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Self Plagiarism

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Most authors and editors easily grasp the concept of plagiarism—using other people’s word or ideas without attribution—but self-plagiarism is not so easily defined. At what point does repeating information from one article to another cross the line from providing useful information to the reader to recycling previously published material that is copyright protected? For instance, does repeating the methods section from a previously published article in a new manuscript discussing other outcomes of the same study provide valuable context, or should the previously published article simply be referenced? An obvious downside of this approach is that it forces readers to track down another article.

Even editors disagree as to how much overlap is acceptable, making it difficult for authors to know what to do. However, if authors and editors develop a fundamental understanding of self-plagiarism and collaborate in determining if it exists, a solution can be found.

What is self-plagiarism and why is it a problem?

Self-plagiarism is also referred to “text recycling,” according to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE, n.d.) It occurs when an author repeats text that has appeared in previously published articles.

The problem with self-plagiarism is two-fold. First, repeating information the author has already published can confuse the scientific record by creating multiple sources of the same information. Second, self-plagiarism can violate the copyright agreement the author has signed with the previous publication—typically authors sign a release form that transfers full copyright to the publisher, so they no longer own the rights to the specific way that information is presented (Henley, 2014; Brent, 2014).

New authors sometimes have a difficult time understanding why they have to obtain permission for something they have written. However, once authors transfer copyright, they are held to the same principles of fair use that any other author would be held.

How is self-plagiarism detected?

Editors use software such as CrossCheck or iThenticate to help detect plagiarism and self-plagiarism. If an author is simply repeating text in large chunks, the editor’s course of action is clear—rejection. If the editor believes the self-plagiarism was inadvertent or it applies to a limited section, another option is to ask the authors to revise the article and resubmit.

Rarely are cases of self-plagiarism this simple; typically the editor encounters more complex cases.

For example, one editor presented a case on the International Academy of Nurse Editors' (INANE) discussion forum. The editor found that CrossCheck revealed a 27% overlap between a submitted manuscript and a published article by the same authors; all the overlap was in the methods section. When queried, the authors stated there are only so many ways the methods can be described and that for consistency purposes, papers flowing from the parent study should include the methods. It should be noted that the authors cited where the methods section previously appeared.

The aspect of the authors' response related to limited ways of describing the methods section is consistent with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines for text recycling, which state, "Use of similar or identical phrases in methods sections where there are limited ways to describe a common method, however, is not uncommon. In such cases, an element of text recycling is likely to be unavoidable in further publications using the same method."

Most editors in the INANE discussion forum agreed that since the authors did not intend to deceive and provided a citation where the methods were previously published, that article could be accepted for publication.

Disclosure

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2009) notes that in "limited circumstances" (such as describing an instrument), authors can repeat previously used words without attribution, but more extensive use of previously published words should include a citation. The challenge is that what is "extensive" to one editor might not be to another.

To protect themselves, authors should first strive to rewrite sections that carry some overlap from previously published work, such as the methods section. If that is not possible, disclosure is key. The author can include something such as "The methods for this study were previously described in detail in //cite the previous publication.// They are briefly summarized here." This gives the reader some background while not repeating the entire section. The author should also disclose to the editor in the cover letter how this issue was handled.

In some cases, the editor might decide this option is insufficient. For example, perhaps the methods are too complicated to summarize, and the editor doesn't want to make the reader seek out another article. Maureen Shawn Kennedy, MA, RN, Editor-in-Chief of *American Journal of Nursing*, suggests another option is obtaining permission from the publisher of the original article to reprint the methods section as a sidebar in the new article. Permission to reprint should be included at the end of the sidebar.

In the INANE discussion, Lucy Bradley-Springer, PhD, RN, ACRN, FAAN, Editor of *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*, sounded a note of caution, "Although there are a limited number of ways to describe the method, surely there are at least two to three ways to rewrite it so that it is not just cut and pasted. If someone is publishing that many papers out of one study, I would start to worry about salami slicing as well as duplicate publishing." Salami slicing refers to publishing multiple articles when the research would be better presented as one article (Elsevier, n.d.)

What should editors do?

While managing self-plagiarism, editors must be careful not to discourage authors from disseminating their findings and knowledge. "I think that plagiarism and self-plagiarism are serious issues that merit attention but at the same time, I think we need to be careful not to let the

pendulum swing too far in the other direction,” says Leslie Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, principal and owner of Maine Desk, LLC. “I have had recent doctoral graduates say to me, ‘I published my dissertation, therefore I can’t write an article for a journal because that would be self-plagiarism.’”

Nicoll goes on to say, “Likewise, a group of researchers who have undertaken several years of study, funded at the tune of several hundreds of thousands of dollars, are not going to be able to report that in one article. We want researchers to disseminate their findings so then why do we start throwing up barriers about self-plagiarism because there is repetition in the methods section?”

Nicoll developed a schematic for describing “tolerance” for text recycling (see Figure 1). Although tolerance varies among editors, writers should know that in general there is more tolerance for overlap in describing methods as opposed to the discussion section, which should clearly include new insights. If new insights aren’t possible, the manuscript probably should not be published.

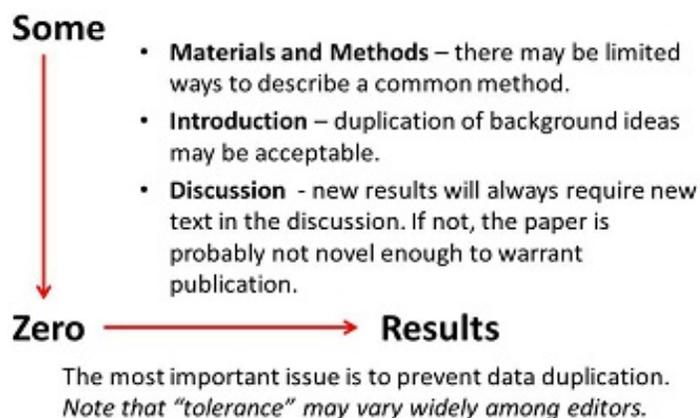
If self-plagiarism is discovered after a manuscript is published, the editor will need to publish a correction or, in extreme cases, retract the article. In that case, editors might want to consult the COPE’s retraction guidelines at <http://publicationethics.org/files/retraction%20guidelines.pdf>.

Collaboration is vital

Self-plagiarism may be unavoidable in a limited number of situations, most notably the methods section. Neither editors nor authors want authors to arbitrarily rewrite already effective information, possibly sacrificing reader understanding. Full disclosure by the author, accompanied by thoughtful consideration by the editor, ensures that these situations are handled in best interest of the scientific record—and the reader.

Figure 1.

Figure 1. Tolerance for Text Recycling



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Comments of Maureen Shawn Kennedy and Lucy Bradley-Springer are used with permission.

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