suspected academic misconduct. As a marker or Course Coordinator, you do not need to decide whether misconduct has occurred, or whether there is sufficient evidence. You simply need to provide the available evidence to an Academic Integrity Officer.

If you have a suspicion that academic misconduct may have occurred, you should notify the Course Coordinator, who will lodge a [Suspected Academic Misconduct](#) report. The Turnitin similarity report should be attached as potential evidence.

## 7. Useful Contacts

- [MyUni Support](#)
- [Education Technologists](#)
- [Learning Designers](#)
- [Academic Integrity Officers](#)
- [Academic Integrity Resources](#)