Using Turnitin to Teach Better Citation Practices
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March 2017

Instructors may have a hunch that it is beneficial to allow students to submit drafts to Turnitin and view their originality reports before the assignment due date, since students can use this information to assess and improve their citation practices. However, research suggests that undergraduate students are ill-equipped to understand what Turnitin’s originality report tells them (M. Davis, 2007; Peacock et al., 2006; Gillis et al., 2009). When students see sections of their writing flagged in an originality report, and they lack the skills to interpret the results, they may become discouraged or, as Gillis et al. (2009) argue, they “may shift from writing to an appropriate human audience to ‘writing to the software’” (p. 60). Students writing to the software compound their problems, for instance, by eliminating crucial information in an attempt to lower the numerical score Turnitin assigns (Gillis et al., 2009).

Overview

This activity is designed to help students identify the kinds of problems in their writing that Turnitin flags, and practice better citation. Students submit a small amount of writing before class or tutorial. During the class, the instructor first provides an overview of three common errors that Turnitin can help students see, then students review their own originality reports, revise their work, and receive feedback from peers on their revisions. In-class time: 45 minutes.

Before Class

Design a short writing assignment that will produce original work, and for which students must draw on existing literature in the field. For instance, you may pose a question relevant to a topic or concept in your course and inform students that they should respond to the question in a 1-2 page paper using 3 academic sources.

Students should submit their work through Turnitin, with Turnitin set to allow students to see their originality reports. They should print their originality reports and bring them to class.

In Class

Possible introductory remarks

You might wish to activate students’ prior knowledge, asking them what they know about citation and why we cite others in academic work. Some take-home points you can emphasize include why drawing on other scholars’ work is so important in your field of study (e.g., allows writers to enter a conversation and advance new ideas, provides theoretical basis for empirical analyses, etc.), and how research and scholarship rely on academic integrity to protect those who do this work. Also emphasize that the practice of drawing on others’ writing provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate how they understand the material.

Beginning the lesson: 3 Problems Turnitin Might Flag
Using a sample that resembles the students’ assignment as closely as possible, demonstrate some of the top writing errors that Turnitin helps students to see. (Note: the following examples simulate the way that Turnitin highlights text that matches another source in its database.)

1. Copy and Paste Error

This occurs when students copy a significant amount of text (for instance, seven or more words) from a source without altering it and without using quotation marks. Students may believe that this practice is acceptable as long as they include the source; you can demonstrate how, even with a citation, copy and paste is a problem because the text appears as paraphrasing when it is in fact a direct quotation.

Example: In response to the global economic crisis that began in 2008, several European countries have implemented fiscal austerity programs that have negative consequences for citizens’ health and for the economy. For instance, some governments have scaled back health services by introducing or raising user fees. **Rises in user charges are a particular cause of concern, because they increase the financial burden on households and probably reduce the use of high-value and low-value care equally, especially by people with low incomes and high users of health care, even when user charges are low** (Karanikolos et al., 2013). Karanikolos et al. (2013) argue that people facing user fees may avoid seeking primary care, causing their conditions to worsen. Because people end up using emergency services that are far more costly to the system, "cost savings and enhanced efficiency are scarce" (Karanikolos et al., p. 3).

Showing students the original source alongside a purpose-made text allows you an opportunity to compare and contrast a copy and paste error (the first highlighted section), proper paraphrasing (the subsequent sentence and a half), and the correct use of quotation marks (the second highlighted section).

2. Find and Replace Error

When making this error, students often mistakenly believe that paraphrasing can be accomplished by changing a few words or phrases, and they keep the basic structure and content of the source material.

Example: Kathy Davis (2008) considers how and why intersectionality theory has become so popular in feminist scholarship. She notes that **intersectionality addresses the most pressing concern within feminist scholarship, acknowledging differences among women. The very fact of differences among women has become the top subject of feminist theories in contemporary times. This is because it deals with the most pressing problem facing today’s feminism, which is the long and painful legacy of its exclusions** (K. Davis, 2008).

One recommendation for students: put the article/book away when writing, since even the most accomplished writers struggle to paraphrase creatively with the source in view. Suggest that students read the source material, put it away, and then pretend they need to describe what they just read to a friend or relative who is not a content expert. If typing out the words still proves difficult, they can try recording themselves and transcribing what they say. After students have captured the ideas in their own words, they can return to the text to verify that they have represented the source accurately.
3. Half-and-Half Error

This error occurs when a student correctly cites part, but not all, of a source. Students who make this error are often struggling to find a unique way to introduce a quotation. In this instance, the highlighted text will reveal a directly quoted, but uncited, signal phrase.

Example: Early 20th-century women certainly faced difficulties in entering into and advancing within the field of psychology, and while several male psychologists receive praise for supporting women psychologists’ education, Robert Proctor and Rand Evans (2014) argue that this support was often ironic. These male psychologists’ writings about the supposedly biologically determined physical, emotional, and intellectual inferiority of women “were not only theoretical essays but also calls for policy changes in education and society in general that would bar most women from any form of education” (Proctor & Evans, 2014, p. 2).

In addition to providing students with different options for introducing and contextualizing a quotation, a discussion about the half-and-half citation problem gives you a chance to stress the importance of analyzing all quotations rather than leaving readers to interpret them.

The above examples all focus on errors that can lead students to breaches of academic integrity, but even when there is no such risk, there are other writing problems that Turnitin may help to flag. Two common issues are:

1. Overreliance on one source. Because Turnitin uses different colours to highlight text from different sources, when one colour shows up frequently, this might be a sign that the student should try to diversify sources.
2. Mix and match. Turnitin’s colour-coding system also helps flag when there are many direct quotations from different sources within one paragraph. In this case, students may be struggling to synthesize material, and are simply repeating what other authors have written rather than making larger claims about trends in the literature.

Once you see your students’ originality reports, you will be able to focus your lesson on their most pressing areas of improvement.

Individual and Group Work

Students are now better prepared to work with their own originality reports in class, with the instructor available to answer questions and provide guidance.

Step 1: Students look at the highlighted sections of their own originality reports and identify any problems with their citation practices.

Step 2: Students work individually to correct at least one error.
Step 3: In pairs, students discuss the issue(s) they found and the changes they made, then trade papers to provide feedback to one another.

Step 4: Class discussion to debrief the exercise and answer any outstanding questions.

References


