



WHITE PAPER

THE ETHICS OF SELF-PLAGIARISM

1.0 Summary

Writers often claim that because they are the authors, they can reuse their work, either in full or in excerpts, over and over again. How can republishing one's own work be defined as plagiarism *if the author has only used his or her own words and ideas*? This white paper explores the definition of self-plagiarism, how it crosses into copyright laws and ethical issues, and the different ways an author can avoid this increasingly controversial act of scholarly misconduct.

2.0 What is Self-Plagiarism?

Let's look at one scenario: Leslie is an assistant professor going through tenure review with significant pressure to publish. An article she is writing for a journal piggybacks on a recent conference presentation that was also published by the conference sponsor. Leslie would like to integrate the writing from the conference presentation into the article. She faces an ethical dilemma: to repurpose her own writing from one text and use it for another, thereby increasing her number of publications for tenure, but from the same work. Doing so, Leslie might commit what Scanlon (2007) calls "academic fraud," a form of self-plagiarism (pg. 57).

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Self-Plagiarism is defined as a type of plagiarism in which the writer republishes a work in its entirety or reuses portions of a previously written text while authoring a new work. Writers often maintain that because they are the authors, they can use the work again as they wish; they can't really plagiarize themselves because they are not taking any words or ideas from someone else. But while the discussion continues on whether self-plagiarism is possible,

the ethical issue of self-plagiarism is significant, especially because self-plagiarism can infringe upon a publisher's copyright. Traditional definitions of plagiarism do not account for self-plagiarism, so writers may be unaware of the ethics and laws involved in reusing or repurposing texts.

The American Psychological Association (2010) explains how plagiarism differs from self-plagiarism: "Whereas plagiarism refers to the practice of claiming credit for the words, ideas, and concepts of others, self-plagiarism refers to the practice of presenting one's own previously published work as though it were new" (pg. 170).

As Roig (2006) suggests, self-plagiarism occurs "when authors reuse their own previously written work or data in a 'new' written product without letting the reader know that this material has appeared elsewhere" (pg. 16). Roig identifies a few types of self-plagiarism:

- Republishing the same paper that is published elsewhere without notifying the reader nor publisher of the journal
- Publishing a significant study as smaller studies to increase the number of publications rather than publishing one large study
- Reusing portions of a previously written (published or unpublished text)

3.0 Definitions of Plagiarism

The question of whether self-plagiarism exists or not—is it possible to plagiarize oneself?—is rooted in the definition of *plagiarism*. Plagiarism is typically defined as stealing the work of another and presenting it as if it were one’s own. The Oxford English Dictionary (2011) defines plagiarism as taking the work of another as “literary theft.” The verb to “plagiarize” is defined as:

- “To take and use as one’s own (the thoughts, writings, or inventions of another person);”
- “To copy (literary work or ideas) improperly or without acknowledgement; (occas.) to pass off as one’s own the thoughts or work of (another)”

According to the OED definition, in the strict sense recycling papers would not be plagiarism.

However, Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2011) defines to “plagiarize” similarly with the addition description in the second definition below:

- To steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one’s own: use (another’s production) without crediting the source
- To commit literary theft: present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source

So, in the Webster definition, recycling one’s own papers would fall under “to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source” and is, therefore, considered plagiarism. But what is more important than the definition of plagiarism, and whether it is possible to “self-plagiarize,” is the ethics behind self-plagiarism.

4.0 Ethical Issues of Self-Plagiarism

Publications manuals have a set standard regarding self-plagiarism. When an author publishes in a journal, the author often signs over rights to the publisher; thus, copyright infringement is possible if an author reuses portions of a previously published work.

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Copyright law “protects original works of authorship” (www.copyright.gov). The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) provides the author’s responsibilities in guaranteeing authorship: “In signing a contract with a publisher an author guarantees that the work is original, that the author owns it, that no part of it has been previously published, and that no other agreement to publish it or part of it is outstanding” (pg. 142).

Authors can quote from portions of other works with proper citations, but large portions of text, even quoted and cited can infringe on copyright and would not fall under copyright exceptions or “fair use” guidelines. The amount of text one can borrow under “fair use” is not specified, but the Chicago Manual of Style (2010) gives as a “rule of thumb, one should never quote more than a few contiguous paragraphs or stanzas at a time or let the quotations, even scattered, begin to overshadow the quoter’s own material” (pg. 146).

In addition to following fair use guidelines, authors need to recognize that copyright is not merely for published text. According to the U.S. Copyright Office (2010), a “work is under copyright protection the moment it is created and fixed in a tangible form that is perceptible either directly or with the aid of a machine or device.”

Biomedical journals in particular have had significant problems with copyright due to self-plagiarism and many have taken a stance against the practice in publication. Some have gone so far as to request the author's previous manuscripts to ensure that the work is original (Roig 2006).

It seems that even the American Psychological Association (APA) has taken a recent position against the practice by addressing self-plagiarism in the 2010 sixth edition of the publication manual, a discussion, which is absent from previous editions.

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The APA also gives some guidelines for writing practice: "The general view is that the core of the new document must constitute an original contribution of knowledge, and only the amount of previously published material necessary to understand that contribution should be included, primarily in the discussion of theory and methodology. When feasible, all of the author's own words that are cited should be located in a single paragraph or a few paragraphs, with a citation at the end of each" (pg. 16).

5.0 Avoiding Self-Plagiarism

Roig (2006) offers writers a comprehensive list of guidelines for avoiding plagiarism, four of which deal specifically with self-plagiarism, as follows:

- **Guideline 10:** Authors who submit a manuscript for publication containing data, reviews, conclusions, etc., that have already been disseminated in some significant manner (e.g., published as an article in another journal, presented at a conference, posted on the internet) must clearly indicate to the editors and readers the nature of the previous dissemination.
- **Guideline 11:** Authors of complex studies should heed the advice previously put forth by Angell & Relman (1989). If the results of a single complex study are best presented as a 'cohesive' single whole, they should not be partitioned into individual papers. Furthermore, if there is any doubt as to whether a paper submitted for publication represents fragmented data, authors should enclose other papers (published or unpublished) that might be part of the paper under consideration (Kassirer & Angell, 1995). Similarly, old data that has been merely augmented with additional data points and that is subsequently presented as a new study is an equally serious ethical breach.
- **Guideline 12:** Because some instances of plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and even some writing practices that might otherwise be acceptable (e.g., extensive paraphrasing or quoting of key elements of a book) can constitute copyright infringement, authors are strongly encouraged to become familiar with basic elements of copyright law.
- **Guideline 13:** While there are some situations where text recycling is an acceptable practice, it may not be so in other situations. Authors are urged to adhere to the spirit of ethical writing and avoid reusing their own previously published text, unless it is done in a manner consistent with standard scholarly conventions (e.g., by using of quotations and proper paraphrasing) (pg. 19-25).

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- Authors and researchers
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- Research organizations
- Media groups
- Publishing companies
- Government agencies

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- A custom, private repository of content based on an individual's or an organization's research needs

6.0 Conclusion

The issue of self-plagiarism is becoming more and more prevalent, and some fields, particularly in STM organizations, such as biomedicine, have seen a rising trend in self-plagiarism. The APA publication manual has no discussion of self-plagiarism in its fifth edition, but addresses it twice in the sixth edition, perhaps to prevent such practices. Organizations and individual authors and researchers can take preventative measures in their writing practices and editing processes, including the use of technology that helps detect potential self-plagiarism before submitting their work for publication.

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