

Ethics in publication

Michael B. Wallace, MD, MPH, Editor-in-Chief, *Gastrointestinal Endoscopy*^{1,*}
 Peter D. Siersema, MD, PhD, Editor-in-Chief, *Endoscopy*^{2,*}

OVERVIEW

The opportunity has never been greater for publishing scientific articles in traditional and open-access journals. The pressure to publish is intense with increasing competition for research resources and rewards for academic promotion. At the same time, the ability to search the web for big data provides powerful tools to compare new manuscripts with articles already published. In these times, it is increasingly important to ensure that scientific publication preserves its core values, to share new knowledge and ideas for the betterment of the patients in our care and the understanding of disease.

The pressure to publish has always led to rare examples of scientific misconduct. Many of us, including the present authors, are pushed to produce manuscripts on a regular basis and often write multiple review articles or book chapters on the same topic of our expertise. In this article, we will make clear the expectation of our scientific journals with regard to ethical issues in publication, in particular plagiarism, duplicate publication, data falsification, and authorship misrepresentation. Fortunately, these events appear to be rare, and we hope that this remains the case.

CURRENT GUIDELINES

Issues of scientific misconduct, and particularly issues of publication ethics, are addressed by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, www.icmje.org) and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE, www.publicationethics.org) to which our journals subscribe. Both groups provide valuable definitions and management algorithms for issues ranging from plagiarism and authorship disputes to data falsification. To avoid personal bias and misunderstanding, both groups provide clear

Abbreviations: COPE, Committee on Publication Ethics; ICMJE, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors

*Both authors contributed equally to this work.

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Current affiliations: Mayo Clinic, Jacksonville, Florida, USA (1), University Medical Center, Utrecht, the Netherlands (2).

guidelines and flowcharts on how to address each issue, with appropriate latitude for interpretation.

Classical plagiarism

Plagiarism is generally defined as “the act of using another person’s words or ideas without giving credit to that person.”¹ Despite this seemingly clear definition, in practice it can be challenging to precisely determine what constitutes plagiarism. Clearly the direct replication of previously published work by another author without reference is indisputably plagiarism. However, reproduction of phrases and ideas is common, particularly in the methods section of an article where many studies attempt to replicate the methodology of previous work. The key principle is the statement “without giving credit.” The examples below provide suggestions for how to avoid accusations of plagiarism.

- Direct replication of published work. This should be in quotation marks followed by a reference to that work.
- Paraphrasing published work in the current authors’ own words. This should not use quotation marks but should clearly reference the previous work (eg, As reported by Smith et al, the endoscopic therapy of Barrett’s esophagus has evolved... [reference]).
- Restating methods that are replicated from other studies. It is appropriate, in fact encouraged, that scientific studies should attempt to replicate the work of others to ensure validity. In these settings, the original source should be referenced or directly quoted (if identical) (eg, In our study, we used the methods previously described by Smith et al [reference] when performing the endoscopic procedure).

The reproduction of another individual’s work without attribution is a clear violation of publication ethics. Although still relatively rare, this is increasingly recognized through software that broadly crosschecks publication with the existing massive body of literature. This is especially common in review articles or in the background/introduction section of manuscripts.

Detection of plagiarism

Software that searches all published text is widely available and is routinely used by our journals to check for plagiarism. This is perhaps the most common issue of ethics review encountered in scientific publication. An example of a plagiarism report is shown in [Figure 1](#). (Note: we artificially created

a plagiarized document for demonstration purposes from one of our own publications.) The software highlights all areas of text overlap and indicates the percentage overlap and source.

TEXT RECYCLING OR “SELF PLAGIARISM”

Many authors, including ourselves, are often asked to write review articles or editorials on the same topic for many different journals or books. It is very challenging to rephrase the same ideas in different words each time. The key principle is whether novel information is being provided in each publication. As suggested by COPE, “Action should be considered when text is recycled from an earlier publication without any further novel development of previously published opinions or ideas or when they are presented as novel without any reference to previous publications” [<http://publicationethics.org/text-recycling-guidelines>].²

Text recycling in the introduction or methods section is difficult to avoid. Reporting the general statistics of a disease (eg, “Colorectal cancer is the third most common cause of death...”) is difficult to re-phrase and is generally acceptable but should always be referenced with up-to-date publications. Likewise, description of a common methodology that is used in a prior publication is necessary for consistency between studies (eg, “Bowel preparation was described according to the...scale”) [reference]. Where detailed identical methodologies have been previously reported, it is preferred to simply reference those with a brief description so the reader does not have to access other manuscripts (eg, “Colonoscopy was performed as previously reported by Smith et al [reference]. Briefly we ...”).

Text recycling in the results and discussion should be avoided because these sections are clearly linked to the originality of the manuscript. Both sections should be written in original language with no more than common short phrases of overlap.

DUPLICATE PUBLICATION

Duplicate publication is a specific and more common type of misconduct in which the same scientific content is re-published in another article. Its most egregious form is the simple re-publication of the same scientific study in two different journals. We recently noted that some manuscripts submitted to our journals had already appeared in non-PubMed-cited online journals. More common is the publication of a simple update of an article with minimal novel scientific information, such as an ongoing cohort of patients with slightly higher numbers than in a previous publication. Again, the principle of novel, original data holds. The new study should present a new hypothesis and aim, or substantially greater statistical power to resolve a previous hypothesis.

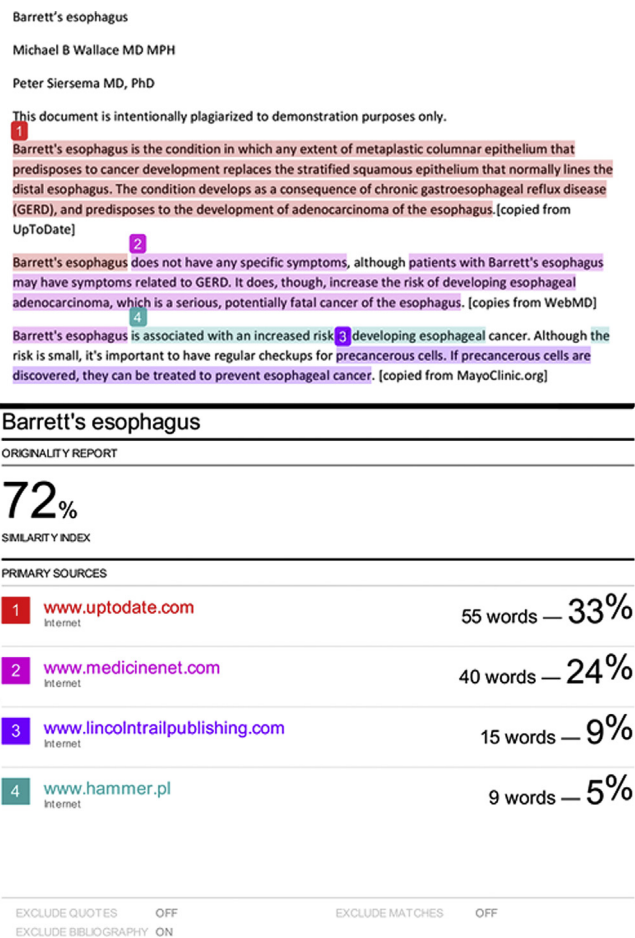


Figure 1. This figure demonstrates a typical output from plagiarism detection software, CrossCheck (<http://www.iThenticate.com/>). The document was intentionally plagiarized using text from the present authors' prior publications. Highlighted text indicated direct overlap with notation of the source.

An issue related to duplicate publication is what is commonly referred to as “salami slicing” of information to get multiple articles from just one study; this is considered unethical as well. Studies should present as complete a picture as possible to address the hypothesis and aims of the author. Extreme subdivision of articles into smaller and smaller aims may weaken the impact of the paper and result in rejection.

Finally, multiple submissions to more than one journal are considered to be an ethical error. It is often a situation in which a person is so determined to publish quickly that he/she ignores the rule to submit to one journal at a time.

MANAGEMENT OF SUSPECTED TEXT RECYCLING, PLAGIARISM, AND DUPLICATE PUBLICATION

Detection of clear plagiarism or scientific misconduct requires retraction of an article. When such violations are

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