Editorial

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Self-Plagiarism:

How to Avoid Recycling Fraud

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[Text word count =310; references=7]

Funding source: none

Disclosed interests: Dr. Ellis is President of the post publication peer review resource www.JournalReview.org. Dr. Dellavalle and Mr. Banks are respectively chair and member of the advisory committee to www.JournalReview.org.
1. What is self-plagiarism?

Self-plagiarism, also known as recycling fraud, occurs when an author reuses text in subsequent writings without attributing the previous publication.¹⁻³

2. Is self-plagiarism ever acceptable?

Thomas Jefferson repeated prose from previous writings in The Declaration of Independence and did not cite these works.⁴ Few would argue this famous example of self-plagiarism as unacceptable.

Most also agree that experts providing opinions to popular newspapers or magazines need not cite specific previous writings.

4. What is copyright, and how does self-plagiarism involve copyright infringement?

The US Constitution grants Congress the power to “promote the progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.” Copyright is this legal protection of a particular expression of an idea, but not of the facts or ideas themselves.⁵ In the US, copyright protection extends for the life of the author plus 70 years.⁶
Authors of technical articles are often asked to assign copyright to a journal’s publisher as a condition for publication—such is the case for this journal (the JAAD) and its publisher (Elsevier). Subsequent republication by the author of copyrighted text without citation is technically illegal.

5. Have authors been legally sanctioned for violating copyright on their own words?

Few sanctions have been handed down as the courts have generally recognized that “authors have special rights to their words not withstanding copyright.”3

6. If copyright law has not been enforced against authors repeating themselves, then why worry about self-plagiarism?

Self-plagiarism is not acceptable in academic writing because academic writing is grounded by its references, and authors are expected to cite their closely related previous writing.

As post publication peer review and software developments make self-plagiarism ever easier to detect,7 the JAAD urges all authors to promote transparency with full citation of text repeated from older publications.
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