

Managing Word Counts in MS Word, Google Docs, Turnitin and SpeedGrader

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This guide provides advice to staff on the relationships between word counts presented to both staff and students across various platforms during the creation, submission and marking of assessments. It provides best practice guidance on managing these relationships to ensure proper adherence to word limits and minimise confusion among staff and students working on assessments.

“This guide does not aim to dictate what should or will be included in word counts for specific assessment contexts. Students seeking clarification on what is included in the word count for a particular assignment should consult their module tutor or school student experience team.”

Most applications used to create documents and to upload/submit/mark assessments include a word count function, to tell the user how long a particular document is. However, the way that words are counted differs across different platforms, and this can lead to confusion, and in some cases unnecessary or unfair penalties, in assessments if staff and students are using different approaches to determine how long a piece of work is. This guide is designed to outline the different relationships between how word counts are calculated across some of the more commonly used platforms, and to offer advice on navigating this with your students.

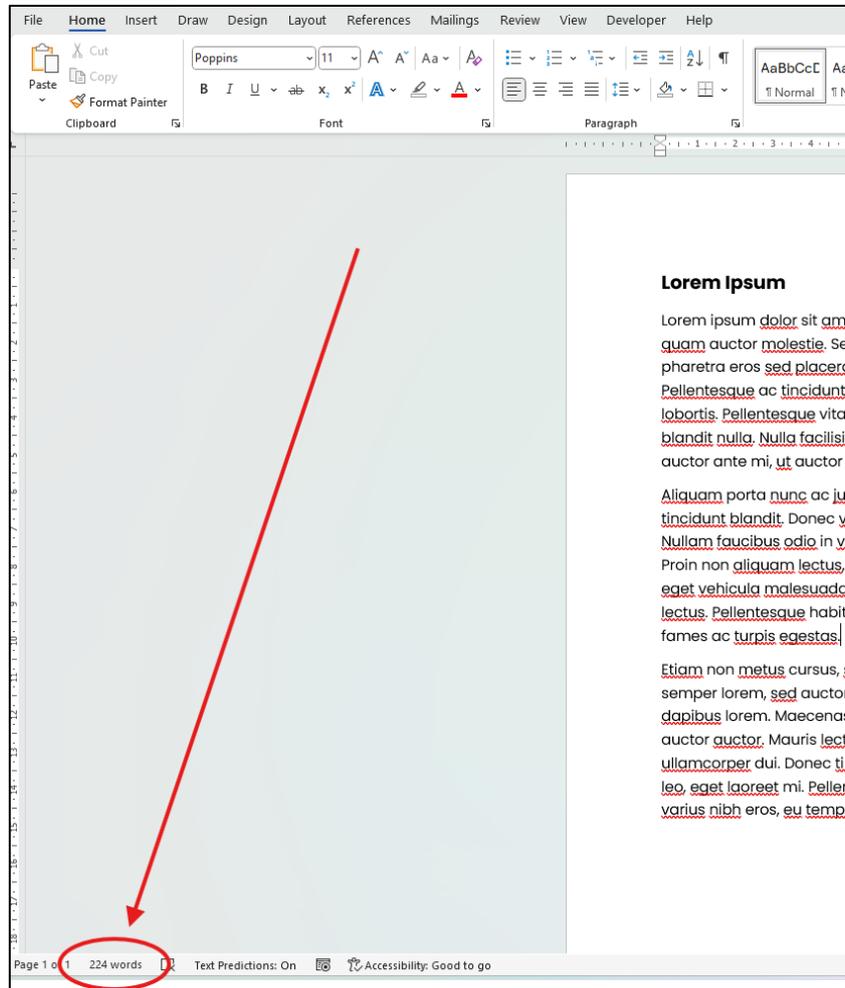
Word Counts at a Glance

	Microsoft Word	Google Docs	SpeedGrader	Turnitin
Text from text boxes	Yes (configurable)	Yes	No	No
Text from tables	Yes	Yes	No	No
Footnotes	Yes (configurable)	No	No	No
Endnotes	Yes (configurable)	N/A (not supported)	No	No
Captions	Yes	Yes	No	No
Visibility to students	Yes	Yes (must be checked manually/ enabled)	No	Yes (at point of submission and in receipt)

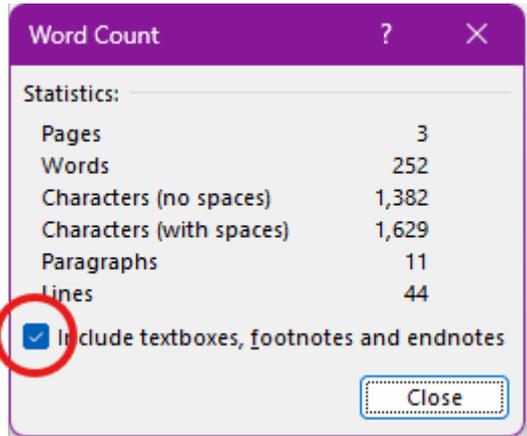
(As of February 2025)

Microsoft Word

The word count function in Microsoft Word appears at the bottom of the document page, and automatically updates as the user types. The screenshot below is for a desktop app user on a Windows PC, but the word count should appear in the same location for users who are using a Mac, as well as users who are working in Word within a browser window.



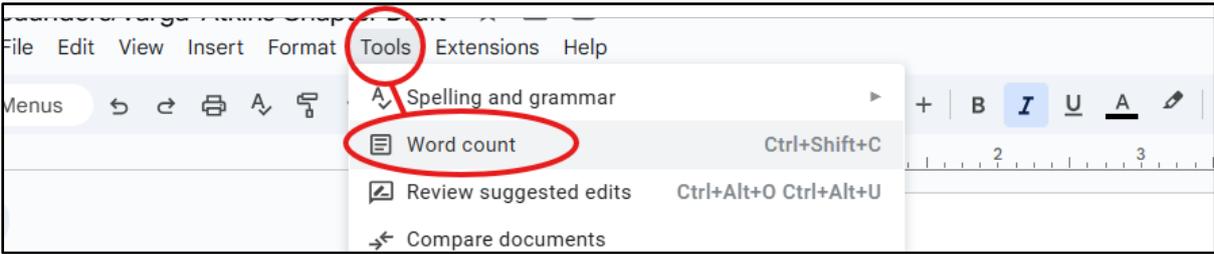
What's included: The word count in Word automatically **includes** material contained within Tables, textboxes, figure captions, footnotes, endnotes and bibliographies generated using Word's in-built Bibliographies tool (as opposed to those that are written manually). This can be disabled by simply clicking on the word count itself, and unchecking the option to 'include textboxes, footnotes and endnotes'.



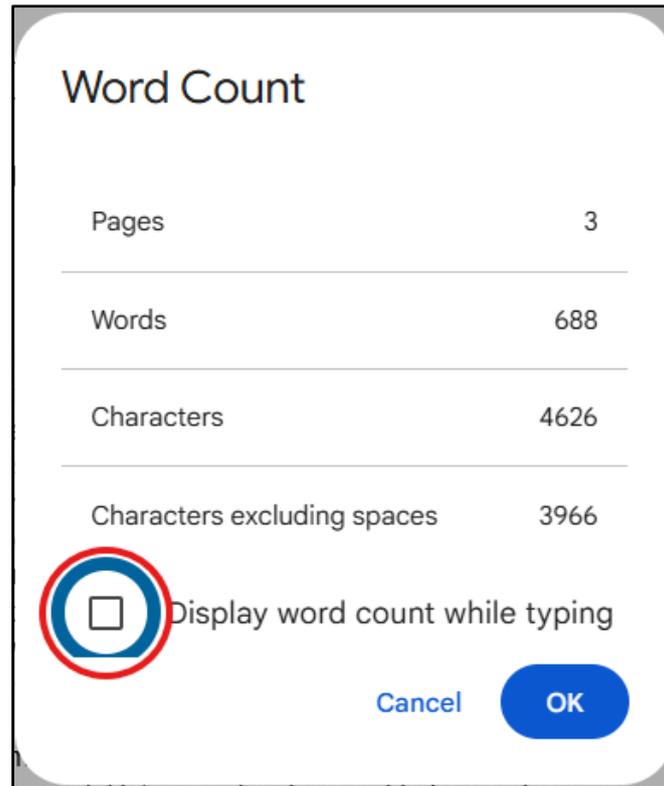
The option to exclude these types of text from the word count in Word should be communicated to students as necessary, depending on the assessment context. If it is not, some students may simply view the default word count at the bottom of their Word environment screen as the correct figure, when there may be material adding to the word count that will not be included as part of the assessment. This is particularly crucial when assessments are marked in Turnitin or SpeedGrader, which **does not** automatically include text in Tables, textboxes, figure captions, footnotes, endnotes and bibliographies generated using Word's in-built Bibliographies tool (see relevant sections below for more information). As a result, there may be a mismatch between the students' perceived word count provided by Word, and the marker's provided by the marking tool, which can lead to difficult conversations.

Google Docs

Google Docs has a similar word count function to MS Word, but it must be manually checked and/or enabled by the user before it will be displayed. Users can find the option under the 'Tools' menu.



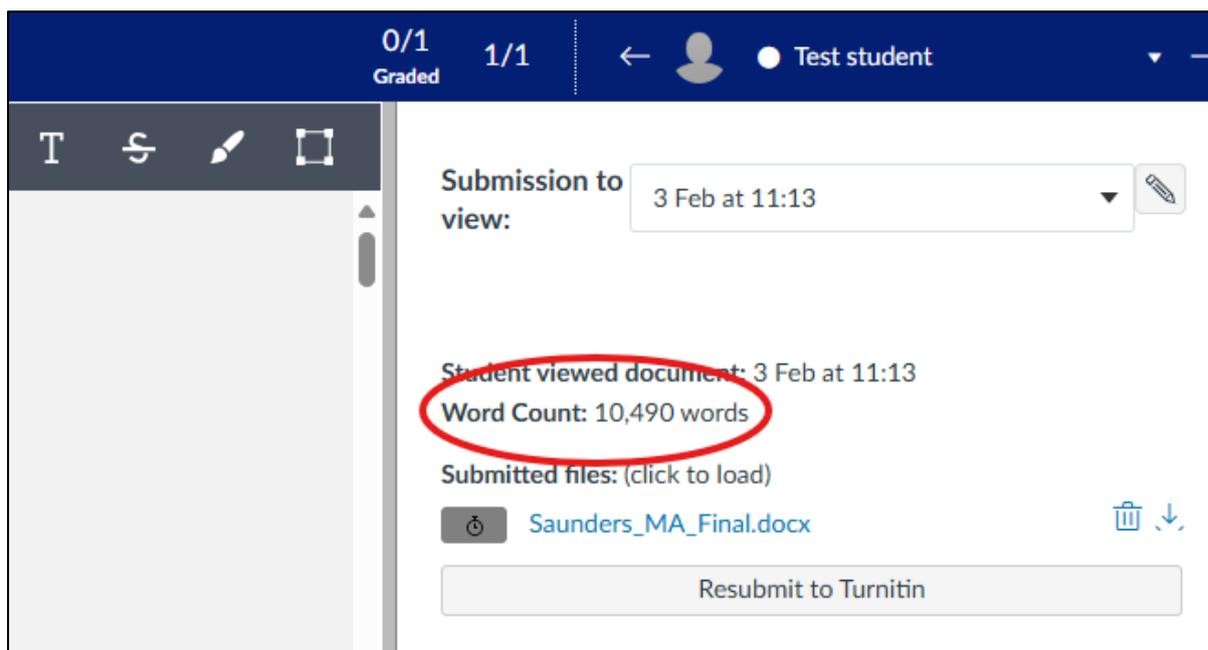
Users can choose to display the word count on the Google Docs page itself within the word-count sub menu, however it will only appear for the duration that the user has the document open – if the document is closed and then re-opened at a later date, the word-count will have disappeared and it will need to be re-enabled to appear on the screen as the user writes.



What's included: Google Docs themselves state that the word count 'applies to everything except headers, footers and footnotes'. There is no option to exclude these from the overall word count. As a result, users will need to ensure that they are sure that the word counts are applied to the appropriate sections of text manually before submission. Users can highlight sections of text and reopen the word count window to check how many words a section is and add them up as they need. Google Docs has no dedicated function for bibliographies and reference lists, and so if they are included in a document then they will add to the overall word count. Students should be made aware of this if they are using Google Docs.

SpeedGrader

SpeedGrader's word count function is only viewable to markers. Students will not see their word count if the assessment is submitted in SpeedGrader. It appears on the right-hand side of the marking window. It does not need to be enabled; it will appear automatically with each submission.



What's included: SpeedGrader **automatically excludes** text contained within Tables, textboxes, figure captions, footnotes, endnotes and bibliographies generated using tools such as Word's in-built Bibliographies tool (as opposed to those that are written manually). Naturally, this is mismatched with MS Word itself, which includes this material by default, which could potentially create a disparity in word counts between MS Word and SpeedGrader. This may also occur with documents created using Google Docs, as that platform also includes text in tables, captions, etc. As a result, word counts in SpeedGrader may appear lower than they do in MS Word/Google Docs by default.

As students are unable to see the word count in SpeedGrader, it is critically important that students are sure of their word counts **before they submit to SpeedGrader** to ensure that the relevant body of text that contributes to the word count is captured and calculated. Students who simply use the default word count in Word/Google Docs may end up with counts that are lower than required, as they have not accounted for text that appears in ineligible contexts.

Assessment briefs, module handbooks and other supplementary material provided to students should be clear regarding what is and is not included in the word count, and steps taken if necessary to demonstrate to students how to ensure that their word counts are correct.

Markers should also ensure that they have checked the assessment itself, and do not simply rely on one word count provided by one system before applying any penalties.

Turnitin

Turnitin provides the student with a word count immediately prior to submitting the assessment, when the student has uploaded the document but before they click 'submit'.

Submit File

Upload Review Complete

Title
Saunders_MA_Final.d
OCX

File Size
126.75 KiB

Word Count
10,481

Saunders Decolonising 'Authenticity'

Rethinking pedagogic 'authenticity' in higher education through the lens of 'decolonising the curriculum'.

Samuel Saunders, Centre for Innovation in Education, University of Liverpool

Introduction

'Authenticity' is a form of Constructivist pedagogy that places value on student-driven construction of knowledge, depth-focused inquiry, and value beyond the educational context (Newmann et al., 1996; Bada, 2015; Villarreal et al., 2020). In higher education, it is often connected to assessment, and is frequently taken to refer to assessments that replicate, or are comparable to, tasks that students will experience post-graduation, often in workplace contexts (Coltherpe et al., 2021). This perspective has existed within scholarship from at least the 1990s (McArthur, 2023), and 'authentic assessment' has become a hallmark of many universities' pedagogic frameworks or strategies, where lecturers are required to design and implement activities that replicate or rehearse tasks that will be performed in post-graduation and/or workplace scenarios (McArthur, 2023).

Decolonising the curriculum, meanwhile, refers to the destabilisation of remnant colonial power structures pervading the academy (Winter et al., 2022). It colonialism and imperialism have shaped how the curriculum, 2022). The legacy of colonialism is the continued central instruments of power (Ardiy et al., 2021), and thus to decolonise the historic global domination of the West and to reflect on and redress extant imbalanced power

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Preview Submission Cancel Submission Submit to Turnitin

Students will also be provided with the option to download a submission receipt, which also includes a word count.

Page count: 21

Word count: 10,481

Character count: 62,601

Submission date: 03-Feb-2025 11:34AM (UTC+0000)

Submission ID: 249918159

For markers, the word count is displayed within Turnitin Feedback Studio, under the 'i' symbol on the right-hand side of the screen (submission details).

Submission Details	
Student ID	scsals08@liverpool.ac.uk
Class Name	personal test course samuels
Class ID	7612018
Submission ID	249918159
Submission Date	03-Feb-2025 11:34AM (UTC+0000)
Submission Count	1
File Name	Saunders_MA_Final.docx
File Extension	docx
File Size	126.75K
Character Count	62601
Word Count	10481
Page Count	21

What's included: like SpeedGrader, Turnitin will not count words in textboxes, footnotes, endnotes, app-created bibliographies or figure captions. Again, this is potentially mismatched with MS Word itself, which includes this material by default. This may also occur with documents created using Google Docs, as that platform also includes text in tables, captions, etc. As a result, word counts in Turnitin may appear lower than they do in MS Word/Google Docs by default.

Again, therefore, is it critically important that students are sure of their word counts **before they submit to Turnitin** to ensure that the relevant body of text that contributes to the word count is captured and calculated. Students who simply use the default word count in Word/Google Docs may end up with counts that are lower than required, as they have not accounted for text that appears in ineligible contexts. It is helpful that Turnitin provides the opportunity to see the word-count before submission (unlike SpeedGrader), and so students' attention should be drawn to this before they complete the assessment.

As with SpeedGrader (and all assessments), assessment briefs, module handbooks and other supplementary material provided to students should be clear regarding what is and is not included in the word count, and steps taken if necessary to demonstrate to students how to ensure that their word counts are correct.

Finally, markers should also always ensure that they have checked the assessment itself, and do not simply rely on one word count provided by one system before applying any penalties.

Other Recommendations and Approaches

Mirror the assignment brief to the marking tool

When providing word count specifications to students, align these to the word count functionality of the marking tool you will be using. For example, since SpeedGrader does not include text contained within Tables, textboxes, figure captions, footnotes, endnotes and bibliographies generated using Word's in-built Bibliographies tool, explicitly inform students that the word count should exclude these elements. (See Appendix for suggestions for how this could be presented to students.)

Submission cover sheet

Consider adding a 'Word Count' field to submission cover sheets where students self-report the final word count from their chosen word processing software. This would give a chance to remind students of the word count requirements, of what is and what is not to be included. It would also act as a quick reference to flag to staff potential discrepancies between the student-reported word count and the word count in SpeedGrader/Turnitin, highlighting work that may need further attention.

Establish a 'Single Point of Truth' for Word Count

To minimise confusion and ensure consistency, we recommend departments or staff with their students decide on an agreed source for determining word count where word count will lead to penalisation of marks. For example, Microsoft Word will commonly be used by students for written work and is accessible to both students and staff, so this platform may be chosen as the most logical place to check word count.

Appendix: Ideas for communicating your word count to students

A table can be provided to succinctly explain to students what should and should not be included in a word count, which could then be included within an assignment brief. Feel free to copy the table(s) below and amend the details as needed. If applicable, you should also stipulate that students do not have to use that particular application to complete the assessment (unless they *do* have to use a specific application).

Expected Word Count	[expected word count]
As measured in	[expected app name] (see guidance)

Word count Inclusion/Exclusion List (what can be included in your word count)

Tables	Included / Excluded
Captions (for figures etc.)	Included / Excluded
Footnotes / Endnotes	Included / Excluded
Bibliography	Included / Excluded

You may also like to share this link from IT Services with your students:

- [How to use Microsoft Word's word count feature](#)

Example from the School of Psychology

The text below has been developed by colleagues in the School of Psychology to communicate to students how the word count should be counted. This text appears in the school's Psychology Student Handbook, which is provided to all students. It demonstrates how the school has established a 'single point of truth' for word counts that is consistent across all students, assessments, and markers.

Word Limits

Coursework assignments come with a specified word limit.

- It is the student's responsibility to ensure that they observe the word limit.
- Please refer to the module co-ordinator who will confirm word limits for each assignment.
- The word count should be provided on the title page of the submitted work.

Included in the count are the following: Text, footnotes, endnotes, in text references (authors and dates). Not included in the count are the following: Title, reference list section, tables, table captions, figure captions, Appendices.

Students should use **Microsoft Word** to check your final word count prior to submission. Other applications use different methods to calculate the total word count, which can result in an artificially lower word count.

When submitting your Turnitin assignment, the word count provided during the submission process may differ from the word count in your original assignment file. This is because:

- I. Turnitin uses a word-counting algorithm, very similar to Microsoft Word but Turnitin's word count does not include words in text boxes, footnotes and endnotes
- II. Turnitin will count each separate word within a URL, however a PDF or Word document will count a URL as one word.



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