

Editorial. To cite or not to cite? Text recycling in scholarly writing

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Text recycling is widely discussed in the research community. However, editors and authors may have contrasting opinions on this matter. What are the reasons for their disagreement, in what sections text recycling is appropriate and how to avoid self-plagiarism? In this editorial I am going to illuminate these issues.

In the guidelines for editors the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) defines text recycling as the use of the same text in several publications of an author (Risser, 2020). According to Professor Cary Moskovitz from Duke University, this practice involves small text fragments that are amended to a slight extent between publications (ibid, 2020). Earlier policies on text recycling applied the term “self-plagiarism”, which was disused due to inaccurate implications. Lately, the definition was elaborated. Text recycling is currently perceived as the reuse of textual information in a new document where 1) material is identical or almost identical to the original work, 2) the material is not presented as a direct quote, 3) one author of the new document is also an author of the previous document (Hall et al., 2021).

The main concern in case of repurposing existing works is to ensure originality of a new document. Sometimes authors do not follow text recycling guidelines, as they do not see a problem in reproducing their own texts in subsequent publications. This stance violates publication ethics. Therefore, editors often recommend authors to reword their submissions in order to avoid plagiarism. But is text recycling always appropriate and can paraphrase solve the problem? Let us examine these issues in relation to a research manuscript. Scholarly papers reflect results of research activity. In case of a large-scale research project, it is not feasible to present and describe obtained data in one paper. This leads to a series of publications on the explored topic. In this light, text recycling is understandable in introduction and methods sections. The use of recycled texts can be acceptable to a certain degree in the discussion. As for results and conclusion, text recycling is not allowed in these chapters (COPE Text recycling guidelines, n.d.).

When text recycling is identified, editors often ask authors to revise their materials adopting one of the three approaches, namely summary of an original document acknowledging the source, quotation, and language editing. However, these ways of avoiding ethical pitfalls are not always effective. For instance, quotation is reasonable only when authors quote a small section of text. Summary and language editing can be confusing, as they limit the access to the source document. Therefore, text recycling is sometimes more preferable (Isaacson, 2023).

Today text recycling causes less concern among publishers, editors and authors thanks to the Text Recycling Research Project (TRRP). Recommendations and guidelines are constantly updated. The TRRP flowcharts illustrate editors' actions when different types of text recycling are discovered. The developed taxonomy can be found on the project website (textrecycling.org).

In conclusion, it should be noted that if identical textual material is found, editors should not immediately ask authors to revise their manuscripts. Each case should be considered individually, taking into account the following factors: the length of recycled text, where in the paper text recycling is detected, whether there is a reference to the source document, whether there is copyright infringement or not (COPE Text recycling guidelines, n.d.). When deciding on the reuse of previous documents, authors should not solely rely on the author's position. They are advised to consider the amount of recycled text. Most importantly, they should understand if the use of earlier content is justified by the publication purposes. It is essential to remember that every step of the research process must be followed by integrity (Bisimbaeva, 2020), and the publication activity of authors should be aimed at increasing scientific knowledge.

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