



Attribution and Plagiarism Prevention

Attribution refers to full and proper credit to material in your writing that is borrowed from another source, such as ideas, data, images, and language. Attribution involves identifying authorship of source material by citing, paraphrasing, quoting, and adhering to the guidelines of a citation style, all of which protect against plagiarism.

Our Approach at the Graduate Writing Center

We believe attribution is a tool for improving critical thinking and writing.

While responsible attribution ensures that a writer is giving credit where credit is due and helps prevent plagiarism, it also gives writers the tools to engage with scholarly voices, validate their own arguments and claims, and gain credibility and competency in their field.

We encourage early learning and practice.

We encourage students to ask the Graduate Writing Center for iThenticate reports on draft class papers, thesis proposals, and early drafts of thesis chapters. These reports and the GWC's multifaceted guidance help students learn how to take notes and attribute properly before the thesis submission stage.

We approach attribution holistically.

When we advise students at the GWC, rather than focusing on the results of an iThenticate report in isolation, we discuss concepts such as [citing](#), [summarizing](#), [paraphrasing](#), [quoting](#), [common knowledge and language](#), [signal phrases](#), [sentence flow](#), and strategic use of source material. When reviewing iThenticate reports, we read critically—beyond the report results—with an eye for what does (and does not) need to be attributed and the best methods for obtaining clarity.

iThenticate reports are not safety blankets.

An iThenticate report is generated when a paper is uploaded into a cloud-based software that compares the document's text against billions of other documents. It can be a useful guide, but a clean report does not indicate that a document is free of plagiarism or that all source material is properly attributed. iThenticate finds only exact or close text matches, and only about [two-thirds](#) of those. It does not identify the following concerns:

- Borrowed information that has been paraphrased or summarized but not attributed
- Direct quotations that are improperly cited
- Inaccurately transcribed direct quotes
- Information or direct quotes attributed to the wrong source
- Some improperly paraphrased (heavily patchwritten) material
- Language from sources outside of iThenticate's database, such as undigitized books
- Fabricated or falsified information

Furthermore, the highlighting in an iThenticate report is not always trustworthy or indicative of necessary revision. Reports should be analyzed and flagged passages reviewed against the writer's original sources.












Understanding an iThenticate Report

iThenticate (a [Turnitin](#) product) color-codes strings of 5 words or more in a document that do not appear between quotation marks and that match, or closely match, other sources in its vast database. Each highlighted passage corresponds—with a color and number—to a source listed at the end of the report.

Be aware of the following limitations and idiosyncrasies when reviewing an iThenticate report.

<p>False positives</p>  <p>iThenticate flags many passages that are not genuine problems. For example, it may highlight proper names, standard wording, common terms or phrases, source titles, and properly attributed direct quotes that span page breaks.</p> <p>Examine each highlighted passage to determine if it is truly problematic.</p>	<p>Source accuracy</p>  <p>As soon as iThenticate finds a match, it stops checking other sources for the same language. Because the language may appear in many places—including untrustworthy web sources that do not properly credit the true original source—the source that iThenticate identifies is not necessarily the source the writer used or the authentic source of the language or information.</p>	<p>Quotation accuracy</p>  <p>When evaluating a flagged passage, always consult the source the writer used. Do not place quotation marks around a flagged passage or attempt to paraphrase without reviewing the original source for accuracy and meaning.</p> <p>A passage that looks like patchwriting, for example, may be a verbatim match to the source, or vice versa.</p>
<p>Common language</p>  <p>Common language is precise wording used to describe common knowledge—something that is broadly known and uncontested in a given field. A passage may be common language if it is impossible to paraphrase without changing the meaning (e.g., an equation or formula). Common language does not need quotation marks. However, if the information <i>can</i> be described uniquely without changing the meaning, it should be paraphrased, or quoted and cited.</p>	<p>Patchwriting</p>  <p>Patchwriting occurs when a writer takes a passage from a source and, rather than paraphrasing meaningfully, makes superficial changes such as substituting synonyms or changing verb tenses. While patchwriting may help new writers get comfortable with academic style, it must be avoided in the final draft of any document. To revise patchwriting, the writer should paraphrase or quote responsibly.</p>	<p>Indirect sources</p>  <p>iThenticate may help show when a writer has borrowed language from one source that describes the work of yet <i>another</i> source. This is most apparent when iThenticate highlights an in-text citation or signal phrase that matches not the source of the citation itself, but another outside source. For guidance on use and proper attribution of indirect sources, consult our handout on citing your sources' sources.</p>
<p>Similarity index percentage</p>  <p>Because iThenticate's similarity index includes false positives and common language, we typically disregard this percentage when evaluating reports; it is seldom a useful indication of genuine concerns.</p>		

For more instruction on attribution concepts, plagiarism prevention, and iThenticate, see the Thesis Processing Office's [Citation Guides webpage](#) and the Graduate Writing Center's [iThenticate FAQ](#).



From the Naval Postgraduate School's Graduate Writing Center and Thesis Processing Office, located in the Dudley Knox Library and online at my.nps.edu/web/gwc and my.nps.edu/web/thesisprocessing.

