

Replicated Text Detection: Test of TurnItIn

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Test Method

As in 2007, I surveyed library staff and writing instructors and assembled six test essays replicating sources common to humanities, natural sciences, and fine arts undergraduate classes. This is not intended to be an entirely representative sample; however, it does accurately reflect the kinds of sources students have used and misused (intentionally or not) in UT classes. These are the source areas we are most concerned that a plagiarism detector be able to find quickly, accurately, and reliably. These results do not address the problem of collusion between students.

Results

TurnItIn's performance has not improved since our 2007 test. It has gotten slightly better at detecting certain types of sites, but still misses some surprisingly high-profile web sources. It is also relatively easy to fool via translations and modest textual re-arrangement.

Usability

TurnItIn's instructor interface has changed since 2007 but have not necessarily improved. The system still requires significantly more training and hands-on instructor time than Google. The recommended Google detection method—selecting word strings containing three to five nouns¹—can be taught in a 30-minute training session. Google also produces far fewer false negatives than TurnItIn, provides easier to understand results, honors FERPA requirements, and is free.

Green = Found original source	Found
Yellow = Found enough text in a non-original source to infer plagiarism, or found non-viewable source	Partial
Red = Classified as "original"	Missed

Document Name	Original Source	TurnItIn Result
Test Essay One	GMU History News Network	Missed
	Société des architectes modernes	Missed
	<i>Salem Mercury</i> (newspaper)	Found
	Brainia.com	Found
	echeat.com	Found
	Twitter feed of @ShaunKing, 3/10/15	Missed
Test Essay Two	<i>San Diego International Law Journal</i>	Missed
	<i>Journal Of Democracy</i>	Partial
	<i>Popular Music & Society</i>	Found
	<i>Contemporary Music Review</i>	Missed
	<i>Muziki: Journal Of Music Research In Africa</i>	Found
	<i>Immigration</i>	Found
Test Essay Three	<i>The Columbian</i> (Vancouver, WA newspaper)	Missed
	<i>Paris Review</i>	Partial
	<i>Encyclopedia of the American Constitution.</i>	Found
	MIT Open Courseware	Found
	Plwikipedia Google Chrome translation	Missed
	Wikipedia; word & sentence boundary changes	Missed
	<i>The Riveter</i>	Found

Test Essay Four	UT CLA Student Affairs web page	Missed
	Goodreads	Found
	Change.org	Found
	Tumblr post by user unlikehisname	Missed
	McDougal, <i>Throes of Democracy</i>	Partial
	Buchsbaum, Ralph. <i>Animals Without Backbones</i>	Partial
	Newberg et al, <i>Why God Won't Go Away</i>	Missed
Test Essay Five	http://www.nts.gov/ Word and syntax changes	Missed
	http://www.ashpmedia.org Edits & patchwriting	Missed
	Wikipedia patchwritten w/ other sources	Found
	http://www.nwf.org patchwritten	Found
	http://www.smithsonianmag.com patchwritten	Missed
Test Essay Six	Pinkwater, Daniel. <i>Fish Whistle</i> (Kindle)	Found
	Wolcott, James. <i>Wild in the Seats</i> (Kindle)	Missed
	Wikipedia with simple word substitutions	Found
	Wikipedia: word subs, deletions, re-positioning	Missed
	Wikipedia: word subs and sentence boundary shifts	Missed
	Wikipedia: phrase shifts, word & punctuation changes	Missed

Total Sources: 37
 Found: 15 (40%)
 Partial: 6 (16%)
 Not Found: 16 (44%)

ⁱ See Weber-Wulff, Debora (Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft) <http://plagiat.fhtw-berlin.de/software/>