

eTools: Using Turnitin in the Classroom

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Introduction

While technological advances are invaluable to education, technology has also made it easier for students to cheat and plagiarize assignments. Some of the ways technology can facilitate plagiarism include copying text directly from the Internet, buying term papers online, and readily sharing files among peers. Though technology has made it easier for students to commit acts of academic dishonesty, technology can also be used to keep students accountable and honest. Turnitin represents one digital tool that can help curtail plagiarism and promote academic integrity.

What is Turnitin?

Turnitin is an etool designed to identify and flag unoriginal written content, with the goal of detecting and preventing plagiarism. When a document is uploaded to Turnitin, the content is compared to a large collection of stored content based on Originality Reports, which houses exact duplicates of three types of work: (a) current and archived web pages on the Internet; (b) published journal articles, book chapters, and other publications; and (c) a collection of student papers and assignments that have previously been submitted to Turnitin. When similarities are found between a newly submitted document and content contained in Originality Reports, the tool flags the

content by highlighting it, and linking it to the original online source. The five-color-coding system on Turnitin is relatively easy to interpret. Based on content already stored in the Turnitin database, each color is interpreted as follows: (a) blue means that less than 20 words match something already in the Turnitin database; (b) green indicates a match of 24% or less; (c) yellow suggests a 25%-49% match; (d) orange implies a 40%-74% match; and (e) red connotes a 75%-100% match. Blue or green generally indicate that it is unlikely that an infraction has occurred, whereas content color-coded yellow, orange, or red suggests that it is possible plagiarism has occurred, given that the duplication percentage is 25% or higher. The flagging process is quick, with a report issued usually within 4-6 minutes.

It is extremely important for faculty to carefully scrutinize the matches that have been flagged and make a final judgment call as to whether or not plagiarism has occurred. For example, if content is highlighted yellow, orange, or red, yet the faculty member reads the content and sees that the paper has a string of quotations from various sources that are properly cited, then the faculty member should rightfully determine that plagiarism has not occurred. Likewise, it is possible that a student's reference list or bibliography matches the sources cited in another paper. In this case, Turnitin may flag the content because the sources are similar, but clearly this does not represent plagiarism. In other words, it is important for faculty to realize that though the color-coding system on Turnitin offers a useful guideline, Turnitin will only find matches

in previously published and submitted content. It is ultimately up to faculty to interpret what the matches mean and conclude if plagiarism has occurred.

How can I get Turnitin?

Turnitin may be obtained from the company's website, Turnitin.com. There is a cost associated with the product, however the exact prices are not provided on Turnitin's website. Instead, the database uses a private quote system. Anecdotal statements from the Internet place the cost at about \$2 per student per year, but the latest pricing along with institutional licenses and potential discounts should be discussed directly with Turnitin sales managers, who can be contacted through the Turnitin.com website.

How can I use Turnitin in the classroom?

Turnitin is compatible with popular learning management systems akin to Canvas and Blackboard, which makes it easily accessible for educators and students. Usage guides in Canvas and Blackboard offer step-by-step guidelines for using Turnitin within the systems. Here are a few ways Turnitin can be used in the classroom:

1. *Detect Plagiarism.* An obvious use of Turnitin is plagiarism detection. Educators are charged with upholding academic standards, which includes ensuring the originality of students' written work. However, checking each student's paper for plagiarized content can be an exhausting, if not impossible, task. Turnitin is an efficient means of flagging the unoriginal content, which the instructor can

simply view to determine if plagiarism occurred. It is fair to assume that sometimes students may be unaware that their written work constitutes plagiarism. To prevent students from claiming plagiarism ignorance, instructors can encourage students to upload drafts of their papers and examine Turnitin's originality report to view content that should be revised before submitting the final paper. This approach functions as a teachable moment by enabling students to see firsthand the extent to which their work is either plagiarized or original.

2. *Prevent Plagiarism.* An old saying alleges that an inch of prevention is better than a pound of cure. In terms of plagiarism, the best way to cure it is to prevent it from occurring. When students know that their papers will be uploaded to Turnitin and that penalties will be applied to plagiarized content, students are less likely to attempt cutting and pasting their way through an assignment and, instead, focus more on authentic learning. Hence, Turnitin functions as a powerful deterrent of plagiarism. By preventing plagiarism before it occurs, faculty empower students to think critically, produce original writings, and maintain high levels of academic integrity.
3. *New Instructor and Graduate Teaching Assistant Training.* Entering the classroom as a novice instructor can be a stressful experience, especially for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) who must mitigate the dialectical tension of balancing dual roles as graduate student and instructor. Toward this end, many programs

have implemented either GTA training workshops or instructional communication courses, where new or would-be teachers can receive important pedagogical training. To help prepare new teachers for assessing students' written content and curbing plagiarism, GTA workshops and instructional communication courses should be used to not only train enrollees on how to use Turnitin, but to stress the importance of having student papers submitted through Turnitin. An early introduction to Turnitin can assist new instructors with student assessment and, therefore, help alleviate some uncertainty novice teachers may face as instructional managers.

4. *Classroom Lectures and Discussions on Ethics.* Essentially all communication courses devote at least one lecture or discussion to ethical behaviors. Teachers are constantly searching for instructional aids to enhance student comprehension and complement course readings. During classroom lectures or discussions on ethics, instructors can use Turnitin as an instructional aid, whereby the instructor illustrates how the digital tool flags content. The instructor can then engage the class in a discussion about proper citations and the importance of creating original work to avoid the unethical act of plagiarism.

Conclusion

In today's technological world, more than half of students have confessed to some form of cheating on the Internet, with most cases involving copying text and

submitting it as original work. While plagiarism can compromise students' academic integrity, Turnitin is a digital tool that easily flags content that matches other sources. Turnitin not only saves instructors valuable time in detecting plagiarism, it enhances students' abilities to think critically, generate creative ideas, and uphold intellectual standards of excellence.