

## Using Turnitin effectively: building integrity into your writing



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## Introduction [Editor: Figure numbering to be corrected once structure confirmed.]

Welcome to this short course on using Turnitin formatively. This course is designed for students, particularly those who are new to university study or returning to academic work after a break. It will also be useful for anyone in higher education who wishes to understand how Turnitin can be used to develop good academic practice, strengthen writing skills, and ensure that all assessed work is their own.

This course builds on the OpenLearn course

[All my own work: exploring academic integrity](#) and the resources in the [Good Academic Practice collection](#), and will help you to take the next step: it focuses specifically on Turnitin and how it can be used to strengthen your writing and your confidence in academic integrity.

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- explain what Turnitin is and how it supports academic integrity
- interpret a Turnitin Similarity Report and identify areas for improvement
- use Turnitin formatively to develop your academic writing before final submission
- recognise the value of using Turnitin as a positive and constructive learning tool.

# 1 What is Turnitin?

Turnitin is a text-matching software tool used by many educational institutions to scan submitted student assessments against a database of internet sources, published works, and previously submitted student papers. It can also be used to help you check your writing before you hand in your assignments.

When you upload your work to the Turnitin draft link on your assessment tab, it creates a report (see Figure 1) that shows where your writing is like books, websites, or other students' work. This doesn't mean you've done something wrong – instead, it's there to help you see if you've used your sources properly. Turnitin's main function is to highlight instances of textual similarity—not to decide whether plagiarism (or misconduct) has occurred.

[Editor: Figure 1 A Turnitin report]

Using Turnitin formatively allows you to engage with your writing process early and regularly, rather than viewing similarity checks as purely a punishment or as evidence of plagiarism. For example, submitting drafts for Turnitin gives you access to a similarity report (or originality report) that identifies matched text and sources and can guide you in refining citation, paraphrasing and referencing before final submission, promoting academic writing skill development.

Research also shows that when Turnitin is used as a developmental tool, your perceptions shift: you can use it as a learning tool rather than simply a plagiarism detector (Oldham, 2025). This approach supports the broader benefits of formative assessment — enhancing understanding, scaffolding performance, and empowering you to self-regulate learning (Turnitin, 2024). By enabling safe revision cycles, you can correct misconceptions, improve academic integrity habits and reduce the possibility of misconduct. The feedback loop created by formative Turnitin use thus fosters academic confidence, stronger writing practices and enables you to have more choice and responsibility for your learning and your writing.

## 2 Turnitin myths

It's important to clear up some myths about Turnitin: [Editor: To be made interactive - flashcard style?]

- **Myth:** Turnitin decides if you have plagiarised.  
**Fact:** Turnitin only highlights similarities. Students, lecturers and academic staff must interpret the report in context—considering referencing, quotations, templates that have been permitted and common phrases, nouns and policy titles.
- **Myth:** A high percentage on Turnitin always means misconduct.  
**Fact:** The similarity index (a percentage) is not a 'plagiarism score' or judgement—rather, it is a signal indicating how much of the student text matches existing sources. A high percentage could reflect correct use of quotations and references.
- **Myth:** A low percentage on Turnitin always means your work has integrity.  
**Fact:** A low percentage could still misrepresent ideas or omit references.
- **Myth:** Turnitin is only used to 'catch' cheats.  
**Fact:** Turnitin does much more than identify plagiarism. When used formatively for assessments, Turnitin is a feedback tool that helps you to:
  - check your use of sources
  - improve your paraphrasing and referencing
  - build confidence in your own academic voice
  - strengthen the integrity of your work before final submission.

By looking at the report, you can spot places where you might need to add a reference, change your wording, or improve your paraphrasing. Using Turnitin in this way gives you the chance to practise and make improvements, so your final work is stronger and shows your own voice clearly.

In the next section you will look more closely at a Turnitin report and what it shows you.

## 3 What does a Turnitin report look like?

When you open your report, you will see a percentage, matched sources with a smaller percentage on the right of the report, and corresponding highlighted matches in the main body of your assessment submission on the left. An example is shown in Figure 2.

[Editor: Figure 2 A Turnitin report]

To access the list of sources that Turnitin has matched to your assessment, you need to click on the number listed in the tools block in the centre of your report.

[Editor: Figure 3 The tools block in the centre of your report]

It is important that you explore these buttons and tools so that you familiarise yourself with the report. There are additional videos and blogs that might help you on the [Turnitin website](#).

After opening up the list of sources matched to your work, you can click on each to take you to the website or publication that your work has been matched to.

If the match is to another student, you will not be shown the other students work, but you should still check the text in your own document that has been highlighted.

In Figure 4, you can see three matches to student papers (these will not be shown to you) and one match to a website (#3). If you click on that link, you will be taken to the website where you will see the text matching.

[Editor: Figure 4]

In your report, all of these matches should be checked to ensure you have cited, referenced and paraphrased successfully. In the next section you will learn how to understand your similarity report in more detail.

## 4 Understanding the similarity report

When you upload a draft to Turnitin, it produces a similarity report. This highlights parts of your work that are similar to other sources in its database.

The screenshot below shows part of a Turnitin report. In this example, 31% of this student's word count has been matched to sources other than this assessment, such as webpages and module materials.

Number 1 is a match to another student's submission, number 2 is a 7% match to module materials and number 3 is a match to a webpage.

[Editor: FIGURE]

Remember, the similarity percentage is not a plagiarism score. The percentage score is a simple calculation between the assessment word count and the number of words that have been matched. For example, if the assessment word count is 1000 words and your match is 100 words, it will show on the Turnitin report as 10%. What matters is how you interpret the report. Here, we'll break down how the report above could be interpreted and solutions you could take.

- Number 1 has been highlighted in red and matches another student's work that has previously been submitted to Turnitin. The student who is matched also studies with the Open University.  
The problem: this section is poorly paraphrased.  
The solution: try to use your own words and the three steps for easy paraphrasing (see Section 7 of course).
- Number 2 is matched to the module materials, but it also contains the title of a document that is frequently cited in education, health and other courses at the Open University.  
The problem: this section is not quoted and is not paraphrased and so it has been matched to content from the module materials.  
The solution: this section should be identified as a direct quotation from the module materials even though the name of the policy document cannot be changed. There should be a citation for this section.
- Number 3 is matched to an internet website which could be referenced and cited correctly. If the website has been acknowledged you won't need to change anything in your work.

Now have a go at interpreting a Turnitin report yourself in Activity 1.

### Activity 1 Interpreting a Turnitin report

Look at [Editor: Figure X] which shows a similarity report from Turnitin. Review each match and identify which you would need to correct and which are acceptable. What changes would you need to make?

[Editor: Figure X]

*Provide your answer...*

.....

## Discussion

[Editor: Is this discussing [www.slacpa.org](http://www.slacpa.org)?] Number 1 is matched to a webpage and needs urgent attention. This is neither paraphrased nor quoted as a direct quotation with a citation. [Editor: Add in a solution as feedback?]

[Editor: Which section is this referring to? Could feedback for Numbers 2,3,4 be added even if to say no action needed?] This section also needs attention though it is not highlighted in the image. Try to ensure that you look at matches such as essay mills and online AI examples to ensure that your work is accurately cited, your references are accurate and that you have sufficiently paraphrased.

[Editor: Move this sentence to Academic conduct vs integrity section. It's quite standalone here, so don't think it holds as much weight as it could/should. ] Only use trusted sources and ensure you use module materials with integrity. [Editor: Use both these examples/ images that follow as part of the activity for learners to identify the problem and solutions? Alternatively move to above activity as another example for them to follow?]

[Editor: Figure X ] [Editor: Is this a screenshot from Turnitin? Does it need explaining why the view is different?]

Problem: the student has copied and pasted the text and then tried to change some of the words to make the text appear unique.

Solution: this is a form of misconduct and instead of using copy and paste, the student should be using the 3-step-paraphrasing technique that would show better understanding of the source.

[Editor: Figure X ]

Problem: this student has taken multiple different sources and tried to fit them together into a single paragraph. There is no citation and no indication of direct quotation.

Solution: this student needs to effectively paraphrase the three sources and write in their own unique voice to answer the assessment question. This is a form of misconduct.

Now you know how to interpret a similarity report, in the next section you will learn how to use Turnitin effectively using a step-by-step guide.

## 5 A step-by-step guide to Turnitin

When you open your Turnitin report, start by remembering that it is a learning tool, not a judgement or a 'plagiarism score'. The overall percentage does not tell you whether there is a problem. What matters is understanding where the matches appear, why they are there, and what you may need to revise.

Follow these six steps to help you use Turnitin effectively.

1. Submit your draft and collect your report. The link to submit your draft assessment will be made available to you on the Assessment Tab of your module. To submit a draft assessment you simply need to click on this link and follow the instructions. It will be similar to attaching a document to an email.

[Editor: Figure]

2. To open your report you can click on the link or click on the coloured box near the similarity score and this will open up your report.

[Editor: Figure 3 Similarity score]

This will open the Turnitin viewer, where your writing is shown in the main window and the list of matched sources appears on the right-hand side. At this stage, ignore the large percentage. Instead, click through each individual match to see the highlighted sections in your work.

[Editor: Figure 4 Matched sources appear on the right-hand side]

3. Check each match by clicking on the hyperlinks on the right-hand side of your report. When you click on the link it will take you to the corresponding original source online (#2 in Figure 4 for example will take you to the Course Hero page online).

As you review each match (indicated by each number), ask yourself whether the highlighted wording genuinely belongs to you. Sometimes the match is harmless—for example, it could be your reference list, a template, or a commonly used academic phrase. Other matches, however, may show where you have used someone else's ideas or wording. If the text is almost identical to the original source and you have not cited it, or if you intended to paraphrase but the structure still mirrors the original closely, you need to revise that section.

[Editor: Figure 5] Your writing will be highlighted where matches have occurred

Figure 5 shows an example of where paraphrasing has been ineffective, and citations are missing throughout each coloured section. This section would need to be revised. You do not want to see lots of block highlighting. There should also be more citations because a citation tells your reader where you got your information from and what your source is.

4. As you revise your work, think carefully about where you should place citations and references. Every time you use another person's idea, whether you quote directly or paraphrase, you must include a citation. Quotes need quotation marks and an in-text citation immediately afterwards. Paraphrased ideas should be expressed fully in your own wording and structure, followed by a citation at the end of the sentence or section. If you use data, images or figures, reference them in the caption. At the end of your assignment, make sure your reference list accurately includes every source you cited, formatted consistently and in alphabetical order.
5. When Turnitin shows an issue, decide whether you need to quote or paraphrase. If it is a direct quote, keep the exact words, add quotation marks and include a citation with a page number if available. If you intended to paraphrase, close the original source, rewrite the idea in your own words, then compare afterwards to ensure it is genuinely different. Add the appropriate citation and update your reference list.

6. Finally, re-read your entire assignment to ensure the writing flows and reflects your own understanding. If your module allows resubmissions, upload a revised draft to Turnitin to check that the problematic matches have been addressed. A good final check is to make sure you can explain every idea in your work without looking at your sources. If something still feels unclear, speak with your tutor—they are there to help you use Turnitin confidently and ethically.

### **Plagiarism and collusion**

Turnitin can also reveal two types of issues: plagiarism and collusion. Plagiarism typically appears when your work contains long passages that match published sources such as journal articles, websites or textbooks, without proper citation or quotation marks. These blocks often indicate patchwriting, copy-and-paste work, or missing references. Collusion looks different: here the match is usually to a 'submitted paper' or another student's work. Large similarities with another student's assignment—whether from your module or elsewhere—suggest unauthorised collaboration or sharing of work. Even if the wording has been lightly changed, the structure and sequence often give collusion away.

## 6 Using Turnitin feedback to improve writing

Turnitin feedback is provided through the generation of the similarity report and is most powerful when it is part of your drafting and redrafting process. Rather than waiting until the final submission, you can submit a draft, study the report, make improvements, and resubmit. At the Open University you can submit a draft as many times as you want to, but this is only useful if the report is analysed each time. You will receive a report swiftly unless the Turnitin system is very busy so be patient and keep checking.

Good academic writing with accurate citations and referencing takes practice. The better you understand what you are reading, the better you will be at writing about it. It can sometimes help to speak to friends and family who might not know about the subject matter you are learning about because when you try and explain the subject and the content you will be naturally paraphrasing and taking mental notes.

[Editor: Figure X] shows the three steps to take for better paraphrasing.

[Editor: Figure X Paraphrasing]

Turnitin will show you where you've:

- missed a citation
- forgotten quotation marks
- copied wording accidentally and forgotten to identify it.

What to do: add the missing in-text citation or use quotation marks where needed. Make sure your reference list matches the sources you actually used.

You should be keeping an ongoing list of sources, or if you are using module materials you need to keep a note of the section, unit and week so that you can tell your reader where your source can be located.

[Editor: Figure X]

If Turnitin shows large chunks of your work match sources (like the image above), it means you are relying too heavily on other people's words.

What to do: summarise ideas in your own words and explain them as you understand them. This strengthens your academic voice.

[Editor: Figure X]

If your module allows multiple draft submissions, so you can check your report like the one above, use this to:

- check your paraphrasing
- check your referencing
- make improvements before your final submission.

What to do: submit an early draft to Turnitin, fix the highlighted issues, then submit a revised version

### Activity 2 Rewrite challenge

Read the sentence below and then rewrite it using your own words.

Original text: 'Turnitin is widely used by universities to promote academic integrity.'

.....

#### Discussion

For example: 'Turnitin is software that many universities use to help students learn about academic integrity'.

## 7 Developing good habits with Turnitin

Turnitin works best when it's part of your regular study habits. Submit drafts early, reflect on results, ask for help, and think long term.

Reflection: write down three things you will do to build good academic habits with Turnitin.

*Provide your answer...*

.....

### Discussion

Examples:

- Submit drafts one week before the deadline.
- Check every highlighted section carefully.
- Keep a record of sources while writing.

## 8 Academic conduct versus academic integrity

There is a difference between academic integrity and academic conduct. However, you might hear them used interchangeably or in specific contexts. Here you will look at the subtle differences between the two.

[Editor: Academic conduct/integrity interactive - How you behave when you are writing your assessment, is you demonstrating your conduct. How you approach your assessment and how you intend to create your assessment, will demonstrate your integrity.]

It is very important that you are honest about your assessments and that the work you submit is your own.

When we talk about student behaviours we mean the activities and actions that you undertake just before you start an assessment and during your assessment. For example, one student shared that when they start an assessment they clear their desk area (action), light a candle (action), and check they have all the stationery they need (action). They then start their assessment by reading through their notes and highlighting sentences and sections they want to use (activity) before taking a fresh page and writing a paraphrased page of notes (activity). They make sure that they include citations throughout their new notes to ensure they know where the ideas came from.

Reflection: can you list any of your behaviours when you start writing an assessment?

*Provide your answer...*

### Answer

Positive student behaviours can include:

- Taking ownership of the assessment content and being an original author
- Putting time into planning and managing time before writing a first draft
- Reading and interpreting the assessment brief
- Using Turnitin formatively for drafts
- Engaging with support and tutorials

### 8.1 Building a culture of integrity

Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT or Bard can support your learning. They can explain concepts or generate practice questions, but they must be used ethically.

Appropriate uses of such tools include: brainstorming, planning and simplifying concepts. Examples of misuse include: submitting AI text as your own, copying without referencing and bypassing learning.

Integrity is not just about avoiding plagiarism. It is about building honest, responsible, and respectful habits. Open University research shows early engagement with Turnitin reduces referrals and improves outcomes.

A culture of integrity is built through choices: time management, careful notetaking, critical thinking, seeking help early, and valuing learning as much as grades.

### Activity 3 Integrity pledge

Write an integrity pledge for yourself using the following as prompts:

- One habit you will commit to.
- One skill you want to improve.
- One reason integrity matters to you.

*Provide your answer...*

## 9 It's your education

Now it's time to put everything you've learnt in this course into practice. So far you have learned what to do with each of the matches that your Turnitin report gives you before you submit your work.

You have seen examples of coloured patterns that show you where you need to apply additional work to make all of your work acceptable. Ensure you check these carefully and use Cite them Right [Editor: Does this need to be more generic if learner is not currently tuding with OU and is unfamiliar with Clte them Right]in the library if you are unsure what you need to do.

### Activity 4 Submit, analyse, improve

1. Write a short essay draft on a topic of your choosing (500 words)
2. Submit your draft to Turnitin
3. Review your similarity report
4. Reflect:
  - What was your similarity score and how do you feel about it?
  - Which matches are acceptable?
  - Which matches need revision?
  - What changes will you make?

*Provide your answer...*

## Conclusion

This course is just the beginning of a positive relationship between you and the use of Turnitin as you build a culture of integrity around yourself. Turnitin is not there to trip you up or to create fear, it is a very simple tool that can help you to see where you need improvement, before you submit any assessment.

[Editor: Make slightly less specific - if someone isn't studying with the OU , e.g.]At The Open University our goal is to provide education first and offer you many different ways to achieve your educational goals. We do not want you or anyone else to be worried about academic integrity or be fearful when you submit your work for marking.

Remember:

- Use Turnitin frequently
- Ask for help if you need it
- Attend as many academic integrity sessions as you can and look for group study skills tutorials to attend
- Understand that you are learning and mistakes are part of the learning process. Never stop learning and soon you will feel confident about academic integrity every time you submit your work

Congratulations on completing this course!

## Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Chelle Oldham.

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