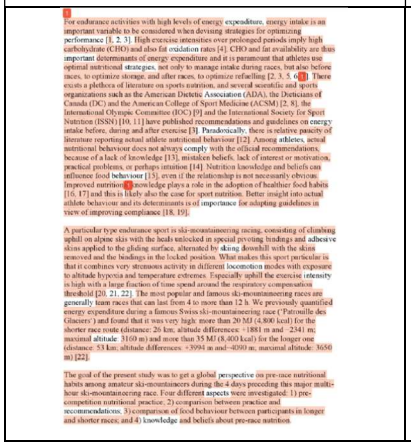
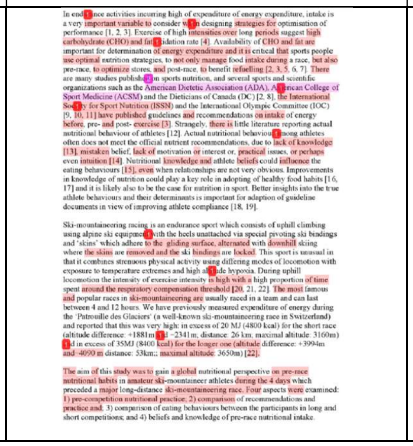
Turnitin Guidance & Rationale

Turnitin identifies similarities between the text of submitted work and the text of other sources accessible via the internet.

Course teams and markers can use Turnitin reports to help identify whether academic misconduct such as plagiarism or collusion might have occurred. This percentage similarity value generated by Turnitin can give an initial indication that problems might exist within a piece of work and prompt staff to investigate further; this score is never used in isolation as any kind of criterion. Most importantly Turnitin reports are examined by academic staff who then make an academic decision about the overall nature and extent of any similarities.

The nature of the similarities may take various forms, including not limited to the following examples showing patterns of similarity:

Continuous, uninterrupted sequences of words which are identical to those in another source	Broken sequences of words which follow a similar pattern to those In another source	Multiple sequences of text derived from different sources are all combined together in a 'patchwork'
		

1) How might similarities occur?

If text is simply copied and pasted then **continuous sequences** of words would be highlighted in Turnitin.

If text is copied, pasted and then superficially altered, e.g. by substituting some of the words, then **broken sequences** of words would be highlighted in Turnitin.

If mistakes are made during the note-taking process this can result in inadvertent similarities. Whether notes are handwritten or taken using copy and paste, they run the risk of accidentally transferring verbatim text from the source publications into submitted student work. Issues with note-taking have caught out many experienced academics, for example:

- https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/19/lewis-wolpert-sorry-using-others-work

If there is not enough time to research, read and understand a topic then it is impossible to write about it meaningfully in your own words. One becomes forced to be more reliant on the form of words used by others resulting in similarities and plagiarism.

2) Are similarities in Turnitin a problem?

Turnitin does not identify plagiarism, it only identifies areas of similarity which then require interpretation by academic members of staff - there is no % ‘score’ to ‘aim for’.

Some similarities are quite legitimate and perhaps inevitable in some assessments; for example use of datasets or text from a questionnaire. While these are automatically identified by Turnitin they will be always be interpreted from an academic perspective by the course team who are aware of the nature of the assessment.

Copied text can be legitimately used when it is a "direct quotation". There is no problem here as long as quotations are both set in quotation marks AND referenced correctly (i.e. citation should include page number where available, and enough information given in citation and reference list to uniquely identify the source).

Similarities with no legitimate explanation, could be indicative of potential academic misconduct.

Copied text not enclosed in “quotation marks” could be considered as plagiarised; this would be the case even if referenced correctly. Accidentally omitting quotation marks produces text which cannot distinguished from plagiarised text. This is really important to appreciate as the university does not distinguish intentional or unintentional plagiarism.

Closely paraphrased text can also be considered plagiarism, even if referenced correctly. This practice can involves copying text and ‘tweaking’ the words (e.g. amending their order, changing abbreviations, and substituting words). Proper paraphrasing means summarising in your own words with sentences written from scratch, and with a corresponding reference(s).

Most academic disciplines and subject areas have recognised stock phrases and sequences of words which cannot logically be re-worded and should remain intact. For example the phrases “*The constitution of the United States of America*.”

The extent of similarity with other sources can be more extensive than the basic highlighting of Turnitin suggests.

The sources identified by Turnitin may not be the only place that the material can be found – for example Turnitin may identify Wikipedia as the source, although the material may also be published elsewhere.

Academic judgements about academic misconduct can draw on any information, not just that generated by Turnitin.

Not all similarities or instances of plagiarism are identified by Turnitin. Academic staff are not restricted to using Turnitin to identify issues in written work.

3) How might similarities be avoided?

In your own words…
All students must develop the ability write in English in their own words ('own voice'), based on their own understanding, gained from reading the sources which they have consulted directly and referenced correctly. When writing in this was the probability of writing sequences of words matching other sources to an extent that is identifiable as a problem by Turnitin is vanishingly small.

Direct quotations…
Copied text can be used when it is a "direct quotation", both set in quotation marks AND referenced correctly. From an academic perspective it is best practice to use direct quotations sparingly in order to demonstrate your understanding - they should never dominate the writing.

Careful Note-taking…
Take great care when making notes. People use different approaches to note-taking including handwritten and electronic processes. Whichever are used we strongly recommend that summarised notes are taken in a way that involves writing in one's own words rather than copying sequences of words from sources. Doing this offers both intellectual benefit and it reduces the chance of accidental transfer of text resulting in plagiarism.

Good Time management…
Make sure you have enough time to read and understand your sources. Having a clear understanding facilitates the ability of people to write in their own words.

4) Advice for Course Teams

Assessment design and clear information for students is key to reducing the chance of academic misconduct but can never eliminate this. Therefore prevention and detection measures implemented together offer the best chance of both discouraging academic misconduct and protecting academic standards.

With regard to detection, the default position should be that use of Turnitin be considered standard practice whenever text-based documents are submitted online for summative assessment (coursework or online remote assessments).

Occasionally there may be specific items of assessment for which Turnitin use is not possible for technical reasons or not appropriate for pedagogical reasons. If course teams want to opt out of using Turnitin for a specific item of assessment, then they should present a technical argument or a pedagogical argument as to why it is inappropriate, and what measures are proposed to ensure that academic integrity is maintained. This will involve considering the potential vulnerability to academic

misconduct – intentional or unintentional. The SAMO for the school concerned will be able to advise.

Information about Turnitin (including a sample statement for students) is available on the Information Services website: https://edin.ac/35xlqMN

Students must be informed about the use of Turnitin, and made aware of the fact that their work will be stored in the database

Students should be aware that their intellectual property rights remain unchanged when they use Turnitin to submit work. Turnitin does not claim ownership of students' work; it is still 100% the student's property.

Students could have some opportunity to examine Turnitin reports of their own writing for formative use in order that they can understand how it functions in relation to their own writing and academic practice.

Students should never be able to access the Turnitin report of any summative assessment before the submission deadline if a re-submission is still possible. The opportunity to 'View before submission' opens a route which allowing reliance on poor writing practices; at worst it allows one to identify and cover up evidence of underlying plagiarism. The need to 'View before submission' is completely superfluous when the steps in (3) above are adhered to and it is these that staff should be promoting the value to students.

Course teams must agree whose responsibility it is to check Turnitin reports and ensure that they understand their use. Turnitin reports must be interpreted in the context of the content of the writing, therefore the most logical time to do this is at the time of marking. However it is important that all staff are aware that ANY member of the university community can report suspected academic misconduct – this should not just be restricted to specific staff within a course team.

Turnitin reports must be interpreted by academic staff involved in the teaching and/or marking for the course concerned.

5) Resources for students on good academic practice

The Institute for Academic Development provide guidance to help students to understand what the University means by good academic practice (https://edin.ac/34ylPhL), and guidance and tips on how to avoid plagiarism by citing and referencing (https://edin.ac/2u0a0it).