Deterring and Detecting Plagiarism
with Turnitin.com

A Tip Sheet from
Center for Educational Resources

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Introduction

Recent articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and academic journals suggest that academic dishonesty is increasing on many college and university campuses. A number of institutions are turning to software detection services such as *Turnitin.com* to help faculty deter and detect plagiarism. *Turnitin.com* can help detect instances of plagiarism by identifying potentially plagiarized passages from publicly available Internet sources and ProQuest databases and from unpublished sources, including other student papers, that have been submitted to its database. It is not a stand-alone solution to the problem of academic dishonesty, however, and the software has certain limitations; for instance:

- *Turnitin.com* does not provide a judgment of plagiarism; it provides data. It uses a set of algorithms to match text and, based on the results, produces an "originality report" that shows the percentage of similar text and the source(s) of the match. But faculty must review and interpret the report.

- The software does not differentiate between passages that are properly quoted and cited and those that are not – a match is a match. Again, faculty must review.

- *Turnitin* cannot detect ideas taken from a source, and it can miss extensive paraphrase or summary.

- It currently does not have the ability to check papers against all subscription-based databases.

- It cannot identify sources such as textbooks that are not available online or papers purchased from term-paper mills, unless those papers are already part of its database. Nor can it detect online material such as Internet discussion groups/list serves; online encyclopedias; or translated texts, diagrams, pictures and graphs – unless those materials have become part of the Internet.

In other words, *Turnitin.com* can be useful to faculty in detecting Internet-based plagiarism, and it is far more efficient than Google, but it is not comprehensive. The originality report constitutes data; it is not a clear diagnosis of plagiarism or not-plagiarism. Faculty must interpret the report and draw their own conclusions.

Faculty should also be aware that when student papers are submitted to the *Turnitin* database, *Turnitin* retains those papers in its database. This is the most controversial aspect of the *Turnitin* service. Some have viewed this practice as a

violation of student intellectual-property rights, although the company has consistently won legal challenges on this point, for two main reasons: it never publishes student papers, and students retain full rights to and ownership of their papers. *Turnitin* also offers the option of checking student papers only against ProQuest databases and other publicly available Internet sources, in which case the papers are not retained in the *Turnitin* database.

Implementation – Options for Consideration

Faculty Considerations

- *Statement in syllabus* – It is recommended that faculty inform students early in the course that they will be using *Turnitin.com.* Some schools provide faculty with a statement to include in the syllabus, while others leave it up to individual faculty members to compose their own statements. In either case, faculty should be sensitive to the possibility that students may feel distrusted if *Turnitin* is used without adequate discussion.

- *Use of aliases when submitting papers* – Because papers are permanently stored in the *Turnitin* database once submitted, it is a good idea to remove all references to student identification before papers are submitted. Some instructors even choose to assign aliases when submitting student papers. It is important to remind students not to include their social security numbers, emails, or other IDs on their papers.

- *Faculty or student paper submission* - Some instructors have students submit their own papers; others prefer to submit all student papers themselves.

- *Access to originality report* – Instructors can choose to be the only ones to receive students' "originality reports," or they can choose to have students receive the reports as well.

- *Plagiarism policy* – Instructors should consider the distinction, if any, between identifying student plagiarism through *Turnitin* and identifying it through more traditional means such as Google or by tracking down the sources themselves. They should also be aware of the university policies on student plagiarism and the process for handling instances of plagiarism.

University Considerations

- *Policy for Turnitin use* – Departments may decide to use *Turnitin* independent of one another. And within each department, instructors may plan to use the software only occasionally, on an as-needed basis, or they may opt to submit all student papers to *Turnitin.* While different departments would, of course, use *Turnitin* differently, and instructors within departments would also differ in how they use the software, if at all, such differences may need to be explained in academic terms.

- *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)* – *Turnitin* argues that its software does not conflict with FERPA because papers submitted to its database are not considered a part of students' records at the time of submission. Also, students don't have to use their names. Debate on this point continues, however.

- *Option for Turnitin to retain papers temporarily* – The university may be able to investigate a contractual option for *Turnitin* to hold student papers for a set period of time rather than indefinitely.

- *Product availability and training* – Training for interested faculty who wish to establish class accounts for *Turnitin.com* will be available, on days and times to be arranged, through the Center for Educational Resources. Interested faculty should check the CER website (http://www.cer.jhu.edu/turnitin/) for the schedule of *Turnitin* training sessions. Individual consultations can be arranged if the sessions conflict with faculty schedules; information on how to request such consultations is on the website.

Summary

Turnitin.com is analogous to such software features as spell check and grammar check within word-processing environments – they are invaluable tools for writers, but they do not eliminate the need for proofreading. Similarly, *Turnitin.com* can be useful in deterring and detecting plagiarism, but it is not the single solution to the problem. Controlling plagiarism requires a comprehensive approach that includes a strong university ethics policy, forceful detection, and thorough, ongoing instruction in what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it.

Resources

Academic Ethics for Undergraduates: A Guide for Students, Professors, and the Community.
This booklet is distributed by the Office of Academic Advising and the Undergraduate Academic Ethics Board and is available online at:
http://www.jhu.edu/~advising/ethics.html

Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices
http://www.wpacouncil.org

Undergraduate Academic Ethics Board

http://ethics.jhu.edu

Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students by Gordon Harvey

This booklet is distributed to incoming freshmen by the Offices of Academic

Advising and the Dean of Student Life.

References

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