Improving Academic Practice with Turnitin

A learning resource for students

Introduction for staff

Authors: Amy Burge (IAD), Simon Beames (Education),
Jessie Paterson (Vet School), Sharon Boyd (Vet School),
Robert Chmielewski (IS).

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Summary

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.

Academic contact: Amy Burge, IAD amy.burge@ed.ac.uk

Technical contact: Robert Chmielewski, IS is.helpline@ed.ac.uk (FAO Robert Chmielewski)

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 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.

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.

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. Links are provided 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.

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.

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.

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".

Feedback from those who have used the tool

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.helpline@ed.ac.uk FAO 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 inquire 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 from a School-specific version 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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