Not sure how to read your Turnitin similarity report?

In a nutshell, the percentage that is given in your Turnitin similarity report indicates how much of your work matches other sources in the global Turnitin database. These sources could be articles, journals, or student papers submitted at your university or other universities.

The most important thing about a Turnitin report is that you should not look at the percentage score in isolation. Rather, you should *interpret* the report by looking at the types of similarities that have been picked up and highlighted.

In fact, Turnitin does not measure plagiarism as such, but simply the similarity between your documents and other work. The aim is therefore not to get a 1% or 2% score necessarily - the aim is rather to use your score to decide if the similarities can be justified and to ensure that your writing has academic integrity.

Scan through your Turnitin report and look at the highlighted areas. Systematically assess whether these areas are problematic or not and whether you need to amend them or not.

A high similarity percentage could, for example, be due to the regular use of direct quotes or commonly used strings of words or phrases (which may be acceptable). It could also be due to your reference list being included in the report*. Perhaps you accidentally omitted important quotation marks, or it may well be that your first attempt to paraphrase a section well was unsuccessful. If you decide that this last scenario is true, ask yourself honestly whether you have truly understood the work enough to be able to integrate ideas and summarize arguments in your own words. You might need to put in some more work to ensure that your writing has integrity.

By the same token, a low similarity percentage does not necessarily mean that plagiarism has not occurred on some level! Fixing poor paraphrasing for example is not just a matter of changing the word order or of finding synonyms for every other word. You might then 'pass' a similarity test but your work will not be honest and most likely be of poor academic quality.

In closing, Turnitin can be used as a developmental tool (by using a 'sandbox') and you should not be afraid to try it. Using a Turnitin 'sandbox' means that your submitted document does not become part of the Turnitin database. You can then submit your document a number of times as part of the writing process to improve and refine your academic writing style.

Find or our Postgraduate Skills Turnitin 'sandbox' here or the Library/Information Skills 'sandbox' here.

> Please check first with your department whether they have their own 'sandbox' that they would prefer you to use, before using one of the latter 'sandboxes'. Once you start using a 'sandbox', stick with it—using a different 'sandbox' to submit the same document can cause big irregularities in your similarity index!

- Do an online, self-paced Avoiding Plagiarism course on SUNLearn here.

- In addition, listen to a useful South African contextualised video for understanding how Turnitin works, called: *The misuses of Turnitin and other text-matching software,* here.

* Note: you can use the filter option in Turnitin to exclude direct quotes and your references.