

# Best Practices for Checking Student Work Using Turnitin's Similarity Report

UBC Sauder Learning Services has created this page to help instructors:

1. Create a Turnitin Account and Class
2. Set up an Assignment
  - a. Students submit: in Turnitin, where students submit assignments to an assignment you have created in Turnitin.
  - b. Instructors submit: by uploading to Turnitin, where students submit via a Canvas Assignment. You then download submissions and upload them to Turnitin.
3. Review and interpret Turnitin Similarity Scores
4. Confirm an Unoriginal Assignment Submission
5. Review a Paper Outside of Turnitin for Other Signs of Cheating

## 1. Create a Turnitin Account and Class

To use Turnitin for the first time, request an account by emailing [help@sauder.ubc.ca](mailto:help@sauder.ubc.ca)

Review UBC's [Turnitin and Student Personal Privacy](#) policy.

Then, once your account is set up, [create a class](#).

## 2. Set up an Assignment

### a. Create an Assignment in Turnitin

Visit Turnitin's [Creating a Paper Assignment](#) page (note – “paper” means “digital paper” in Turnitin-speak). Once you have completed the basic settings, expand “Optional settings”. You may choose to leave all buttons as-is. However, you may wish to consider the following suggested settings to target specific issues with plagiarism.

Generate Similarity Reports for student submission (drop-down menu)

- ✓ “Immediately First Report is Final” option – Similarity Reports will be generated immediately. This will only allow the student to submit once. Use this option if you believe that allowing multiple submissions *may* permit students to ‘game’ Turnitin by tweaking their paper repeatedly to avoid plagiarism detection.
- ✓ “Immediately (can overwrite reports until due date)” option – Students may resubmit as often as they wish until the due date. Use this option if you want students to use Turnitin to avoid accidental plagiarism, to use Turnitin to practice citing correctly, or to re-work passages to paraphrase better.
- ✓ “On Due Date” option – Students may resubmit as many times as needed until the due date and a Similarity Report will not be generated until then. Similar to #1 above, this *may* allow students to ‘game’ Turnitin if they have their own, separate account. Use this option if you want students to submit and be able to continue to edit their papers.

Exclude bibliographic/reference materials from Similarity Index for all papers in this assignment.

Choose Yes. It is recommended that you exclude bibliographic materials from Similarity Index. True, this could remove the ability to recognize the very rare occurrence of a plagiarized list, but it will serve to reduce a student's similarity score if they have an extensive, correctly cited bibliography.

### b. Upload Assignments to Turnitin

If you have downloaded student submissions from Canvas (see instructions for doing that [here](#)) you can upload them to Turnitin as a ZIP file. See [Zip-file upload on behalf of a student](#).

For Zip files generated from your online exams, refer to this guide, [How to upload ZIP files in Turnitin](#), to see the more specific step-by-step instruction.

### 3. Review and Interpret Turnitin Similarity Scores

The Similarity Report provides a percentage score of a paper's matches to other sources.

[Accessing the Similarity Report](#)  
[Interpreting the Similarity Report](#)

A 'good' similarity score will be in the range of 20%-30%. If a score is above or below this, you should review the paper in the Feedback Studio (next section).

**High Similarity Scores** - A high score does not necessarily indicate plagiarism - Turnitin merely finds similarities. For example, a student may have used a properly cited quote that would appear in the similarity report. Similarly, common groups of words will appear in the report. This is why you should investigate the "flags" provided in the report to confirm whether content has been plagiarized or not.

**Low or Zero Scores** - A zero or very low score can indicate issues such as falsified references, the use of paraphrasing tools (aka text spinners) such as [Quillbot](#), or the inappropriate use of embedded files. Other examples include student papers with .jpg or .png images of text. Turnitin will not detect these file types as being copied from elsewhere.

Even with similarity scores of 20%-30%, it is worthwhile to investigate further. For example, a student may receive a similarity score of 22% but may have used hidden text (text/symbols that are typed, then 'whited-out' by changing the font colour to white) to try and trick Turnitin into believing plagiarized text is original and should be excluded. Turnitin will detect hidden text and reveal this in the flags area.

A more in-depth analysis of the top ten different types of plagiarism can be found in the Turnitin document [The Plagiarism Spectrum](#).

### 4. Confirm an Unoriginal Assignment Submission

If you suspect a student's paper is plagiarized, review the student submission in the Feedback Studio. To access, click on the student's similarity score – Feedback Studio will open in a new window.

Access the student's similarity in the Feedback Studio by clicking on the red layer icon:



Then, review the matches and their sources.

#### a. Flags

Turnitin compares a paper's text to its database. If there are instances where a student's writing is similar to or matches one of their sources, it will flag this for you to review.

#### b. Match Overview

This shows where similarities in the text are coming from - the sources and percentage of the paper that has been pulled from that source.

Note that:

- ✓ Turnitin will provide information, but you should confirm if matches are relevant.
- ✓ Once you access the match overview, you should review the matches to see if they are:
  - A match, but properly cited
  - A match, but improperly cited
  - A match, but was from a student's previous submission of the same paper
  - A match, but taken from sources that are not their own (i.e., academic misconduct)

#### c. Layers

Should you wish to see the exact website where the match is, go to the "all sources" layer which will indicate the source site, the percentage of the paper copied from the site, and give you a direct link to

where the text was found. This is where you may confirm whether text was copied or paraphrased without citing. You are also able to [exclude an individual source](#) that you feel was used properly by a student but showed up in the similarity report.

**d. Active Layers**

If you feel a student has not plagiarized, but their similarity score is high, you may consider adjusting the setting for this particular assignment. For example, if a student has used common phrases, you may adjust 'exclude sources less than' to a word count of 10 rather than 5. This will allow you to have a more accurate report of items that may have been used from other sites.

**e. Excluded Sources**

This is a list of sources you choose to exclude from the report.

## 5. Review a Paper Outside of Turnitin for Other Signs of Cheating

- a. Review text to see if a student has added characters from another language to elude Turnitin's visible and invisible text recognition.
- b. Confirm a Word document's author by [checking the metadata](#). An author's name different from the student's name may indicate contract cheating.
- c. The University of Calgary has created an excellent blog page, *15 Strategies to Detect Contract Cheating without Turnitin*, at <http://connections.ucalgaryblogs.ca/2018/10/01/15-strategies-to-detect-contract-cheating/>

## Sources

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