

Improving Academic Practice with Turnitin

A learning resource for students

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Contents

Summary	2
Background and context	3
Introducing Turnitin	3
Plagiarism and academic (mis)conduct at the University.....	3
The tool: Improving Academic Practice with Turnitin	4
Overview and learning outcomes	4
Contents of the tool	4
1. Using Turnitin: how to access and use the tool	4
2. What is good academic practice and why is this important?	6
3. Citing and referencing, including specific guidance for your School	6
4. Using sources: Paraphrasing and avoiding patch writing	13
5. Finding your voice: synthesis and summarising.....	14
Feedback from users	16
Using the tool with your students	16
Frequently Asked Questions	17
Can I use parts of the tool with my students?	17
Why have you chosen to focus on Turnitin to improve academic writing?	17
My School does not let students see their Turnitin originality reports. Can I still use the tool with them?	17
You give students access to a Dropbox to generate an originality report. How do I know students won't use this to submit other work?.....	17
Will submissions to the practice dropbox show up when checking future assignments?	17
Works cited	18

Summary

This guide is an introduction to our PTAS-funded learning resource that helps University of Edinburgh students improve their academic writing skills through the use of Turnitin.

Turnitin can be effectively employed as a powerful means of helping students with their paraphrasing, summarising, synthesising, quoting, citing, and referencing. Training students on how to interpret originality reports for their own work can help them to identify areas of their academic writing that need attention in order to improve the quality of their written work.

In many parts of the University, Turnitin is solely used as an academic administrative tool, with students having little or no access to the text matching, originality report facility. In other Schools where student access is permitted, only limited additional support for developing good academic practice is provided.

Our intention is to create a tailored and supplementary tool that can complement work already being done in Schools with Turnitin and academic conduct. We hope that this learning resource will encourage more Schools to make more effective use of Turnitin with their students.

Over the next few pages, we'll give you an introduction to the tool and our reasons for creating it. We'll tell you more about how it works, and how our students have found it helpful. Finally, we'll let you know how you can use the tool with your own students.

Feel free to get in touch with us to find out more about the tool.

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Background and context

Introducing Turnitin

For many people, Turnitin is a familiar name. In many universities around the world, Turnitin is the number one text-matching tool used; in the UK, 99% of all universities use Turnitin. In the 2013-14 academic year at the University of Edinburgh, 122,290 student assignments were submitted through Turnitin.

For most students and staff, Turnitin is a tool used to 'detect plagiarism'. Matching the content of a students' essay against a 45 billion item database, Turnitin produces an 'originality report' indicating the percentage of matched text; in short, it shows where a student's work matches the work of someone else already in the database. In this way, Turnitin is largely understood as a tool used to 'catch students out'; the fact that access to originality reports is mostly limited to staff confounds this belief.

We believe that there is another way of using Turnitin that is less about academic penalties and more about educative action. This approach is supported by key voices in research and practice on academic integrity (Bertram Gallant 2008; 2011; Carroll 2007; Williams and Carroll 2009). There is, we argue, a way to use the learning technology offered by Turnitin to think differently about plagiarism, about academic integrity, and about academic writing.

Plagiarism and academic (mis)conduct at the University

It goes without saying that universities are concerned about plagiarism. In 2014-15 (the last year for which we have statistics) 185 University of Edinburgh students were disciplined for academic misconduct offences (University of Edinburgh, "Student Discipline Statistics" n.d.: n.p.).

The evidence suggests that academic misconduct remains a significant issue and, equally, that many cases of plagiarism are accidental. As a collective group of academic teachers, we need to work with students to reduce the amount of plagiarism in assignments, particularly through poor paraphrasing and excessive patchwork cut and pasting from digital sources. The tool we have developed is intended to address precisely this accidental plagiarism, allowing students to clearly see what they need to do in order to effectively and responsibly use sources.

Our approach to academic misconduct and to the development of this particular tool is based upon several years of thinking about academic misconduct, reading research and reflecting upon how best to approach this topic with both students and staff.

The tool: Improving Academic Practice with Turnitin

Overview and learning outcomes

The learning resource, entitled Improving Academic Practice with Turnitin, has been developed using the University's virtual learning environment, Learn. This environment was chosen for its familiarity and ease of access for staff and students.

This tool is intended to enhance students' ability to:

- search for, evaluate and use information to develop knowledge and understanding
- make effective use of oral, written and visual means to critique, negotiate, create and communicate understanding

On completion of the activities, students should be able to demonstrate:

- Independence and responsibility for their own learning, as well as a commitment to continuous reflection, self-evaluation and self-improvement
- Flexibility in transferring knowledge, learning, skills and abilities from one context to another
- An ability to critically assess existing understanding and the limitations of their own knowledge, and recognise the need to regularly challenge all knowledge.

Contents of the tool

Improving Academic Practice with Turnitin contains five sections or units:

1. Using Turnitin: how to access and use the tool
2. What is good academic practice and why is this important?
3. Citing and referencing, including specific guidance for your School
4. Using sources, including quoting, paraphrasing and avoiding patch writing
5. Finding your voice: synthesis and summarising

Each of the five sections includes an introduction to the topic, activities to aid understanding, and links to further resources.

1. Using Turnitin: how to access and use the tool

This section introduces Turnitin as a tool. It gives a short introduction to the software focusing on originality reports, explaining what these are, how students can view them, and how they can be understood.

2. What are originality reports?

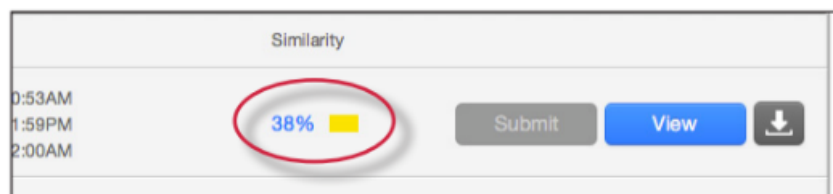
Originality Reports

The Originality Report provides a summary of matching or similar areas of text found in a submitted paper. The Originality Report icon shows a percentage and a corresponding colour, which indicates the amount of matching content. This percentage is the *Similarity Index* and refers to the amount of text in the submission that matched content in Turnitin's repositories.

Each colour on the report reflects one of five tiers matching on the Similarity Index. This is based on the amount of matching text found by the repository comparison.

- Blue (no matching)
- Green (one word to 24% similarity)
- Yellow (25-49%)
- Orange (50-74%)
- Red (75-100%)

An example of how the Similarity headline figure is displayed to students in the dropbox:



Do be aware that a high level of matching doesn't necessarily mean a high level of plagiarism. For example, if filters for quotes and references haven't been turned off, then the Similarity Index will be higher.

Figure 1: Screenshot from the page 'Using Turnitin: Accessing and seeing the tools'

3. How to access and view your originality report

Viewing Originality Reports



Accessing Originality Reports

Please go to your assignment folder and click on the 'View' button.

How to submit to a Turnitin dropbox

Please refer to this video guide about submitting to a Turnitin dropbox in Learn:

[How to Submit Coursework Online - Step by Step](#) (opens in a new window)

Figure 2: Screenshot from the page 'Using Turnitin: Accessing and seeing the tools'

2. What is good academic practice and why is this important?

This section of the tool provides a brief definition of good academic practice and how it relates to plagiarism. The section links to the University of Edinburgh's guidance on plagiarism and to EUSA's Read.Write.Cite campaign. It then outlines how Turnitin can help students' academic practice.

What is good academic practice and why is this important?

This section of the course is about academic practice and the reasons why this is important for your writing at university. Before we can look at how Turnitin can help improve your academic writing, it's important that you understand why good academic practice is so important.

According to the [University of Edinburgh's Read.Write.Cite](#) campaign,

"Part of the process of academic writing is giving credit to people whose ideas you use in your own work. It's really important to do this, so that people who read your work will know where you have used the work of others to strengthen your own arguments.

If you don't let your reader know whose work you've used and where you've used it, then it looks as if you're trying to pass another person's work off as your own. This is called plagiarism, and it's a form of cheating."

Why is good academic practice important?



Good academic practice is being responsible and honest about how you make use of other people's work.

Good academic practice is important because it can help you to write better and it can help you to avoid being 'tripped up' by [plagiarism](#)!

Turnitin can help you hone three elements of your academic writing:

1. Demonstrating knowledge through correct (and judicious) citation.
2. Showing off your own argument (without too much quoting or reliance on others).
3. Developing key skills of summary and synthesis.

Figure 3: Screenshot from the page 'What is good academic practice and why is this important?'

3. Citing and referencing, including specific guidance for your School

This section focuses on the mechanics of citing and referencing (i.e. citation styles). It outlines how the Turnitin originality report can help students format their citations accurately. It also provides links to resources on different citation styles, including Harvard, MLA, Chicago, Vancouver, APA (American Psychological Association), McGill, aka the Canadian Guide to Uniform Legal Citation, MHRA, IEEE, and OSCOLA. Finally, users can undertake a test to check their understanding where they will be shown examples from originality reports and asked whether a change is needed or not.

How can Turnitin help me with citing and referencing?

The Turnitin originality report can help students with referencing in two ways:

- a) It can help check that a citation has been provided where this is needed;
- b) It can help check that a citation is accurate.

These points are illustrated with examples. In this example, a citation should have been given but has not been included (see figure 4).

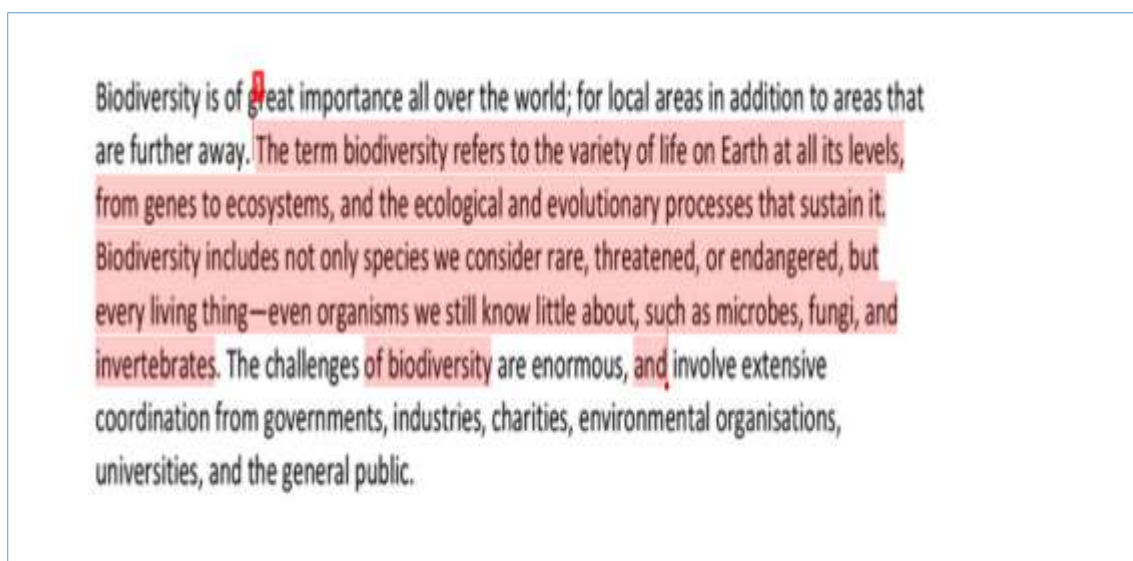


Figure 4: Example from page 'How can Turnitin help with citation and referencing?'

The originality report shows a match for two sentences; the unbroken, highlighted lines indicate that the student's work is an exact match to another source. This suggests that the student has quoted the article (i.e. used the author's own words). A direct quotation must be given in quotation marks (to show that it is someone else's words) and a citation to the article must be given. In this example, the student has not used quotation marks, and has not provided an accurate citation. Because the student has not acknowledged where this wording and ideas have come from, this work is an example of plagiarism.

The student must take immediate action and has two choices:

- a. To summarise or synthesise the sentences in his/her own words and give a citation;
- b. To put quotation marks at the start and end of the quoted material and give a citation including page number.

In the following example, there has been an error in the transcription of a quotation.

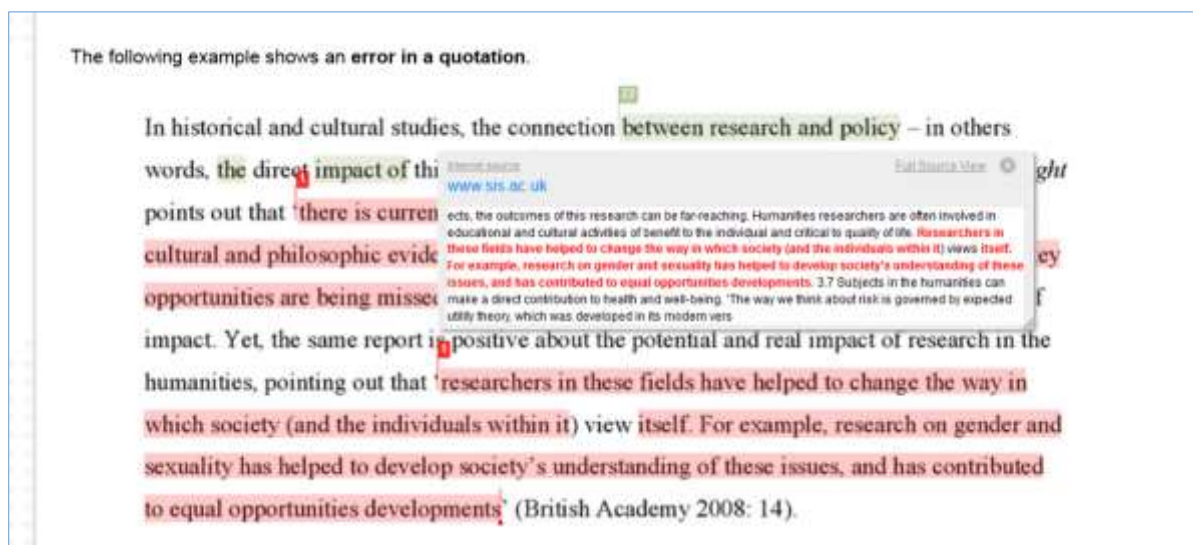


Figure 5: Example from 'Citing and Referencing'

The originality report here shows a match to a website that has, in turn, cited the British Academy report (2008). The highlighted sentence again shows a direct quotation. The student has used quotation marks and given a citation, however the gap in the highlighting shows that the sentence has not matched the source exactly. Looking again at the source, it becomes apparent that the student has made a transcription error, writing "view" rather than "views".

What citation style should I use?

This part of the tool makes clear that there are different School requirements for citation, although most of these will ask for the same information. The importance of consistency is highlighted.

It directs students to their School or department for guidance on which citation style to use while providing a list of commonly used styles with links to further resources.

A link is also provided to Cite Them Right (a web-based tool recommended by the University) and the EUSA Read.Write.Cite campaign.

2. What citation style should I use?

There are so many different citation styles. Most citation styles ask you to provide the same information, but want you to do it in different ways.

Your School or department usually asks you to use a specific style. Whichever style you choose, it is very important to be consistent.

Citation styles are generally divided into parenthetical styles (where brackets are used in the text) and footnote or endnote styles (where a superscript number in the text indicates the reference).

The most common citation styles are:

- Harvard
- MLA (usually the humanities, including English and history)
- [Chicago](#) (used across the social sciences and humanities)
- Vancouver (physical sciences)
- [APA](#) (American Psychological Association) (social and behavioural sciences)

You might also come across:

- McGill (aka the Canadian Guide to Uniform Legal Citation -- sometimes used in law)
- MHRA (arts and humanities in the UK)
- IEEE (technical fields, such as computer science)
- OSCOLA (Oxford University Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities -- law)

[Cite Them Right](#) -- a web-based tool recommended by the University -- can help you format your citations correctly.

You can find out more about citation through the [Read.Write.Cite](#) campaign.

Figure 6: Screenshot from page 'Citing and Referencing'

Test: Using Turnitin for accurate citing and referencing

In order to check understanding, students can undertake a short 3 question test. Users are shown three examples of originality reports and are asked to indicate whether a change is required to the original piece of work. After submission, students are told whether their answers are correct along with an explanation.

→ ⚠ Moving to another question will save this response.

Question 1

Look carefully at the originality report. Is there anything the student needs to change?

continuing pr
portfolios can
picture of lear
supporting the

Source: mams.mil.edu.au
 10/12/2009 | slide 8 Working to a consensus • "An e-portfolio is the product, created by the learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning. • Behind any product, or presentation, lie rich and complex processes of planning, synthesising, sharing, discussing, reflecting, giving, receiving and responding to feedback. • These processes – referred to here as 'e-portfolio-based learning' – are the focus of increasing attention, since the process of learning can be as important as the end product" (JISC, 2008) Joint Information Systems Committee
 Purposes & Tools E-portfolios to present for different purposes Tools to support processes Celebrating learning Personal planning Transition/entry to courses Emp

The crucial dual definition of e-portfolio as both product and process makes clear the learning possibilities for this medium. Indeed:

Behind any product, or presentation, lie rich and complex processes of planning, synthesising, sharing, discussing, reflecting, giving, receiving and responding to feedback. These processes – referred to as 'e-portfolio-based learning' – are the focus of increasing attention since the process of learning can be as important as the end product. (Jisc, 2008, p. 6).

☐ Yes, a change is needed.

☐ No, a change is not needed.

Figure 7: Using Turnitin for accurate citing and referencing test question 1

Question 1

0 out of 10 points

Look carefully at the originality report. Is there anything the student needs to change?

continuing pr
portfolios can
picture of lear
supporting the

Source: mams.mil.edu.au
 10/12/2009 | slide 8 Working to a consensus • "An e-portfolio is the product, created by the learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning. • Behind any product, or presentation, lie rich and complex processes of planning, synthesising, sharing, discussing, reflecting, giving, receiving and responding to feedback. • These processes – referred to here as 'e-portfolio-based learning' – are the focus of increasing attention, since the process of learning can be as important as the end product" (JISC, 2008) Joint Information Systems Committee
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Selected Answer: Yes, a change is needed.

Answers:

- Yes, a change is needed.
- No, a change is not needed.

Response Feedback:

Actually, no change is required here!

The student has used a direct quotation from another source, but this has been clearly distinguished from the student's own work by being set in a separate paragraph (this is common for quotations longer than about 40 words). An author (Jisc), year (2008), and page number (p. 6) have also been given.

Figure 8: Using Turnitin for accurate citing and referencing test answer 1

Question 2

Look carefully at the originality report. Is there anything the student needs to change?

exchange, the is
likely to 'be con
existing knowle
In historical an
words, the direct impact of this research – is even less tangible. Indeed, *Punching Our Weight*
points out that 'there is currently a rather limited appreciation of the way in which historic,
cultural and philosophic evidence can lead to far-reaching social chances, and as a result, key
opportunities are being missed' (2008: xiv). A narrow disciplinary reach limits the scope of
impact. Yet, the same report is positive about the potential and real impact of research in the

- ☐ 1. Yes, a change is needed.
- ☐ 2. No, a change is not needed.

⚠ Moving to another question will save this response.

Figure 9: Using Turnitin for accurate citing and referencing test question 2

Look carefully at the originality report. Is there anything the student needs to change?

exchange, the is
likely to 'be con
existing knowle
In historical an
words, the direct impact of this research – is even less tangible. Indeed, *Punching Our Weight*
points out that 'there is currently a rather limited appreciation of the way in which historic,
cultural and philosophic evidence can lead to far-reaching social chances, and as a result, key
opportunities are being missed' (2008: xiv). A narrow disciplinary reach limits the scope of
impact. Yet, the same report is positive about the potential and real impact of research in the

Selected Answer: [None Given]

- Answers:
- 1. Yes, a change is needed.
 - 2. No, a change is not needed.

Response Feedback: Actually, a change is required here.

While the student has correctly used quotation marks and has given a citation for this direct quote, they have made a transcription error, writing "chances" instead of "changes".

A quick check of the original source and an adjustment to the essay is all that's needed here for accurate citation.

Figure 4: Using Turnitin for accurate citing and referencing test answer 2

Question 3

Look carefully at the originality report. What is missing?

Scotland has enjoyed a particular emphasis on knowledge exchange, a process which brings together academic staff, users of research and wider groups and communities to exchange ideas, evidence and expertise. While 'research and teaching have been the two traditional pillars of higher education in the UK, in recent years knowledge exchange has been established as a third one, especially within Scotland' (Universities Scotland, 2008, cited in Jung et al 2010: 217). It has been compared to England, indicating wellbeing of Scotland (Paterson 230). The British Academy note academics on their research topics, allowing for a broader and more long-term consideration of research priorities (31).

- Nothing is missing; the work does not need changing.
- A citation (name, year) is missing.
- A citation (name, year) and quotation marks are missing.
- A citation (name, year and page number) and quotation marks are missing.

Figure 5: Using Turnitin for accurate citing and referencing test question 3

Look carefully at the originality report. What is missing?

Scotland has enjoyed a particular emphasis on knowledge exchange, a process which brings together academic staff, users of research and wider groups and communities to exchange ideas, evidence and expertise. While 'research and teaching have been the two traditional pillars of higher education in the UK, in recent years knowledge exchange has been established as a third one, especially within Scotland' (Universities Scotland, 2008, cited in Jung et al 2010: 217). It has been compared to England, indicating wellbeing of Scotland (Paterson 230). The British Academy note academics on their research topics, allowing for a broader and more long-term consideration of research priorities (31).

Selected Answer: A citation (name, year) is missing.

Answers:

- Nothing is missing; the work does not need changing.
- A citation (name, year) is missing.
- A citation (name, year) and quotation marks are missing.
- A citation (name, year and page number) and quotation marks are missing.

Response Feedback: Not quite right!

The student has given a direct quotation from a source but has not used quotation marks or given a citation. When using someone else's words exactly, quotation marks must be placed at the start and end of the quote and a full citation must be given, including author, year, and page number. Where there is no page number given (for example, on a website) you will usually be required to indicate this by writing no pagination (n.p.) or similar, according to your School's citation style.

Figure 6: Using Turnitin for accurate citing and referencing test answer 3

4. Using sources: Paraphrasing and avoiding patch writing

This part of the tool outlines how students can use Turnitin originality reports to identify and avoid paraphrasing and patch writing. Students are given an opportunity to submit a practice paragraph of their own writing (up to 100 words) to identify where they might paraphrase more effectively.

How can Turnitin help me with paraphrasing?

This part of the tool outlines the difference between direct quotation from a source and paraphrasing. It outlines the benefits of paraphrasing, while reminding students that appropriate citation is always required.

What is patch writing and how do I avoid it?

This part of the tool defines patch writing, or mash-up, as a term used to describe essays that feature text cut and pasted directly from textbooks and journal articles, and which have had a few words substituted to make it personalised and read coherently. User are informed that this kind of practice is cheating and that Turnitin can show you where you might have been careless with your note-taking and have fallen into the 'mash-up trap' inadvertently. An example is given.

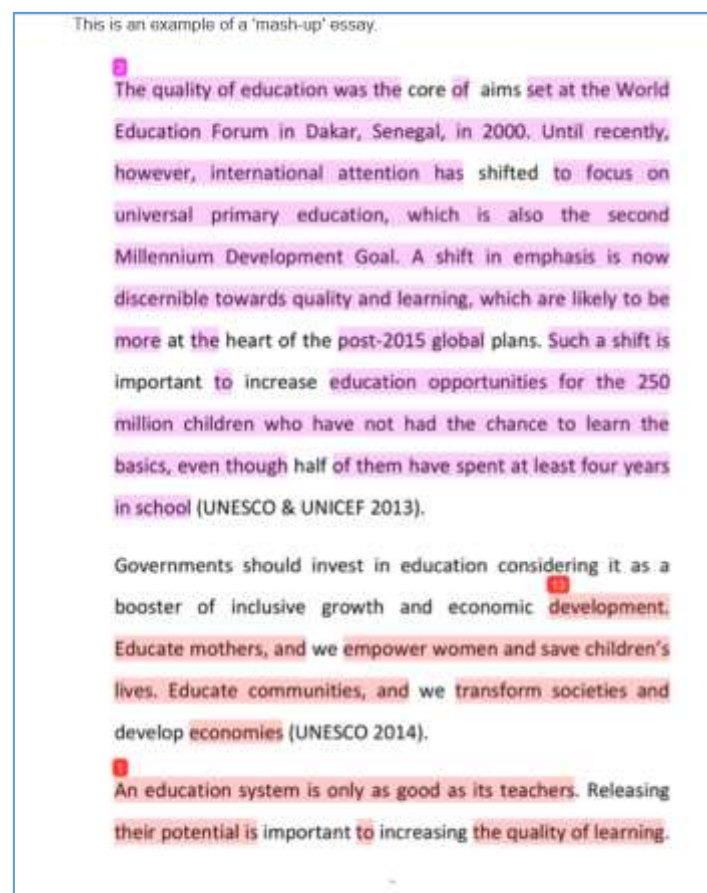


Figure 7: Example of a 'mash-up' essay

5. Finding your voice: synthesis and summarising

The final part of the tool outlines how Turnitin can help students synthesise and summarise material to develop their own voices in academic writing.

1. How can Turnitin help me to synthesise and summarise?

This part of the tool outlines how the Turnitin originality report can indicate areas of writing where students can synthesise and summarise secondary material to develop their own voice.

It repeats that one of the key components of academic writing is learning how to use and integrate sources. For most written work the aim is to get over an "argument" or "view point" that is balanced and "evidenced/backed up" by the work of others. This synthesis of sources is often termed "finding your voice".

Turnitin can be used to highlight when synthesis is weak. For example, this similarity report provided by the University of York illustrates a lack of synthesis, with the writer relying on giving evidence close to the original authors' words.

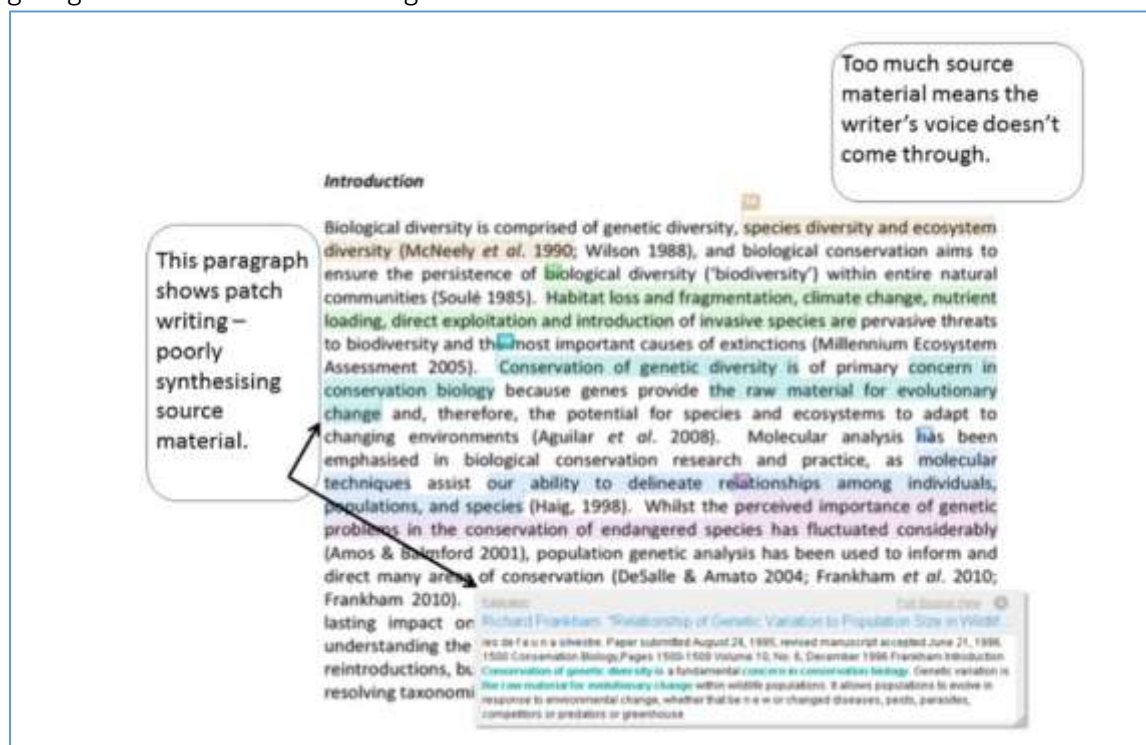


Figure 8: Example of originality report from the University of York

Writing like this lacks a cohesiveness in terms of arguments and often reads like a list of ideas rather than something that is integrated and flows well.

2. Exercises to develop synthesising and summarising skills.

This part of the tool provides exercises created by the Institute for Academic Development designed to help students 'find their own voice'.



IAD INSTITUTE FOR ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Families: student extracts – some comments on A

Student A

Brown **says** that most people think of a family as being the traditional unit of two parents and their children. He **states** that this is the **best model for the welfare of the child** (Brown, 2018, p.4). **Smith (2017) says this kind of model** is not a suitable one today but that it is difficult to produce a new model. Jones (2015, p.8) **says** that in the past extended families "were founded on ties of blood or marriage" and did not change much but that this is not always true now because there is a new type of extended family caused by people splitting up and having new relationships. **This can cause "stress and trauma" for parents and children.** Green (2017) **states** "There is no longer such a thing as a typical family." She **says** that many different groups of people can be thought of as families and that "It may only be possible to say that a family is any group of people who consider themselves to be one." (Green, 2017, p.27)

Purpose and Focus

Student A simply lists what the different authors say.

- She does not make it clear why she is doing this.
- She only once shows **how one source connects to another**.
- She uses no signposting or linking language to show us how she is thinking.

Her focus is not clear

- At first, it looks as if she will write about family structure in relation to children's welfare but, in fact, the second sentence is **not relevant** because

Figure 9: Exercise on summarising and synthesising (IAD)

say title: 'Discuss the importance of the family in the twenty-first century.'

Both (made-up) extracts are taken from the early part of the students' essays.

Student A

Brown says that most people think of a family as being the traditional unit of two parents and their children. He states that this is the best model for the welfare of the child (Brown, 2018, p.4). Smith (2017) says this kind of model is not a suitable one today but that it is difficult to produce a new model. Jones (2015, p.8) says that in the past extended families "were founded on ties of blood or marriage" and did not change much but that this is not always true now because there is a new type of extended family caused by people splitting up and having new relationships. This can cause "stress and trauma" for parents and children. Green (2017) states "There is no longer such a thing as a typical family." She says that many different groups of people can be thought of as families and that "It may only be possible to say that a family is any group of people who consider themselves to be one." (Green, 2017, p.27)

Figure 10: Exercise on summarising and synthesising (IAD)

Feedback from users

Users found the tool "specific, clear and easy to master" and particularly praised the clarity of the resource. The sections of the resource on 'Citing and referencing: Variations within and between schools' and 'Finding your voice: synthesis and summarising' were highlighted as particularly useful.

We are inviting further feedback from users via a survey embedded in the resource:
<https://edinburgh.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/improving-academic-practice-with-turnitin-evaluation>

Using the tool with your students

We believe that the tool we have developed is of benefit to many students at all levels of higher education. We would be delighted if colleagues from across the University used the tool with their own students.

If you would like to have a look around the tool and try it for yourself, we can arrange observer access for you. Please contact Information Services (is.help@ed.ac.uk) or Robert Chmielewski.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I use parts of the tool with my students?

Yes – get in touch with Information Services (is.helpline@ed.ac.uk) FAO Robert Chmielewski to enquire about incorporating our resources into your own Learn course.

Why have you chosen to focus on Turnitin to improve academic writing?

Turnitin is used by most UK universities where it is seen by staff and students as a tool for 'detecting plagiarism'. Yet this is a limited view of what Turnitin actually does and how it can help students. The originality report produced when submitting student work to Turnitin can be a valuable learning tool for students.

Giving students access and time to rethink their own work helps those students who find academic work difficult and who might be more likely to drop out or fail assignments. It demystifies the tool and the process of checking work via Turnitin, and gives students more ownership over their work. The whole approach is about less about catching cheats, and more about working better to explain our collective responsibility for academic conduct.

My School does not let students see their Turnitin originality reports. Can I still use the tool with them?

While your students will get the most out of the tool if they can apply their learning to individual originality reports, much of the tool's content is relevant more widely. Some of the activities do not relate to Turnitin originality reports and all of the information on academic conduct, citation, and using sources will be useful for students who do not see their originality reports.

You give students access to a Dropbox to generate an originality report. How do I know students won't use this to submit other work?

We recognise that, ultimately, while the resource guidance suggests submitting a specific piece of work, students may elect to submit their own work. Turnitin does not allow us to limit the length or specification of submission.

We have mitigated against this in three ways:

- 1) The dropbox will allow only one practice submission per student to prevent misuse of the tool
- 2) It is clearly indicated in a message to users that students should not upload any work they intend to submit for credit
- 3) Staff will be given access to the submission inbox to review the submissions students are making.

It is also possible to remove this part of the course if desired.

Will submissions to the practice dropbox show up when checking future assignments?

Submissions to the practice dropbox will not be added to the Turnitin database so will not be included in future matches.

Works cited

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