

Plagiarism detection software

How it works:

- Plagiarism detection services have databases that may include papers from internet “paper mills,” web pages, student writing, and some professional and scholarly publications. Collections vary considerably from service to service.
- Student essays are submitted to the service’s website, often by the students. Most often, the students’ writing becomes property of the service and their writing is incorporated into the database.
- They are scanned for similarity to anything in the database.
- Passages are highlighted if they:
 - Resemble any passage in the database
 - Appear to be improperly cited
- Essays are returned showing what percentage of the essays contains suspected plagiarism (sometimes called an “originality report”).
- Instructors decide on subsequent action.

Reported benefits:

- May act as deterrent to intentional plagiarists in some cases. Note that there are ways to “fool” the software.
- May identify plagiarized passages in some cases.

Reported issues:

- May inaccurately identify passages as plagiarized in some cases, with extreme variation between services, depending on the scanning algorithm and database collection.
- Software operates on a premise of mistrust and coercion.
- Has been legally challenged as copyright infringement by students who did not want their intellectual property incorporated into a for-profit database, though the Court of Appeals (4th Circuit) found that Turnitin.com did not infringe the plaintiffs’ copyright. See [NC Law Review](#) of this decision for details.
- Does not differentiate between intentional and incidental plagiarism.
- Does not address the underlying issues of information literacy or instruction.

Information literacy:

- Selecting, evaluating, comprehending, summarizing, quoting, paraphrasing, and synthesizing sources requires a highly complex skill set, which develops over time, with instruction. Research has shown that students inadvertently plagiarize with some regularity as they are developing these skills. See Rebecca Moore Howard’s “[Citation Project](#).”
- Disciplinary differences exist in the conventions of source use and citation practices. Becoming literate users of information systems across disciplines happens over time, with instruction, and mistakes will happen.

Instruction:

- Both intentional and unintentional plagiarism can be largely prevented with careful attention to assignment design. The Council of Writing Program Administrators has developed a brief and accessible guide to potential causes of plagiarism and principles of instruction in “[Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices](#).”
- Composition scholar and plagiarism expert Nick Carbone has assembled strategies for teaching students about the research process and plagiarism in his “[Teaching with Technology](#)” workshop.