

# Reading TurnItIn

## Interpreting Originality Reports

I use Turnitin.com to review essays for use of sources. Turnitin.com is a text analyzing website that compares every text submitted with all of the others submitted, as well as with searchable internet sources and some books.

Essays and other texts are submitted to TurnItIn either as file attachments or as copy/paste submissions. When a text is submitted, TurnItIn compares the character strings against submissions it has already received and against files openly available on the internet. TurnItIn doesn't care what the words are, it only looks for matching strings of characters. When it locates a matching string, it highlights the matching text and provides a corresponding color-coded and numbered citation and link to the source. That information is returned as part of the Originality Report, which we will look at next.

The most amazing thing to me is that the comparison process usually happens within minutes. The longest I've ever had to wait for an originality report is 24 hours. When I think back to how many hours I had to spend trying to figure out whether a text had been plagiarized or not, I'm exceedingly grateful for this particular bit of technology. But teachers aren't the only ones who benefit. The savvy student will make use of TurnItIn whenever it's available because it can help teach what plagiarism is and which sources need to be cited. By examining a TurnItIn Originality Report on a key draft, a student can see not only what text in the project may not be considered original but also what percentage of the essay is in the words of others. That will be important to you later in this class. When I perceive a problem, I return not only comments on an essay but also a copy of the TurnItIn Originality Report.

Originality reports are not particularly intuitive, and each professor evaluates the information differently. So, I thought it would be helpful to you if I explain how I interpret the information on an

Originality Report because it can also help you to understand what to look for and how to deal with what you find.

## In this lecture...

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- Originality Report information
  - Levels of concern
    - Green – no problem
    - Yellow – some concerns
    - Red – serious concerns
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What I will be explaining in this lecture are the different informational elements that are shown on a printed Originality Report and the three levels of concern that I have when reading a TurnItIn report.

But first, let's examine the report itself, just in case you've never seen one before.

# Originality Report Information

The image shows a screenshot of a Turnitin Originality Report. At the top, it says 'Turnitin Originality Report' and 'Processed on 03-05-07 9:53 AM MST'. The overall similarity index is 28%. Below this is a list of sources with matching text. Source 3 is highlighted with a red circle and a red arrow pointing to the 'paper text' section. In the 'paper text' section, a specific sentence is highlighted in blue and also circled in red. To the right of the screenshot, there are four callout boxes with arrows pointing to the corresponding parts of the report: 'Identifying Information' points to the top header; '% direct quote & word count' points to the similarity index; 'List of sources with matching text' points to the source list; and 'Highlighted text' points to the highlighted sentence in the paper text.

When you choose to print the originality report, it is formatted much like the one shown here. At the top will be identifying information and the date of submission. A word count is shown, though it is invariably higher than the one allowed in this class. The reason for this is that TurnItIn counts all of the information submitted on an essay; I allow only the body of the text, exclusive of the identifying and documentation information, to be used toward word count requirements. That means when you're checking word count, you should highlight just the text of your essay and count the words in it. Don't highlight the identifying info, the title, or the Works Cited.

The report also shows a percentage of direct quote. For this class the amount of direct quote should **never** exceed **20 percent**, although like the word count, Turnitin's estimate of quote percent is frequently high too. A good rule of thumb is to write at least four sentences in your own words for every one sentence you copy. What this means is that you'll need to **select quotes for their impact** and not simply because two or three paragraphs of someone else's writing sounds a lot better than you think you can write yourself.

The next section of the printable originality report is the list of sources TurnItIn identifies as having text strings that match those in the essay. Notice that each source is numbered and color-coded. The numbers and color-coding correspond to the text that is highlighted in the essay.

The next section of the report is the text that was submitted for examination. It will not look as it did in your original essay, but don't let that worry you. TurnItIn simply removes much of the extraneous formatting so that it is easier to search for text strings. When a matching text string is located, TurnItIn highlights the matching passage, color-codes it, and attaches a number that corresponds with one of the numbered sources on the list at the top of the page. This enables you to see exactly how much text is the same and where TurnItIn found the matching text. Not every passage of text that TurnItIn highlights requires documentation. In the next section of this lecture I'll go over the ways that I interpret the highlighted text.

**CAUTION:** The interpretations I am going to explain are unique to me. Other professors may interpret an originality report differently. If you have any questions, you should contact your teacher and ask for clarification.

## Green Level

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2 5% match (student papers from 04/13/06)  
[Submitted to MSU, Great Falls on 2006-04-13](#)



best selling author, lawyer, and nationally recognized speaker.

2

One of the first questions I ask is whether highlighted text uses "**common language**." I'm trying to discover if it's reasonable that two people having had no contact with one another could come up with the very same phrasing. That can and does happen a lot and is especially likely to come up when one is doing a **signal phrase** which may include an author's name and institution information. But there are many other types of common language. And, when lots of people are writing about the same general subject, it's not uncommon for them to use similar phrasing.

One thing to notice is that some of the highlights are associated with texts submitted to other educational institutions. When one of these comes up, I am able to click on the link and request to see the entire document that was originally submitted. I've received several of these queries and always agree that the teacher making the request can see the entire essay that was submitted. Seeing the original document often provides me with information about where the other person may have found the source of the text.

## Green Level

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4 1% match (student papers from 10/05/06)  
[Submitted to \(school name not available\) on 2006-10-05](#)



sexually abused child shuttled from one family member to another, 4

Another situation that isn't **too** troubling is like the one shown here. This is an example of relatively common language, and it's reasonable to think that more than one person could come up with similar phrasing when discussing what happens to sexually abused children.

Did you notice that the word "member" is not in bold red text in this example? What that means is that word is different from the rest of the copied text. Depending on the rest of the essay this could be totally insignificant, but if there are other instances in which longer passages are also copied and just a word or two have been changed, my concern level can go up.

Remember ... if you use four or more words in a row from someone else's writing, you **MUST** provide proper citation. That means quote marks, an in-text citation, and a reference citation. If you use a full sentence from someone else, it's also preferred that a **signal phrase** be used to introduce the other 'voice' in your essay.

## Yellow Level

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2

5% match (student papers from 04/13/06)  
[Submitted to MSU, Great Falls on 2006-04-13](#)



has given me a greater understanding of my own past, my motivations,  
[redacted] and my desires. Iyanla's

desire is for people to know who they are from the inside out and  
to use that knowledge as a tool of empowerment and love.

2

When the highlighted text has been submitted to another educational institution, it's possible there's no issue at all. I've seen this many times when two people have quoted from the same **article** or **book**. This also tends to happen when I teach using the same texts for several semesters. The more students who are writing essays based on the same readings, the more likely it is that some of them will choose the same quotations.

As long as the text has been appropriately cited, I generally don't worry about the duplication of source. If there is **no citation**, I will send a query to the other institution to see what source has been used. Getting that additional information helps me to make a determination about the highlighted text. When I submit a query to another institution, I receive a copy of the entire essay containing the similar text. This allows me to compare not only the specific passage but also the key points, the organizational structure, and other elements of the essays.

## Red Level

3 4% match (internet)  
[http://www.beliefnet.com/author/author\\_147.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/author/author_147.html)



lyanla Vanzant's personal experiences have given her profound insight into life. 3

lyanla is also

an ordained minister, committed to a message based on the principles of divine power and self determination. Her 3

The last category is obviously quoted material, and it's often matched to internet sources.

Again, my first step is to check for a citation. If the quote has been properly cited, there is no problem, even if more than one person has used it. Sometimes the source that is highlighted is not the same one that my student has used. This happens because plagiarism is rampant on the internet. Material gets copied and recopied. My student may have found the information on a different website than someone else's student. This is one reason it's so important to backtrack as often as possible to the most credible source available. When there is disagreement with the source, I usually go to the source my student has listed so that I can ascertain whether it is credible and likely to be the original use of the material. At the very least, by visiting my student's source I can make certain that the material has been quoted and cited accurately – even if someone else plagiarized it.

In the example above you may be asking why I would be concerned about what appears to be **relatively common** language. After all, it would not be unusual for a writer to give brief biographical information about an author. The issue here is that I can see that two full passages, **exactly congruent** with the linked source, have been used with only three words altering the text. And, further, there has been **no attempt to cite** the text. In this case I would be highly suspicious. It would be highly


unlikely that two people would come up with that much text that was exactly the same. I would definitely visit the online source and compare the remainder of the text looking for similarities in structure, ideas, and text. It's highly likely this would be considered copied but not cited – and that leaves one open to a charge of plagiarism.

# Red Level

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1 15% match (internet from 01/20/07)  
(1-20-07) <http://alumbo.com/article/9250>

life and career are a big inspiration and I have learned many important life lessons as well as personal lessons.



In her book, "One day my soul just opened up", Iyanla Vanzant suggests being open to options while learning patience. "The greatest challenge to the development of patience is being able to wait for tangible evidence that your efforts are paying off. We have a fixed idea of what we want and what it will look like when it shows up. We hold that idea so firmly that often we are not able to detect that the very thing we want has actually arrived."

I have learned to

be open to other options. For example, what you might receive instead of a full time job is several part-time opportunities or contract projects.

This last example is the most egregious. Large passages have been copied and no citation has been made. In order to accommodate the passages to the essay, the student made three very brief editing changes. This alone would warrant a charge of plagiarism.

Equally problematic is the 15% match. That means that **15%** of the student's essay was drawn from this single source. That's unacceptable and when combined with the lack of citation will assure a plagiarism investigation.

This example gives me a chance to talk a bit about how much direct quotation should be used in an essay. In this class you should **never have more than 20%** of your essay in direct quotes. This is the rough equivalent of **writing at least four of your own sentences for every one sentence of direct quotation** that you use. With this limitation in place, you will find it necessary to choose quotations wisely. In this class if you **exceed 25%** direct quotation in a document, even if you accurately cite all of the sources, you will be asked to reduce the amount of direct quotation used.

That's it, the basic outline of how I interpret TurnItIn Originality Reports. I hope that you find this useful.