

TIP SHEET for Instructors

Can I use Plagiarism Detection Software?

Plagiarism detection software does not actually detect plagiarism. It is simply a text-matching algorithm which indicates when the text entered into the tool matches other text. There are many different types of Text Matching Software (TMS), ranging from search engines like Google to companies offering a comprehensive database of student work against which submitted work can be compared. This Tip Sheet is concerned primarily with those services that store the student work in a database.

Before using a TMS, especially one that stores student work in a database, there are a number of issues you should consider:

1. Privacy

Student work usually includes private information (their name, ID number, other personal data). Be aware that when their work is submitted to a TMS, that private information often goes with it. The University of Alberta is subject to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPP), which requires that private information be safeguarded.

Students and professors alike have raised concerns about protection from surveillance by our own and foreign governments. Both the possibility of being subject to repercussions and the potential intellectual chill due to a fear of those repercussions should be of concern.

2. Intellectual Property

Particularly in the case of a TMS that uses a database, the students' intellectual property may potentially be used for unintended purposes. For example, some commercial TMS incorporate all submitted student work into their databases in order to expand its collection of work against which student papers can be compared. Therefore, a student's intellectual property serves the interests of the company's profit. Other TMS may save the work in a database for a period of time and then sell it. When an instructor submits student work to a service which stores that work in a database, students no longer have control over their intellectual property. This is an issue that any academic community must take seriously.

3. Other considerations

- "Originality reports" generated by a TMS do not exclude properly cited quotations, nor does a TMS detect plagiarism other than the verbatim cut-and-paste variety.
- Different TMS are designed for different types of work (written work, computer code, etc.). It is important to choose one that works for your area.
- There is diminishing value in the larger scale TMS databases. Students are much more likely to copy from their friends or hand in a paper submitted for another section of the course or a previous year than to use a paper generated at another university or in another country.
- There are those that believe the use of a TMS creates a climate in which students are guilty until proven innocent. This could act to undermine the teacher/student relationship, which we know to be of prime importance both in learning and in the promotion of academic integrity.
- There is little evidence to show that using a TMS acts as a deterrent to plagiarism. Other recognized methods of promoting academic integrity and discouraging cheating should continue to be used.
- For those few students intent on plagiarizing, it is relatively easy to "trick" a TMS. If a student alters the text sufficiently it will not be flagged as a match. Likewise, there is a rising number of services or individuals offering to write original papers for a fee. TMS is not able to detect this type of plagiarism.
- A TMS could reduce time by highlighting matched passages but it does not change the amount of time required to report an instance of plagiarism.
- Finally, some TMS are prohibitively expensive, others demand 'payment' in the form of relinquishing submitted work to the company. Consider all costs before using a TMS.

For more information please contact Student Conduct and Accountability at 780-492-0777, or studentconduct@ualberta.ca.

Please note this publication does not replace or supersede the policies and procedures outlined in the Code of Student Behaviour. In the case of any disagreement, the Code of Student Behaviour takes precedence.

Suggestions for promoting academic integrity and discouraging cheating:

1. Change assignments and examinations every year.
2. Assign papers in stages, or design the assignments in such a way as to elicit analysis rather than memorization.
3. Proctor exams carefully and use whatever constraints are appropriate for the exam room.
4. Discuss the importance of academic integrity with your class.

More suggestions are available in the [Academic Integrity Handbook for Instructors and TAs](#).

When using a TMS that stores student work in a database:

1. To be FOIPP compliant, you **must** let students know what service you are using, how and for how long their information will be stored, and the purpose(s) for which it will be used. A statement on your course outline is necessary, and it is best to discuss it in class as well. If you cannot get the required information from the TMS service, avoid using that service.
2. The course outline must also indicate that students have an opportunity to opt out if they object to having their intellectual property added to a database. Make the alternative realistic and achievable, rather than something designed to discourage students from opting out. **Suggestions for opt-out alternatives:**
 - Have the student submit drafts either at specific deadlines or along with the final paper.
 - Conduct an interview with the student to discuss the process of writing the paper.
 - Have the student fill out a short questionnaire on the process of writing the paper.
 - Have the student provide copies of the sources used.
3. Explain to your students that they may not opt out of having their work checked for plagiarism, only of having their material stored in a database. You can use other methods to check for plagiarism if needed, including Google or other search systems that don't store work in a database.
4. Give your students a deadline to opt out and ensure they are informed of what alternative(s) exist for them so that they can make an informed decision.
5. For privacy concerns, it is better to use a local system that compares the assignments in one course or Department rather than a system with an international database, especially one housed in another country.
6. To ensure students do not feel that they are "guilty until proven innocent," you may want to consider using a TMS only to check suspect papers than to require all papers be submitted for mandatory screening.
7. Be very wary of 'free' plagiarism detection services. Make sure you know exactly what the service is doing with the papers you submit to it.
8. A TMS report alone is not sufficient to make a case of plagiarism to the Dean of your faculty. The TMS report should act only as a trigger for further investigation.
9. When considering adopting a TMS, ensure that your evaluation process includes FOIPP considerations, and account for the University's information management, privacy and security requirements. Be sure to consult with the [Information Technology Security Office](#), the [Information and Privacy Office](#), and the [Office of General Counsel](#) before making a decision.
10. Instructors who adopt or use TMS are responsible to ensure that its use complies with FOIPP. You should also be prepared to address concerns from students regarding intellectual property or lack of trust between teacher and students.

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