

Tips on Evaluating Plagiarism Prevention Services

September 30, 2009

Not all plagiarism prevention services are equal: they vary widely in accuracy, speed, ease of use, reliability and overall effectiveness. The following guidelines will help you perform a rigorous head-to-head comparison to determine which service is the best match for your needs and organization.

Guideline #1: Use Real Student Papers

Plagiarism prevention tools work by examining student papers and matching them against a database of pre-existing sources such as web content, articles, books and other student papers in order to find unoriginal content. The only way to fully test this matching ability is to use actual student papers--and the more papers, the better. In addition to using real papers, be sure to:

- **Use a sufficient number of papers.**
To ensure that you get significant results, try to test at least 250 papers.
- **Use “fresh” papers**
When evaluating a service, make sure to use papers that haven't been submitted previously to that service.
- **Use a variety of papers**
For best results, use papers reflecting your institution's breadth of writing assignments (short and long papers, research and non-research papers, papers from a variety of subject areas).

Guideline #2: Closely Simulate How Instructors Will Use the Service

In order to gauge a service's effectiveness in actual use, submit test papers in a manner that closely resembles instructors' habits.

Batching

If you think instructors are likely to process papers in batches (e.g., for an entire class), submit a large number of papers at once.

- **Timing**
Services should be able to promptly process papers regardless of the time or day of the week. To test this ability, try to approximate the timing of your instructors. For example, if instructors would typically submit papers on Tuesday at 9 pm, run your test submissions at that time.

Guideline #3: Use Objective Metrics

To make sure your comparison is truly objective, use quantitative measures wherever possible.

- **Wait Time**
To compare the speed at which various services process papers, record the date and time of each submission, how many papers were submitted and the time that you received the report for each paper. Record the wait-time for each report and analyze the data to determine which service produces the fastest results.
- **Text-Matching**
To determine which service finds the most text matches, record the match score reported for each paper by each service. Next, compute the average match score and median match score reported by each service. To better understand the reports, consider visiting the website for each service.

- **Overall Ease of Use**
Rate each service for ease of use and the ease of *learning* to use it.
- **Usefulness of Reports**
Examine the reports for individual papers and rate each service for the usefulness of the results with respect to your needs. Reports should include thorough feedback that allows you to quickly assess a group of papers, determine whether they contain unoriginal content and, if so, whether it is properly attributed or not.
- **Database Size and Quality**
Rate each service for the range and volume of source content against which papers are matched. For example, does the database include only publicly available web content, or does it also include proprietary sources such as articles, books and reference works? Equally important, rate each service for the number of student papers in its database. In order to detect collusion, services should have access to a very large number of papers, well into the millions.
- **Foreign Language Support**
If your student papers are likely to include foreign language text, rate each service's ability to match such text.
- **Support Tools**
Rate each service for the breadth and depth of support tools and services available, including online self-help, email and phone support, documentation, training and professional services.
- **Future Flexibility**
Rate each service for its flexibility meeting your current and future needs with respect to integrating with any chosen learning management systems (LMS's). Does the service lock you into a specific LMS, or does it give you freedom of choice?
- **Vendor Reputation**
Rate each service's provider for its reputation and standing. How well-established is the company? Are its services widely used by leading educational institutions? Does it have a proven record of results?

Guideline #4: Generate a Recommendation Based on Your Analysis

Assist your institution's decision-making by providing a concise summary of your evaluation.

- Follow the recommendations above to write a summary of the research methodology. Include the dates on which the research was conducted and researchers' contact information.
- Summarize findings by listing the strengths and weaknesses of each service. State which service you recommend and explain why.

Appendix: Tables For Comparing Services

The following tables that may be helpful in comparing plagiarism prevention services:

Table 1: Wait Time Comparisons

Paper	Service #1	Service #2	Service #3
Paper #1	(enter time waited)		
Paper #2	(enter time waited)		
Paper #3, etc.	(enter time waited)		
Average time waited	(compute average)		
Median time waited	(compute median)		

Table 2: Text Matching Comparisons

Paper	Service #1	Service #2	Service #3
Paper #1	(enter match score)		
Paper #2	(enter match score)		
Paper #3, etc.	(enter match score)		
Average match score	(compute average)		
Median match score	(compute median)		

Table 3: Other Comparisons

Criterion	Service #1	Service #2	Service #3
Ease of Use	(enter rating)		
Usefulness of Reports	(enter rating)		
Database Size and Quality	(enter rating)		
Quality and volume of content database	(enter rating)		
Foreign Language Support	(enter rating)		
Support Tools	(enter rating)		
Future Flexibility	(enter rating)		
Vendor Reputation	(enter rating)		