Werner Ulrich's Home Page: *On Plagiarism*

Considerations for Authors and Reviewers
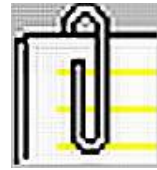
A reviewer's and author's perspective on plagiarism Both as a reviewer and as author, I cannot help but observe that plagiarism is ever more becoming an issue in academic publishing. The Internet has made it so easy to copy directly from a vast array of sources! The temptation to "borrow" material without doing justice to one's sources is certainly there; in order to resist it, clear principles and guidelines are essential for authors as well as for reviewers.

Recent involvement in the launching of a new open-access electronic journal, the *Journal of Research Practice* (JRP), once again confronted me with the issue. A manuscript I reviewed for the new journal relied so heavily on plagiarism that it faced the editors with a need for defining a clear policy regarding plagiarism. It caused me to try to formulate some basic guidelines for handling the problem. I would like to share some of the relevant considerations with other reviewers and authors.

A definition of plagiarism By plagiarism, I understand any use of ideas or formulations of others that risks passing them off as one's own. The only way to avoid this is to give full credit to the authors, by specifying the source truthfully and accurately.

Plagiarism includes the widespread phenomenon of "*mild plagiarism*" in the form of near-literal paraphrasing without giving accurate references. "Accurate" reference means to give full bibliographic data including the pagination. Giving page references is essential to enable readers to find referenced passages easily, so that they are able to compare the wording and meaning of the original author with that of the present author.

It is irrelevant for the fact of plagiarism whether the failure to disclose one's sources occurs intentionally, due to a conscious attempt of passing off the

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ideas or formulations of other authors as one's own, or unintentionally, due to an oversight or missing bibliographic information. Applying utmost care in identifying, recording, and declaring one's sources is one of the basic requirements of scholarly writing, and there is no excuse for not doing so.

Two basic guidelines for editors and publishers Personally, based on some 25 years of practice as a reviewer, I have come to the conclusion that it is indispensable for any scholarly journal – and indeed for any editor and publisher – to take an absolutely firm and clear stance on this issue, and to make every effort to uncover and combat reliance on plagiarism in manuscripts submitted for publication. Amazingly, hardly any academic journals or book publishers of which I am aware include in their "**Guidelines for Contributors**" some clear standards regarding plagiarism.

I suggest that the following two rules should be part of all editorial guidelines for authors:

1. *"All submitted manuscripts will be carefully examined for proper citing and accurate referencing of their sources. Proper citing means that paraphrases as well as literal or near-literal quotations are clearly identified as such. Accurate referencing means that as a rule, full bibliographic data including page references are provided."*

2. *"Manuscripts resorting to any form of plagiarism will be rejected without completing the review procedure, and the authors will not be allowed to resubmit them. In grave cases, authors may be barred from submitting any further manuscripts to the journal."*

The two rules may look overly strict at first glance, but I am convinced they represent the only clear line that editors and publishers can take on this issue, otherwise they will move on slippery grounds. I would like to offer some personal reflections on why I believe this is so.

The standard excuse by authors I have often experienced that not only inexperienced authors but also established university professors (colleagues and others) have more or less literally copied entire passages and indeed, entire pages from my writings, without giving any reference or disclosing the circumstance in any other way. Whenever I politely inquired about their

reasons for doing so, they would explain that it happened "unintentionally" and was a *mere "oversight."* I do not believe this is a convincing excuse, though. Once you start to accept this kind of excuse, it will become very difficult indeed to maintain a clear line regarding plagiarism.

A personal stance on plagiarism As a matter of principle, plagiarism in all its forms is in my view not just an editorial oversight or defect that can be corrected like others can. Rather, it betrays *an author's lack of care in dealing with his or her sources,* if not conscious dishonesty in using the works of others. Lack of care and *dishonesty* go in this case hand in hand; for if I do not take care to identify and write down from the outset the exact sources of all the materials I use or may collect for later use, and then also to indicate these sources in my manuscripts at the time I draw on them, I accept – and indeed, invite – the risk that later on, I will "forget" or be unable to give accurate references, so as to make it at all times clear to my readers which parts in my writing are truly my own wording and which are quoted or adapted from somewhere else. This is what quotation marks and page references were invented for! Nothing can dispense me as an author from this kind of responsibility and care vis-à-vis my readers.

Furthermore, I trust every author who plagiarizes – whatever his/her skills in academic research and writing may be – deeply inside *knows* at the time of writing that he/she is resorting to less than honest means, by claiming authorship of something that is not of their own making. Nobody can claim not to realize that this practice both harms the original authors and deceives the readers. Having "forgotten" one's undeclared use of third sources is no acceptable excuse for the dishonesty that allows it in the first place.

Boundary issues So much for the principle. In practice, it is not always easy to draw the line. It can happen to all of us that occasionally, we use a phrase without being aware it is someone else's or remembering its origin. That does not however dispense me as an author from taking all possible care to identify and note down the sources of all materials on which I rely, so as to minimize the risk of unintentional plagiarism. If I know a phrase is not mine but I "forgot" to note the source, or could not identify it from the beginning, I am still obliged to make this circumstance apparent, as well as to undertake

every possible effort to identify the source post-hoc.

As a practicable minimal line of handling the issue for reviewers, I would suggest that an occasional failure to cite the source of a phrase or term that is a particular author's language rather than general language, need not automatically imply sanction (2) above, except when it is plain that the author's failure to give adequate reference is purposeful rather than a mere oversight. However, as soon as a manuscript contains an entire sentence quoted more or less literally from another source without making this fact apparent and indicating the source (wherever possible, with accurate page references rather than unspecific references only), there should be no exception.

A complementary guideline for editors Reviewing time is a scarce resource and should be managed as such. In my experience, this is not what is usually occurring in the practice of reviewing. Too often I have received poorly written manuscripts for review and invested a lot of time and energy in reviewing them, only to find in the end that they heavily relied on undeclared sources and therefore should have returned to the author(s) from the outset. Hence, in the interest of not wasting scarce reviewing time, I recommend that editors should take a stricter line than they often do concerning the editorial requirements for submitting manuscripts. As a rule, manuscripts should be sent out for review only if their editorial state is close to being publishable. In all other cases, they should be returned to the author (s) immediately, with an invitation to edit them adequately before submitting them.

Consequently, a basic third rule should be included in the Guidelines for Contributors, and should then also be strictly enforced:

3. *"Manuscripts will be accepted for review only if their editorial state is close to being publishable. Otherwise, they will be returned to the authors immediately, with an invitation to edit them adequately before submitting them."*

It is difficult to see why authors should expect to have their manuscripts carefully reviewed if they themselves do not in the first place invest the

effort and care it takes to edit a paper to a well-readable and publishable standard, even if that implies they need help by a professional copy editor. Resisting the temptation of plagiarism is an essential, but by far not the only criterion of the editorial standard that reviewers should be entitled to expect from authors.

An Encouragement If you are an author, I hope these few comments will encourage you to appreciate the perspective of reviewers and editors, and prepare your manuscripts accordingly. If you are a reviewer, I hope these same comments will encourage you to take a firm stance on the issues of plagiarism and sloppy editing, in the well-understood interest of authors as well as readers, editors, and publishers. When it comes to upholding the quality of academic publications, we're all in the same boat.

Find some additional considerations on this topic here: Against Plagiarism

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