

# IN YOUR OWN WORDS: BEST PRACTICES FOR AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

Research manuscripts typically build upon or revise previous work and are often critical for academic career success. However, improperly referring to or recycling previous work can both decrease the likelihood of publication and damage career prospects.

The U.S. Office of Research Integrity defines plagiarism as “the appropriation of another person’s ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit.”<sup>1</sup> Said differently, plagiarism is the misrepresentation of someone else’s original thought as your own. In fact, the Latin root of plagiarism means *kidnapper* or *thief*. Such theft is a form of academic misconduct and can thus lead to decreased credibility as a researcher, article rejections or retractions from journals, and even dismissal from a university or research institution. Unfortunately, individuals may still be tempted to plagiarize for myriad

reasons, including feeling a pressure to publish, driven by their desire for recognition and/or career advancement; experiencing anxiety about writing in English; or struggling to express complex ideas in their own words. Although we often think of plagiarism as intentional, it can also be accidental. Carelessness while writing, heavy reliance on few sources, the cultural belief that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” and a lack of understanding of what plagiarism is may all lead to inadvertent intellectual theft.

## FORMS OF PLAGIARISM

The two most widely recognized forms of plagiarism are as follows:

### 1. VERBATIM PLAGIARISM

Copying text word-for-word from someone else’s work. If content from several sources is duplicated, this form of plagiarism is known as *mosaic* or *patchwork*.

### 2. PLAGIARISM OF IDEAS

Mentioning someone else’s unique idea, whether in the form of a theory, an interpretation, data, a method, an opinion, or new terminology, without citing your source, even if explained in your own words.

<sup>1</sup> From “Definition of Research Misconduct,” available at: <http://ori.dhhs.gov/definition-misconduct>

Moreover, there are several less commonly understood but equally concerning forms of plagiarism that should be avoided:

#### **LOOSE PARAPHRASING.**

Paraphrasing someone else's work with only slight changes, effectively maintaining the other author's logic while mentioning most or all of the same ideas. Note that the flow of an argument is indeed an original idea.

#### **PLAGIARISM FROM ALTERNATE SOURCES.**

Failing to cite the source of publicly available knowledge that is not in the scholarly literature. Similar to journal articles, sources such as books, webpages, blogs, lectures, and personal communication (including descriptions of unpublished ideas, with permission) should be referenced if they contributed unique information to your manuscript.

#### **SELF-PLAGIARISM AND DUPLICATE PUBLICATION.**

Recycling your own previously published text on a small scale (such as reusing a paragraph from one manuscript in the methods section of a second manuscript) or on a larger scale (such as the publication of the same manuscript in two separate journals), respectively. This is perhaps the most often overlooked category of plagiarism. Although self-plagiarism and duplication do not entail the theft of another's original ideas, this practice is unethical, particularly given that many journals ask for a confirmation that your research has not been published elsewhere, and is sometimes a violation of copyright law.

## **A STEP-BY-STEP WRITING PROCESS**

### How can researchers avoid plagiarism to increase their manuscripts' likelihood of being published?

Plagiarism may be on the rise due to increasing access to research articles via the internet, the ease of use of the copy-and-paste function, and mounting pressure to publish frequently and in high-impact journals to achieve tenure and obtain grants. In fact, *PNAS* has reported that 10% of retracted journal articles are withdrawn due to the plagiarism of others' ideas and that 14% are withdrawn due to duplicate publication.<sup>2</sup> However, the theft of ideas is also being detected more than ever due to heightened awareness among academics.

Peer reviewers familiar with the scholarly literature may notice data or wording similar to previously published work and alert the journal. Differences in writing style or fluency within a single manuscript or the inclusion of seemingly irrelevant ideas, which were copied along with more pertinent material, may additionally flag a paper as potentially plagiarized. Moreover, many academic journals have begun using plagiarism detection tools (such as CrossCheck™) to compare submissions with large databases of published articles.

<sup>2</sup> Fang, F.C. et al. 2012 "Misconduct accounts for the majority of retracted scientific publications" *PNAS* 109(42): 17028-17033. Available at: <http://www.pnas.org/content/109/42/17028.long>

It is clear that both widely recognized and less commonly recognized types of plagiarism are significant problems in academic publishing. But how can researchers avoid plagiarism to increase their manuscripts' likelihood of being published? Here are ideas for each step of the writing process:

### STEP 1:

Before writing, as you review the literature, keep careful records of your sources. Citation software, such as Zotero, ReadCube, or EndNote, can be helpful at this stage.

### STEP 2:

While writing, try not to directly refer to your sources to avoid inadvertent copying, use multiple sources to ensure a diversity of content, and err on the side of citation. See below for more information about when to cite a source.

### STEP 3:

After writing, review your manuscript and reference list to ensure that all of the appropriate source citations were included. Additionally, consider checking your manuscript for inadvertent plagiarism using Turnitin, iThenticate, eTBLAST, or other detection tools.

In sum, plagiarism is a major issue that should be consciously avoided throughout the process of preparing a research manuscript. Taking the time to use your own words will only increase the impact of your work.

## WHEN TO CITE:

- When including verbatim text, which should be placed inside quotation marks, even if only mentioning a unique two-word phrase. Note that quotation marks are particularly useful if a phrase seems too difficult or distinctive to paraphrase.
- When paraphrasing unique ideas, logic, or other information, regardless of the source. Proper paraphrasing and source citation clearly distinguish between others' ideas and your own in the context of your argument and logic.
- When mentioning your previously published work.
- When reproducing or adapting others' graphs or tables (after acquiring their permission).

## WHEN NOT TO CITE:

- When detailing your own work, presented for the first time in the current paper.
- When mentioning common knowledge—information available in general reference texts and/or stated without citations in at least five publications<sup>3</sup> (e.g., dates of historical events or common laboratory methods). Note that just because a concept is well known in your field, it is not necessarily common knowledge. If you are not sure whether information is commonly known, include a citation.

<sup>3</sup> <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/2/>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Panter is an In-House Editor at AJE and has been editing for the company since 2008. She graduated from Yale University with a BS and MS in Biomedical Engineering and a PhD in Immunobiology. Her dissertation focused on antigen presentation in human cells. Dr. Panter has also served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* and as a writing advisor for graduate students in the sciences.



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