

1B Search, Cut, Paste and Submit: The Four Horsemen of the Turnitin Apocalypse

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The Level 2 Essential Genetics class comprises a very mixed cohort of 400 students. So a key aspect of our approach to teaching is to convince the class that genetics is relevant to them. One route to achieving this is to ask them to look for a contemporary 'genetics' story on the BBC website, find the original published peer-reviewed research source of this story and submit a 500-word essay emphasising the key points of the research.

The essay is submitted via Turnitin, and, whatever essay descriptors and instructions we use, this provokes a deluge of traffic on our Moodle forum. Whilst some of this traffic concerns fascinating discussions of state-of-the-art research in genetics and is very welcome, much of it speculates on our reasons for using Turnitin. Such discussions range from mild and legitimate concerns, to threads bordering on panic.

What is it about Turnitin that precipitates such a response from the students? Are their fears justified, or is it in part that few of them actually understand what plagiarism is? Do they (or we) understand what the originality score means, and why to many of the students mistakenly believe that there is some magical originality cut-off, above which they'll 'automatically' be accused of plagiarism?

After four years of using Turnitin as a tool and the forum to acquire feedback, we have a database of about 1500 students and their essays that allows us to explore these questions.

In addition, perhaps we should also address one other fundamental issue. Is essay writing a useful exercise for a 21st century student?