What is SafeAssign?

SafeAssign can be used as a tool to prevent plagiarism and to create opportunities to help students identify how to properly attribute sources rather than paraphrase. SafeAssign is effective as both a deterrent and an educational tool.

When SafeAssign receives a submission from a student, it converts the submission from its original file format into text, and then “chunks” that text into phrase-level pieces to execute as queries against the indexes of the various sources. SafeAssign chunks the text according to punctuation (periods, commas, semicolons, new lines, etc.). Also, the edits that a student makes between a draft and final version of the paper can change the way that SafeAssign “chunks” the text, which, in turn, can result in different results.

SafeAssign also checks the Institutional Database before it checks the Global Reference Database. If a paper is in both databases, SafeAssign will always return the one in the Institutional Database because it will encounter that match first. Once SafeAssign finds a match, it stops looking for further matches. If SafeAssign finds more than one match for a particular paper, there is a possibility of a different percentage each time if the paper is resubmitted. Not only is there the possibility of false positives (for example, SafeAssign may return a match for appropriately cited quotations, as it does not make determinations about citation accuracy).

The Internet is a dynamic place. To determine if there are matches on the web, SafeAssign executes web searches using Microsoft Bing. Web pages change and the rankings that search engines give to web pages can also change. When using the phrase-level “chunks” as the search query, it's possible to get different results on different days as pages are added to the web and search engines (like Bing, which SafeAssign uses) adjust their rankings of search results that they return. Similarly, the Institutional Database and Global Reference Database grow by over a million papers a month.

SafeAssign is best approached not as a tool to “detect” plagiarism, but as a decision-support mechanism that provides instructors with more supplementary information for identifying areas of concern.

See Create a SafeAssignment in Blackboard for step by step instructions for using SafeAssign at Georgetown University.