

Understanding, Misunderstandings, and Strategies for using SafeAssign

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Understanding SafeAssign

SafeAssign is an intellectual property checker, something like a spelling or grammar checker, but for quotations and ideas.

Safe Assign functions as an augmented version of the Blackboard Assignment Tool that flags text copied from the Internet, journals (via the ProQuest ABI/Inform database), or other papers. It does not detect plagiarism per se, but by flagging copied material, showing possible sources, and indicating the percentage of the paper copied, it can be used as an aid in fighting plagiarism. Because Safe Assign cannot determine if passages are properly cited, instructor intervention is necessary to determine actual plagiarism.

Blackboard suggests that papers with scores (percentages of copied materials) higher than 15% should be checked to see that content is properly attributed. It also suggests that scores about 40% indicate probable plagiarism. *Note* that Safe Assign considers titles of books and articles as copied text, so large numbers of notes or extensive bibliographies can also drive up the score.

Best Practices with SafeAssign

- Create a sample document that allows your students to see how Safe Assign marks up documents. Go over this with them, explaining what you will disregard, what you would consider allowable (correctable errors), and what would be treated as plagiarism.
- For at least the first assignment, allow students to submit in draft mode, and then resubmit the paper for a grade. This gives students a chance to get used to the software, and to correct bad habits they may have developed without fear of retribution.
- Release the SafeAssign reports to students. Explain to them how to review the reports. Also ensure that students understand SafeAssign does not instantly generate a report, but may take several minutes or several hours to do so (depending on server load).
- Incorporate any discussion of Safe Assign into a broader discussion of citing sources and intellectual property. Provide links to style guides and other materials on how to cite and quote materials. These MU sites provide references for citation styles, MU's description of plagiarism and the process faculty should follow, as well as links to topics related to academic honesty.

MU Libraries Writing and Citing Guides:
<http://mulibraries.missouri.edu/guides/WritingCiting.htm>
MU Libraries Plagiarism and Copyright Resources:

Support

Experiencing any problems? Feel free to call us:

Marla Germann
(573) 882-1733

Gary Godsy
(573) 882-1664

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(573) 882-6176

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(573) 884-6966

[Request a Consultation](#)

Or email us at:
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Last Updated
20th of June, 2012

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Additional resources may be found in the ET@MO handout "[Addressing Academic Honesty](#)"

- When focusing on creating good papers and avoiding plagiarism, consider using SafeAssign in tandem with the Self and Peer Assessment tool. Have students peer review their writing before submitting to SafeAssign, or after revising a paper based on SafeAssign feedback. Alternatively, set up a series of Self Assessment questions to lead students through finding the kinds of errors that SafeAssign catches.
- Help students consider Safe Assign as a tool for their own use, to be used like a spelling or grammar checker before submitting the final draft of a paper.

Sources of Misunderstanding in SafeAssign

There are four major "gotcha's" to watch for in evaluating SafeAssign reports.

1. The paper shows a matching score of 100%.
 - Cause: If you have had students submit drafts of their papers but did not have "draft" mode turned on in the SafeAssignments, then the earlier version(s) of the paper will have been added to the database. Under these circumstances, all, or almost all, of the final version of the paper will appear to be plagiarized from the earlier drafts.
 - Solution: These hits may be ignored or you may rerun the report without these sources.
2. When opening the file, the name of someone other than the student appears.
 - Cause: This is usually caused by a glitch in the way SafeAssign processes files submitted as .rtf (Rich Text Format). When Microsoft Word saves a file, it includes certain metadata, including the name of the person who installed or licensed the software. When this file is saved in .rtf format, SafeAssign is unable to recognize this as metadata, and so displays it as part of the file's text. Thus the individual who installed Word in the campus computing labs may show up as the "author" of the paper when it is opened.
 - Solution: Ignore any lines in the body of a paper or report starting with "AUTHOR:" and inform students that they need to include their name at the beginning of the paper. Always look for the name of the author in the "Paper Information" summary in the header of the document or report. You may also wish to suggest that they do not upload .rtf documents to SafeAssign.
3. The student has used quotation marks where appropriate and/or cited the sources, but they show up as being from a different source in SafeAssign.
 - Cause: SafeAssign ignores quotation marks and block quotations. Likewise, it is insufficiently "smart" to know that a citation refers to a given block of text. It therefore will flag any text in a document that it can match with text from the Internet, the Proquest ABI/Inform database, or its own databases.
 - Solution: These hits may be ignored or you may rerun the report without these sources.
4. Many or most of the citations show up as "matching" other sources.
 - Cause: The titles of most articles or books will match some source on the net, such as Google Scholar or Amazon.
 - Solution: These hits may be ignored or you may rerun the report without these

sources.

Strategies for Using SafeAssign

Although Blackboard markets SafeAssign primarily as anti-plagiarism software, and only secondarily as a tool for teaching students about plagiarism and intellectual property, we believe that the software is more useful in the secondary role. SafeAssign is an intellectual property checker, something like a spelling or grammar checker, but for quotations and ideas.

Because the Internet has created so much confusion regarding copyright, intellectual property, and plagiarism (even among lawyers) consider using SafeAssign more as a means of educating students about proper citation, rather than as merely a means of catching plagiarism and cheating in papers. This can be particularly effective when SafeAssign is combined with other tools to create an assignment.

For example, you can set up a series of assignments that will lead the students through the knowledge they need to successfully submit a final paper.

We suggest providing:

1. Links to resources on what should be cited.
2. A guide to citation formats.
3. A self-test regarding what to cite and how to quote.
4. Three individual SafeAssignments
 - a. First draft (Not graded)
 - b. Revised draft (Not graded)
 - c. Final draft (Graded)

For more information on how to set up a SafeAssignment and interpreting reports, please see the related articles.

Related Articles

- [Creating a SafeAssign Assignment](#)
- [Interpreting SafeAssign Reports](#)

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