

Understanding Turnitin reports and using Turnitin as a learning enhancement tool

What is the Turnitin Originality Report and what does it show?

An Originality Report shows if there are any similarities between a piece of work which you have submitted and a database of previously submitted work (both within the University and from other learning institutions), websites and other sources. Turnitin does not pick up matches to images, drawings, diagrams or plans, print books and journals, translated foreign language works and password protected content on websites. If the text in your work matches the text in an existing work, this will be highlighted by the report. The more text that matches text in existing work, the higher the Similarity Index will be.

However, the fact that matching text has been found does not automatically mean that you have committed unfair practice. The Originality Report can help you (and the member of staff marking your work) identify potential sources of unfair practice. There is a difference between a raw Similarity Index (which is a simple indication that text in your work matches text in existing work) and a relevant Similarity Index (where the nature and type of matching means that unfair practice may have been committed).

You may be permitted one submission through Turnitin before the final submission and will be provided with the Originality Report as a learning enhancement tool (in such a case your work will not be added to the Turnitin database, so it will not be a match when you formally submit). You should consider the Originality Report carefully and look at each highlighted instance of a match to understand what the match is showing. Depending on the settings used by your tutor, the Originality Report may highlight text which is not normally an indication that you may have committed unfair practice. Look out for the following when deciding if matching text is relevant:

Direct quotes

Is the matching text actually a direct quote from another work? If so, it should be enclosed in quotation marks (or indented for longer quotations) and correctly referenced (normally by stating the name of the author, the date of publication and page number so that the quote could be easily found by anyone else). This is not unfair practice.

BUT - if you fail to provide a proper reference for the quoted text, this could be considered as unfair practice even if you have put it in quotation marks. If you did this once in an essay, it might be seen as a “mistake”, but if it happened more than once, then it is likely that this will be classed as unfair practice.

Also, if you present something as a direct quote (in quotation marks or indented) but change some of the words without showing you have done this, then it is likely that this will be classed as unfair practice.

Finally, if you give a “wrong” reference (that is present a quotation, but indicate that the text came from somewhere other than the actual source – it was a quote from Smith, but you say it was from Jones), this could be considered as unfair practice. Be particularly careful when you are quoting someone who is discussing another work (this is an example of a secondary source).

Bibliography / References

Is the matching text actually a correctly presented reference which follows the relevant guidelines for showing your sources? This is not unfair practice.

BUT - if you appear to have copied almost all your bibliography from another work, this could be considered as unfair practice. Also if you have electronic sources in your bibliography and

the “accessed date” does not appear to be appropriate for when you would have been working on your essay, then this could be considered as unfair practice.

Paraphrasing

Is the matching text picking up on your attempt to paraphrase another work? Paraphrasing is when you present the key ideas and information from another work in your own words and correctly reference this (normally by stating the name of the author and the date of publication). You must change both the words and the sentence structure of the original, without changing the content. This is not unfair practice.

BUT – just changing a few words from the original work is not a legitimate paraphrase – this is often referred to as “word substitution” and can produce a patchwork effect in the Originality Report (with gaps in the highlighting where you have changed a word) and is likely to be classed as unfair practice.

Also, if you fail to provide a proper reference for the paraphrased text, this could be considered as unfair practice even if you have paraphrased properly.

Common words and phrases

Is the matching text picking up individual words or very short phrases which are specific to your subject or the issues you are writing about (such as the title of your essay, “jargon” and technical terminology)? Very occasionally short common phrases may also be picked up. This is not unfair practice.

BUT – where more than seven words in a row, this could be considered as unfair practice (you are much more likely to win the Lottery jackpot than to match seven words in a row by chance) – for instance if you are giving a list of technical terms which has been taken from another work and you are presenting it in exactly the same order (this may look like unfair practice, but could be avoided either by adding a reference or where the list is common, by changing the order).

Unrelated parts of the assignment

Is the matching text in the assignment cover sheet? This is not unfair practice.

BUT – appendices may not be considered as part of the assignment, but you must still make sure that you reference the contents of appendices properly. If you fail to do this, this could be considered as unfair practice.

Your own previous work

Is the matching text from an essay which you have previously submitted? Any work which has been previously submitted via Turnitin will be added to the Turnitin database and so can be presented as a match in the Originality Report. If you are re-working an essay (as part of a re-assessment), then it is expected that quite a lot of the text in the re-work will match the original work and this is not unfair practice.

BUT – if you are not re-working an essay, you must add a reference to show that this was work you did for another assignment. If properly referenced this is not unfair practice, but if you fail to provide a proper reference, this is considered as unfair practice even though the work is your own (this is known as self-plagiarism).

Is there an acceptable Similarity Index score?

The simple answer is **NO**. The University considers any unfair practice as unacceptable and so even a relevant Similarity Index of only 1% could be treated as unfair practice and processed accordingly. Having said that, a high raw Similarity Index (for instance where your essay consisted almost entirely of direct quotations of other work, all properly referenced) is

not unfair practice (but would probably be seen as bad academic practice which would earn you a very low mark as this would not show that you have actually understood any of the quotations – just that you can reproduce them).

Sources in the Originality Report

The Originality Report will list the “source” of the matched text. This may be an internet source, a publication or a student paper. You may look at these sources and feel that you have never visited the web page or read the book or seen the paper from another student to which the source refers. You should be aware that the Originality Report will list just one of possibly many sources for the matched text – there is no suggestion that you actually took the text from the source; only that there are similarities between your work and work which others have done.

Why is avoiding unfair practice important?

If it is determined that you have committed unfair practice, then there are a number of penalties which can be applied, ranging from being given a formal warning up to being expelled from the University (with no credit) and being disqualified from any further study at the University. Penalties become more severe the higher your level of study, the higher the relevant Similarity Index and if you have committed unfair practice before. So, you really should try your best to avoid unfair practice. Remember that the University does not recognise a defence of committing unfair practice unintentionally or accidentally (or due to extenuating circumstances) - The golden rule is; “if in doubt, provide references”.

If you are permitted one submission through Turnitin before the final submission, you should make use of the opportunity to make sure that you have not “accidentally” presented text in your work that is very similar to text in other work and that you have referenced everything properly. In some cases you may be able to see that you have not paraphrased well and so may need to amend your text (but do not just try to change a few more words – this will still be matched by Turnitin). You should allow yourself sufficient time to review (and where necessary, amend) your text before the final submission deadline – it is no excuse to say that you did not have time to check your work before final submission.