

Plagiarism: Trespassing the Grey Zone Between Searching and Researching

Sir,

One of the most heated debates doing rounds in the world of literature today is about plagiarism.

Walter Bagehot, physics and politics (1872)^[1] once said “The propensity of man to imitate what is before him is one of the strongest parts of his nature.” The following joke definition attributed to Wilson Mizner circulates around the Internet: To copy from one book is plagiarism; from two an essay; from three a compilation; from four a dissertation.^[2]

Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person’s ideas, processes, results or words without giving appropriate credit.

Research misconduct does not include honest error or differences of opinion. A finding of research misconduct requires that there be a significant departure from accepted practices of the relevant research community and the misconduct be committed intentionally or knowingly or recklessly and the allegation be proven by a preponderance of the evidence.^[3]

Easy availability of soft copies in computers, time constraints for submission leading to hurriedly prepared, poorly drafted, copy-pasted material with little modifications here and there are some of the reasons for plagiarism in scientific writings.^[4] Further, since the scientific community provides recognition to curriculum vitae with a long list of publications, scientists often fall prey to plagiarism.

Paraphrase and summary are the two most important ways to avoid plagiarism. To most of us there is a little difference between the two. However, to paraphrase means to express someone else's ideas in your own language and to summarize means to write down the essence of someone else's work. Whatever the method, the words used should be one's own and should also be properly acknowledged with the original source.

Students today quickly learn that finding and manipulating data available on the internet is a valuable skill. The production of original analysis and interpretation may seem like 'harder work' compared to the easy availability of enormous information online. Students should be taught to learn skillful analysis and apt processing of information rather than to look for easy searching options. The best solution to avoid plagiarism is to follow the maxim "whenever in doubt, cite sources."^[5]

Another form of plagiarism is "self-plagiarism," which means stealing or borrowing a large portion of the present work from one of his previously published manuscript. Suppose an author of a textbook wants to include some portion of his research work on anatomy published earlier, will it lead to "self-plagiarism?" (as he cannot change the human anatomy) The simple way out is disclosure to the editor and maintaining transparency by citing reference of his own previous work.^[6]

Plagiarism poses a significant threat to the health of scientific literature and is difficult to detect. Plagiarism is mostly suspected by knowledgeable reviewers, whose expertise in a particular field helps them catch fine defects. Electronic plagiarism detection tools are utilized by the editorial staff to detect plagiarism. The suspicious areas indicated by such tools are then compared carefully by placing both articles in parallel. Although abstract similarity is a useful method for plagiarism detection, but it is more effective, if full text article is processed.^[7]

Common tips to avoid plagiarism:

1. Original source of the idea, text or illustration must always be acknowledged by ethical medical writers.
2. If the text has been copied verbatim, then it must be enclosed within quotation marks.
3. Even when the borrowed idea has been written in one's own words, (i.e., paraphrasing has been carried out) it's important to properly acknowledge the original source.
4. If one is not sure whether an idea/fact is common knowledge, better to cite the source.^[8]
5. If some part of the text is from one's own previously published article, then it must be mentioned clearly in the cover letter submitted to the editor.
6. Written permission is required for reuse of any published cartoon, drawing or figure.
7. After submitting the article, at a later time if one feels that she/he has unintentionally used somebody else's ideas or text without appropriate referencing, one should immediately put across the message to the editor in chief of the concerned journal asking for advice.^[6]

In 2002 Plagiarismadvice.org was formed in UK against growing concerns about plagiarism and the authenticity of student work. It is providing resources, training, advice and guidance to universities, colleges, and schools world-wide and has been influential in raising awareness and stimulating discussion on the subject.^[9]

Research projects are conducted across Europe to assess the impact of policies for plagiarism in higher education, which focuses on several aspects like strategies for countering plagiarism, evaluates the policies and procedures implemented at institutional and national level, E-tools in use for detecting plagiarism and how they are deployed.^[10]

A guide to ethical writing by Miguel Roig, first published online in September 2003, helps students and professional identify and avoid plagiarism, self-plagiarism and other questionable writing practices. This guide is one of the many products of office of research integrity's educational initiatives in the responsible conduct of research.^[11]

To conclude we can say that to curb the menace of plagiarism in scientific writing, a combined effort on the part of authors, reviewers, and editors needs to be put in toward maintaining originality in the scientific literature by providing due acknowledgement to the real mind behind a particular idea.

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