Interpreting Turnitin Reports

Faculty who use Turnitin need to understand that a report generated from Turnitin must be examined to determine the level of possible infraction. All Turnitin reports will be color-coded and the level of severity ranges from blue or green (indicating that it is unlikely plagiarism has occurred) or yellow, orange and red (indicating that it is highly likely something is amiss).

An originality score can be high but may not be plagiarism. For example, long papers (7-10 pages) may have ample footnoting with matches of low consequence (under 5% each). But even five or six such “hits” might yield an originality score of 25% made up of matches that are less than 5% each. Such a score would be unlikely to indicate the presence of plagiarism. What it could indicate is that the paper is simply a string of quotations from various sources. This is not plagiarism but would indicate the need for a different sort of conversation with the student. On the other hand, it may not mean anything at all.

In the example below, the yellow tagged paper must be examined at. The red color-coded paper is clearly in violation.

Matches occur in three basic cases: the presence of phrases, the presence of common language of the subject matter, and the presence of the bibliography. In the first case if the phrasing is cited, it is not plagiarism even though it may show up as a match. In the case of the second, specialized areas often use common language. For example, it can only be said just so many ways how chemical compounds work together or how Lord Byron was born and where. The presence of low level matches such as these are also NOT plagiarism. You can recalculate the report and exclude low-level matches, the bibliography or
both. Doing so will likely decrease the similarity score while increasing the originality report, and yielding a better view of that student’s performance on the assignment.

When we examine our example more closely we see the matches are all under 5% and are properly cited. So even in a case of yellow color-coded paper, plagiarized is not indicated.

High level matches in yellow, orange and red color-coding (as you look at the score before opening the report) hold a much stronger indication that something is wrong with the paper, but not always. You’ll need to look at the report to determine if proper citations and/or referencing have occurred or not.

A good rule of thumb is this: reports that are color-coded in green or blue are very likely not plagiarism, even if there are many low-level matches. Any report that comes back in yellow, orange and red should be carefully reviewed. If you have any questions, or would like a refresher on how to interpret Turnitin results, please call or email either Dean Herring (x2232, herringm) or Ms. Gale Teaster (x2311, teasterg) for an appointment.

To watch a video on this and many other aspects regarding interpreting Turnitin reports, surf to: https://www.turnitin.com/static/training/instructor_viewing_originality_reports.php.