

## Using Turnitin™ formatively: good practice guidelines for Brookes teachers

The Turnitin licence allows the University to use the text matching tool, Turnitin™, in a wide range of ways. Brookes will continue to use it as a screening tool for identifying copied text in students' work that could indicate plagiarism in line with the central university project to introduce Turnitin use for all students as a regular part of their course experience. This guide covers good practice recommendations for teachers **using Turnitin formatively** with students.

The tool can provide students with feedback on their writing before final submission as a way of reinforcing teaching, checking students' understanding of academic writing requirements and, for some students, alerting them to the need to 'try harder' to adopt recommended writing strategies. For a few students, seeing their own digital report is often the moment when all the talk about 'using sources' or 'writing in your own words' comes clear.

### Terminology

*Originality Report:* The name given for the summarised findings of Turnitin searches on all Turnitin databases — though it could be more accurately termed a *Similarity Report*. The Originality Report shows an overall percentage (i.e. for the text as a whole) of how much of the student's text matches that held by Turnitin. The report lists sources where matches were found in rank order of their percentage contribution to the overall percentage. It also shows in a side-by-side, colour-coded report how each of the matching text segments were used in the student's text compared to how it appeared in the database of sources.

*Submission:* When the student uploads the work to the Turnitin site. This is usually done through Brookes Virtual.

### Developing Good Practice in formative use

Over the years, as more and more teachers use Turnitin for feedback, a few issues have emerged as key to getting the best out formative use. At the end of this guide, you will find further reading and specific studies, some done by Brookes staff, which underpin the good practice suggestions below.

#### 1. Use formative feedback from Turnitin as one element in a teaching strategy designed to support students' academic writing skills.

A test run through Turnitin is no substitute for all the careful teaching and feedback which is needed to develop students' academic writing skills. You will also need to make sure students learn what is expected in a specific type of text or writing assignment.

#### 2. Control and manage the submission of draft texts.

This means managing:

##### 2.1 The time frame in which students' work is submitted.

The Brookes Virtual upload facility allows teachers to set the dates for draft submission. For guidance on how to do this, go to <https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/BVhelp/Turnitin>.

Set a start date for the draft submission that is well before the final submission date, to ensure students will have time to review and act upon any feedback. Set an end date for draft submission to stop students from delaying until just before the submission. Students who delay are unlikely to have the time or inclination to use the submission as a learning event and may be simply checking the document is 'clean enough' to hand in.

Recommendations like these about setting dates might seem to support beliefs that some teachers hold about formative use teaching students to cheat. There is little evidence to support this claim and indeed, determined cheaters can and do find ways to elude or avoid the text matching capabilities of the tool. A Brookes study cited below by Davis and Carroll (2009) specifically investigated whether an increase in cheating behaviour was evident. None was — though in one case, the student's subsequent performance was so very much better that the possibility was investigated that feedback had prompted him to commission someone else to write subsequent versions; it was unproven.

## 2.2 The delay in returning Originality Reports

The Turnitin tool typically returns an Originality report within minutes (except at times of high volume traffic such as the end of term when delays can be up to 12 hours in the worst case). However, a teacher can specify when reports are returned, perhaps choosing a date to coincide with a planned review event such as a tutorial. This would prevent students from unsupervised access before this date.

## 2.3 The number of times a student can submit work

Most teachers think that one draft is sufficient. Setting the class page to allow one submission will mean that students cannot alter text and resubmit 'to make the colour go away' as many teachers fear might happen with formative access.

## 3. Create a mechanism for supervised analysis and review of students' formative Originality Reports.

This is probably the most important point to make in this document. Students who interpret their own reports often either ignore or misinterpret the feedback. For example, they may assume their task is to reduce the percentage "score" to zero. Also, when students look at their own reports, they often miss useful additional information such as

- the nature of the sources they are using (are they authoritative? Are they skillfully selected?)
- over-reliance on a small number of sources (for example, 20% of the copying from one source is bad practice *per se* but it may also be unacceptable to rely so heavily on any one source)
- the way in which a paraphrase is constructed (has the student used 'find and replace' instead of rewriting the ideas?)

and so on.

#### 4. When reviewing reports with students, focus on the key messages.

Make sure you identify instances and examples of where students have used sources correctly — look at text which is not highlighted and point out to the student why this might have been “overlooked” by a text matching tool. Usually, it is because this section is the student’s own writing. However, be careful since Turnitin cannot identify matching text outside of its (albeit extensive) databases. This means you may identify text which contains signs of not being authored by the student yet which has not been highlighted. This unoriginal but uncited text, too, needs to be drawn to students’ attention if you notice it during the tutorial. No student should be left to assume that text that is NOT highlighted is necessarily fine. The teacher, after all, is not reading the drafts and since reading is by far the most effective way of identifying unoriginal text, unmatched text could remain an issue.

It is likely that, even if you do manage to organise 1:1 discussions with students, this will be brief. Make sure the students are referred to subsequent places for more information and guidance rather than, for example, using tutorial time to teach specific skills such as paraphrasing or formatting a citation.

Key messages might be:

**4.1 What sites were found.** Is the student using authoritative, credible sources?

**4.2 How much text was matched from each site.** Has any one site been ‘over-used’?

**4.3 Where students have failed to use recognised signals** for verbatim use of others’ text.

**4.4 How students’ cited** others’ ideas and words. Was it in line with acceptable practice?

#### **4.5 Paraphrasing strategies**

A few draft texts will show serious breaches of the regulations governing submission of assessed work. This might include so-called ‘patch writing’ where students string together short extracts from a range of sources, perhaps adding a few words to create a more or less coherent text. This type of writing shows up particularly well on a Turnitin Originality report and the colourful display often makes students realise how they are ‘writing’ (sic). However, patch writing tends to be a deeply ingrained strategy and short tutorials usually cannot alter this approach to writing — do refer the student for additional help. One possible referral is to Upgrade or, if the faculty supports a study tutor, try that route.

#### 5. Make the consequences of not acting on formative feedback clear to the student.

Breaches of the academic regulations that are identified at this stage must be corrected before submission — this is not a suggestion but rather, a requirement under University regulations. In fact, because the student has been given this formative chance, the consequences of **not** correcting breaches and more importantly, of not learning how to create a final version correctly, will be more severe. Any breaches cannot be deemed to be the result of misunderstanding or misuse but instead, are likely to be considered as misconduct.

Formative use of Turnitin can show other breaches such as fabrication of dates or data; resubmission of work by, for example, matching the draft text with student work already in the Turnitin database; and deliberate attempts to deceive such as altering the original text in ways to make the new version seem more relevant, recent etc. The Brookes regulations allow work at draft stage to be referred to an ACO if there is evidence of serious fraud or deception such as a student who is found to be paying someone to write their dissertation, chapter by chapter, and the supervisor recognises this during tutorials. It would be unusual to report any findings from formative use but where the teacher is unsure, discussion with a Faculty ACO is advised.

## **A final word**

Often, suggesting formative use of Turnitin triggers strong reactions about 'teaching them to cheat' or threatening later detection strategies. The latter objection is easily addressed by using the strategies above since draft submissions are not entered in the permanent Turnitin databases. This means draft submission does not compromise later checks.

The objection about 'teaching to cheat' is more difficult to resolve. In general, teachers who have used Turnitin formatively say the benefits outweigh concerns and that 'teaching to cheat' is largely hypothetical. The more cynical then list the many ways that determined cheaters already evade text matching tools and point to the real limitations of a tool that cannot deal with commissioned work, with translations, with copying from protected sites, and which only identifies a fraction of the possible matches.

It seems likely that a pedagogic approach, supplementing but not replacing skills teaching and other means of identifying plagiarised work, will continue to be useful. Brookes will continue to evaluate and monitor this type of use.

Jude Carroll, 2009  
Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development

