Turnitin: guidelines for students

What is plagiarism?
At the University of Sydney plagiarism is defined as “presenting another person’s work as one’s own work by presenting, copying or reproducing it without appropriate acknowledgement of the source” (Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism in Coursework Policy).

What does Turnitin do?
Turnitin searches for matches between text in your assignment and text sourced from the Internet (including ‘paper mills’), published works (such as journal articles), and assignments that have previously been submitted to Turnitin for analysis. It produces an originality report showing matches with various sources, and an overall level of match or similarity index.

Why does my lecturer want me to use Turnitin?
Academic honesty is highly valued at the University of Sydney. Turnitin is a tool which helps your lecturers and tutors to detect instances of academic dishonesty. It is important to understand that Turnitin does not itself detect plagiarism – that is a judgment made by your lecturers and tutors. Turnitin is just one tool among several that assists them in making their decision.

What happens if my text shows matches?
There will always be some degree of text-matching, caused by direct quotations, technical terms and phrases, and items in the reference list. This does not mean you will automatically be accused of plagiarism. The degree of text-matching may depend on
- the type of assignment you are writing (a literature review may show a higher level of text-matching than a reflective journal, for example)
- the amount of directly quoted text
- the frequency of commonly used words and phrases and
- the length of the assignment (one plagiarised paragraph in a long assignment may produce a low similarity score but still be considered as academic dishonesty).

How can I avoid text-matching?
You should always write your assignments using your own words (apart from direct quotations) – this means paraphrasing, summarising, or both together. You will very likely need to use some synonyms to replace words in the source and to restructure sentences so that they are different from the original. However, you should not rely simply on a mechanical substitution of words and phrases, active sentences for passive ones, nouns for verbs, etc. (although occasionally this is hard to avoid).

Mechanical substitution should be kept to a minimum for a number of reasons:
- it doesn’t really help your learning of the material
- the way the original author has expressed the ideas may not fit the flow of your paragraph
- the original author’s purpose may not suit your own purpose
Instead you should try to
- read thoroughly for understanding
- take notes in your own words to suit your own purpose and
- write your own text from notes and memory (i.e. without the original text right in front of you).

Remember to reference your work appropriately – both direct quotations and paraphrases. Check with your Department or Unit of Study outline for the correct referencing method to use.

**What are the limitations of Turnitin?**
Many sources of information are not held in Turnitin’s database. However, text matches from such sources may be identified through other means.

**What happens to the ownership my assignment after I submit it?**
Your text is retained on the Turnitin database (without your name attached) so that other students’ writing can be compared to it. However, the ownership of your work remains with you and only you and your teachers can read it.