Building trust by eliminating plagiarism: White paper from the ad hoc committee on plagiarism

Marilyn Chambliss a,*, Mimi Bong b, Barbara Greene c, Douglas Kauffman d, Sofie Loyens e, Peggy Van Meter f

a University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA
b Korea University, Seoul 136-701, South Korea
c University of Oklahoma, OK 73019, USA
d University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0517, USA
e Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
f Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: marilyn@umd.edu (M. Chambliss).

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"plagiarize;" "to steal and pass off as one's own (the ideas or words of another)
: use (a created production) without crediting the source.
" to commit literary theft: present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source." (Merriam Webster Incorporated., 1993).
"plagiarism:
“1. The action or practice of taking someone else's work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one's own; literary theft” (Oxford University Press., 2009a).
"Plagiarism: Researchers do not claim the words and ideas of another as their own; they give credit where credit is due (APA Ethics Code Standard 8.11, Plagiarism)” (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 15).
“Reporting must be accurate and without falsification or fabrication of data or results; reflect the work of the authors with appropriate attribution to others; be free of any plagiarism or misappropriation of the writing or ideas of others; and be sufficiently accessible to be subject to verification, replication, or further analysis” (American Educational Research Association, 2006, p. 14).
“Plagiarism is committed when one author uses another work (typically the work of another author) without permission” (Elsevier., 2007, p. 1).

Plagiarism occurs when one author copies someone else's writing or ideas without sufficient acknowledgment. Dictionaries define plagiarism consistently, professional organizations publish standards for identifying and avoiding it, and Elsevier, the publisher of many research journals including Contemporary Educational Psychology, has prepared a Legal Guide for Editors Concerning Ethical Issues (2007), including plagiarism. Presumably, eliminating plagiarism from a scholarly journal should be straightforward. Authors would know how to avoid it, reviewers and editors would readily spot it when it does occur, and the journal would have a set of procedures for how to protect against the publication of plagiarized material. However, the Editorial Board of CEP acknowledged recently that eliminating plagiarism from the journal is not a straightforward matter. Authors under pressure to publish frequently and quickly and to contribute to an evolving knowledge base by linking their work to other research may either intentionally or neglectfully copy as their own the words or ideas of others. Reviewers and editors who cannot be expected to be aware of the phrases, paragraphs, or sections of text from every article relevant to every topic appropriate to the journal may miss plagiarism when it occurs. Reviewers and editors who suspect plagiarism may not know how to respond. Concerned to build and maintain trust in the research published in CEP, the Board appointed us as an ad hoc committee to prepare a statement that would clearly explicate our understanding of why eliminating plagiarism from a journal is challenging, define plagiarism, and establish a set of procedures to be followed when plagiarism in a manuscript is suspected.

Before we proceed, however, it is important to explain that this Statement addresses plagiarism in manuscripts submitted for publication. It does not consider charges of plagiarism in published articles. Published plagiarism is a far more serious issue with possible institutional and legal ramifications. Elsevier’s Legal Guide for Editors Concerning Ethical Issues (2007) includes the processes to follow for formal complaints of plagiarism in published articles. An important purpose of this Statement is to address issues of plagiarism prior to publication to greatly reduce or eliminate the occurrence of plagiarism in published articles.

1. Why plagiarism continues to be a problem

Scholars can find themselves on a slippery slope. On the one hand, they must link their work solidly to the evolving knowledge base in their fields. They do not have the luxury of avoiding plagiarism by ignoring the writing and ideas of others. A manuscript that ignored related articles and books would lack credibility and be re-
jected for publication. Furthermore, knowledge builds and is fine
tuned through replication, wherein scholars use research designs
originating with someone else to design their own studies. Finally,
authors develop expertise by scrutinizing the writing of others.
Curricula developed to teach writing often include models of
well-designed text for students to emulate (e.g., Comley, Hamilton,
Klaus, Scholes, & Sommers, 2007). A junior scholar may borrow the
wording of a senior scholar as far more precise and eloquent than
anything he or she could compose. Even experienced researchers
searching for appropriate outlets for their manuscripts often care-
fully study currently published articles to use as models for their
own writing. Indeed, the most radical version of the notion of
intertextuality (see Bazerman, 2004 for an excellent analysis)
would suggest that whenever scholars write, they are creating a
mosaic composed of other texts that have gone before (Kristeva,
1980).

On the other hand, authors must carefully distinguish between
the work of others and their own work. The Publication Manual
of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) admonishes
authors, “To avoid charges of plagiarism, take careful notes as
you research to keep track of your sources and cite those sources
according to the guidelines presented in this chapter…” (p. 170).
The Open Letter to Authors for APA Journals (American Psychological
Association, n.d.) explains, “The scientific literature is our institu-
tional memory. It is important that this literature accurately reflect
what happened, who did it [or thought it], and to what extent one
observation is independent of another.” (p. 1). Those who develop
instructional programs for teaching scholarly writing are aware
both of the need to teach students how to distinguish their work
clearly from the ideas and words of others and the challenges that
scholarly writing entails (see Bazerman, 2004; Howard, 1999). The
American Psychological Association considers plagiarism and other
ethical issues to have become so important that the sixth edition of
the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association
(2010) presents the ethical issues of publishing as an extensive sec-
tion within Chapter 1 and briefly reiterated in Chapter 6 rather
than at the end of the Manual in Chapter 8 and Appendix C, as
was the case for the fifth edition (American Psychological Associa-
tion, 2001).

Electronic texts further contribute to the problem. With the
right tools, individual words, phrases, paragraphs, and even whole
pages of text can be readily copied and pasted from a pdf file to a
word processing file. The APA letter (n.d.) cautions, “As recent
cases inform us, authors need to be scrupulous in their notetaking
(especially in the electronic form) and careful about using those
notes in their own manuscripts” (p. 1). The researcher under time
pressure or with notes that do not clearly distinguish direct copy-
ing can deliberately or inadvertently insert copied text into a man-
uscript far more easily than in the past where published text would
have to be laboriously reproduced letter by letter.

We begin by pointing out these problems in order to clarify our
intention. We do not consider plagiarism in the academic world to
always be thievery nor do we believe our role is to develop guide-
lines for searching out plagiarism and punishing the “perpetra-
tors.” In some important respects, scholars must understand the
relevant knowledge base including the writing and ideas of others.
But they must not copy without clearly identifying that the words
and/or ideas are not original. In this Statement, we have begun
with the problems to raise the awareness of authors, reviewers,
editors, and readers of the complexities in eliminating plagiarism
that definitions and other documents may gloss over.

1.1. How to define plagiarism

The quotes with which we began this Statement are a starting
point for defining plagiarism. According to the American Psycho-
logical Association and the American Educational Research Associ-
aton, plagiarism is the direct copying or paraphrasing of another’s
work as one’s own without appropriate attribution (AERA, 2006;
APA, 2010), although note that the most recent edition of the
also considers the issue of self-plagiarism in which authors copy
their own words from an earlier published article. Definitions from
English dictionaries define plagiarism as “literary theft;” as passing
off another’s work as one’s own, or as passing off work from an
existing source as if it were new (e.g., Merriam Webster Incorporated,
1993). Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary presents an ar-
chaic definition of plagiarize as kidnapping (Oxford University
Press, 2009b).

Directly copying without using quotation marks and attribution
would clearly be plagiarism according to both the professional and
dictionary definitions. Essence is an important additional criterion.
According to the Elsevier policy (2007), “Where the essence of
a work has been reproduced, even if only a small part of the original
work may have occurred” (p. 1). Another additional criterion
is whether the author’s thinking appears to have benefited from
another’s ideas without clearly identifying the original source. Direct copying becomes plagiarism when it is not identified
as a quote, and the original author of the copied materials is not
acknowledged. However, according to the publishers of CEP, direct
copying from the essence of the copied materials is more egregious
than other copying.

Although not direct copying, professional guidelines (e.g., APA,
2010) and Elsevier policy (2007) also consider substantial para-
phrasing without citation to be plagiarism because such behavior
passes off the work of another as one’s own ideas. Here the issue
of essence seems to become particularly crucial in defining what
is meant by “substantial,” as does the issue of whether the author’s
thinking as expressed in the paraphrase has benefited substantially
from the thinking of someone else. Slightly different wording of a
phrase central to another author’s conceptual framework, but
passed off as one’s own, could be considered substantial even
though the number of paraphrased words was small (Elsevier,
clearly extends these principles to the paraphrasing of ideas.

If authors model a study after one done by someone else, the
originating author should be given credit. If the rationale for a
study was suggested in the Discussion section of someone else’s
article, that person should be given credit (p. 16).

As with direct copying, paraphrasing becomes plagiarism when
an author has benefited from someone else’s ideas or “borrowed”
the essence of another’s ideas without attribution.

Patchwork quilt “borrowing” in which paraphrased or copied
ideas of others are stitched into one’s own organization without
citation is clearly considered plagiarism according to professional
definitions and Elsevier policy. But this form of plagiarism can be
difficult to detect, and not everyone would agree that it is plagia-
rism. Howard (1999) has written a monograph to argue that what
she calls “patchwriting” can be an important stage in learning how
to produce academic writing and should be encouraged in compo-
sition courses rather than criminalized. She also notes, however,
that definitions of plagiarism are social constructs. “...[P]lagiarism
falls into the purview of society, where it is adjudicated by local
standards,” she explains (Howard, 1999, p. 19). Whereas we recog-
nize that many authors who submit manuscripts for publication
may be just beginning their experience as scholarly writers, it is
important to note that writing for academic journals assumes a le-
vel of academic writing expertise far beyond the level expected for
an undergraduate composition course. Thus, the social context for
scholarly writing calls for a more sophisticated definition of plagia-
rism that includes all forms of paraphrasing without citation to the
original source of the words or ideas. To reiterate, The Open Letter to Authors for APA Journals (APA, n.d.) provides an important rationale for avoiding any suspicion of plagiarism. “The scientific literature is our institutional memory. It is important that this literature accurately reflect what happened, who did it [or thought it], and to what extent one observation is independent of another.” (p. 1).

The CEP Editorial Board members raised three additional concerns for us to consider. The first concern has to do with how to handle translations of an article into other languages that will reach different audiences through different journal outlets. CEP is an international journal. Authors may very well submit to CEP manuscripts in English that have been published in other languages. A second related concern is whether duplicate publication in the same language for different audiences constitutes plagiarism. For example, an author may submit to a research journal such as CEP a manuscript describing the data analysis of a study, having published the conceptual framework in a theoretical journal and the educational implications in a practitioner journal. The Board’s third concern had to do with what the standards should be for an author using identical or paraphrased wording to describe similar methodology in more than one article. A member of the Board noted that having established clear descriptions of her methodology, paraphrases in subsequent manuscripts to avoid plagiarism could render her descriptions less clear. She is not “borrowing” or “stealing” someone else’s ideas, but is reusing her own wording to describe different research.

We struggled with how to respond to these three requests. Should duplicate publication be considered plagiarism? A strict definition of plagiarism as literary theft, as passing off as one’s own the writing and ideas of another, would suggest that no types of duplicate publication are plagiarism because they have the same author. However, according to the APA Manual (2010, p. 13),

Duplicate publication distorts the knowledge base by making it appear that there is more information available than really exists. ... Duplicate publication can also lead to copyright violations; authors cannot assign the copyright for the same material to more than one publisher.

This standard is to apply to all previously published work, including work in other languages.

The notion of self-plagiarism provides the necessary link between duplicate publication and plagiarism as characterized in the sixth edition of the APA Manual (2010). The major section of Chapter 1 titled “Plagiarism and Self-Plagiarism” is divided into two subsections accordingly. The subsection on self-plagiarism begins, “Just as researchers do not present the work of others as their own (plagiarism), they do not present their own previously published work as new scholarship (self-plagiarism)” (p. 16). The subsection continues with three qualifications. Authors can use their own previously published words without citation if they are describing instrumentation or analytical approaches, if repeated citations would seem “awkward” or “undesirable,” and if the duplication is “limited.” More extensive duplication should be “located in a single paragraph where feasible”, and accompanied by citations (APA, 2010, p. 16). Otherwise, the notion of “essence” is relevant to self-plagiarism as well. To avoid artificially inflating the knowledge base, the “core” of new manuscripts must contribute to the knowledge base anew, “...and only the amount of the previously published material necessary to understand that contribution should be included, primarily in the discussion of theory and methodology” (APA, 2010, p. 16).

These standards for avoiding self-plagiarism would rule out translations as well as duplicate publications for different audiences and would restrict the amount of identical text that authors could use in more than one publication to describe methodology. Analogous to the standards in the APA Manual, the unpublished bylaws of the Ethics Committee of the Korean Psychological Association (KPA) consider duplicate publication of one’s own work to be part of a broader problem that the bylaws call “major dishonest (unethical) practices in research” including “forgery, falsification, plagiarism, and duplicate publication” (personal communication, Mimi Bong, November 23, 2009).

Not all scholars agree that duplicate publication is, prima facie, to be eschewed. Both translations and duplicate publication prepared for different audiences increase the accessibility of research. Particularly in education, research published in a scholarly journal may not appear to be relevant to classroom teachers. Likewise, research described for a practitioner audience may appear to lack scientific rigor for a scholarly audience. Reporting the research in more than one venue would increase its accessibility and acceptability. Translations of research published in more than one language would increase its accessibility worldwide. Indeed, one of us who is currently working in Germany has expressed frustration that she has come across interesting references to work that she cannot access because it is published in German (personal communication, Peggy van Meter, January 19, 2010). In contrast, journals in Dutch often encourage scholars to publish translations of research originally written in other languages to render international research accessible to Dutch readers (personal communication, Sofie Loyens, April 7, 2009).

The goal of accessibility would appear to be in direct contrast with the goal of protecting the knowledge base from being artificially inflated. The two contrasting goals have opposing implications for plagiarism. Duplication would not be seen as plagiarism if the goal is to increase accessibility, although an author submitting for publication a translation or a manuscript designed for a different audience would want to be very clear to the new editor the relationship between the submission and previously published work, would want to reference and cite the previous work wherever appropriate, and would want to secure permission from the first publisher to avoid violating copyright laws. In contrast, duplication would be seen as self-plagiarism if the goal is to avoid artificially inflating the knowledge base. Translations and previously published manuscripts recrafted for a new audience would not be considered acceptable even with appropriate citations and permission from the first publisher. Contemporary Educational Psychology is guided by the standards of the American Psychological Association and adheres to the goal of protecting the knowledge base from artificial inflation. With the exception of small amounts of technical wording, CEP is committed to not publishing text that has already been published, regardless of possible language differences. We acknowledge that this might restrict the reporting of international work as well as previously published work recrafted for the CEP readership. Other journals may have accessibility as a primary goal. Authors would want to check with the editor of a particular journal.

In this section, we have defined plagiarism as direct copying, paraphrasing, and patchwork quilt “borrowing” without adequate attribution of the original sources. We have added the notion of essence to the definition of plagiarism and whether an author’s thinking has directly benefited from the work of another. If either of these conditions is present, the plagiarism is more egregious than otherwise even if the actual copying or paraphrasing is not extensive. We have distinguished two contradictory goals that have implications for whether duplication of an author’s published work is to be considered self-plagiarism. Individual professional organizations and journals around the world may follow different goals. For example, we have noted that the American Psychological Association and the Korean Psychological Association have different standards for duplicate publication including translations than professional organizations in other countries like the Netherlands.
We have come to understand that any definition of plagiarism must be understood according to the goals of the social context within which it resides, as suggested by Howard (1999). Our definition of plagiarism is qualitative rather than quantitative, appropriate for our particular social context (Howard, 1999). However, other definitions may be more quantitative. Mimi Bong notes that Korean journals have quantified the existence of plagiarism. According to one definition of plagiarism, any work is considered to have committed plagiarism if it shares two or more identical sentences in a row with other published work (personal communication, Mimi Bong, April 6, 2009). At the other extreme, Sofie Loyens quotes from a German publisher (personal communication, May 7, 2009), “According to German copyright law if you add/remove/rewrite 20% (based on word count) of the already published material it can be considered as a new piece of work.” Computer programs and/or websites can be used to identify plagiarism and duplicate publication by counting the number of similar words in two documents (e.g., WCopyfind, Turnitin by iParadigms (2009)). We have intentionally avoided quantitative definitions because our goal is to encourage authors, reviewers, editors and the publisher to work together to avoid both plagiarism and unethical duplicate publication and thereby to build trust in the articles published in CEP. Accordingly, our final section discusses steps we can take to reach our goal.

1.2. Steps authors, reviewers, editors, and the publisher can take to avoid plagiarism

One approach to avoiding plagiarism has been to take steps to seek out the criminal and then to punish the crime. Howard (1999) describes university faculty who comb their libraries or use computer programs to identify student plagiarism and punish it with a failing grade. Or university personnel committees who identify faculty work as plagiarized and proceed to marginalize the offender. Presumably, criminalizing plagiarism deter others authors from making the same mistakes. As we explained at the beginning of this statement, our goal is not to seek out plagiarism and punish it as thievery, but instead to take steps to build trust in the scientific knowledge base codified in CEP. Authors, reviewers, editors, and the publisher all share the responsibility of preserving this trust.

In the best of all possible worlds, authors submitting manuscripts to CEP would clearly understand how to avoid plagiarism and would value the goal of preserving the accuracy of the Contemporary Educational Psychology knowledge base. In this less than perfect world, however, authors are still the first line of defense against plagiarism. Accordingly, we have prepared this statement to characterize plagiarism and clarify for authors how it can be avoided. To remind authors of their responsibility as trustees of the scientific knowledge base, the Board will be requiring authors to submit along with their manuscript a standard statement verifying that they have not plagiarized. If their manuscript is a duplication in any way, the authors must make the nature of the duplication very clear including an explanation of how they have avoided self-plagiarism and justifying the manuscript’s publication in CEP. If the manuscript includes duplicate wording to describe technical methodology, the author must alert the editor to this duplication by describing and justifying it along with relevant page numbers. Authors should be aware that CEP does not republish already published data regardless of the rationale provided by an author. Reviewers are the second line of defense. The editor of CEP takes great care to assign reviewers whose expertise matches the content of each manuscript. This expertise provides reviewers with excellent lenses for recognizing ideas that are being presented as original to the author but that actually originated with someone else. Those familiar with the relevant scientific literature will also be able to determine if these borrowed ideas constitute the essence of another article rather than small details and whether the thinking of the author of the manuscript has benefited from the thinking of someone else without attribution. These types of borrowing are particularly egregious forms of plagiarism. The reviewer who suspects plagiarism will alert the editor, describing the type of plagiarism as clearly as possible, including page numbers in the manuscript and the citation for the original publication if possible. The editor will return the manuscript to the author with the written description from the reviewer and any additional comments that the editor wishes to add. The editor will exercise judgment in whether the author will be allowed to “fix” the plagiarism and resubmit or whether the plagiarism is so egregious that the manuscript is to be rejected outright.

The editor will exercise judgment in determining issues of duplication. Before sending a manuscript to reviewers, the editor will have received the statement of possible self-plagiarism from all authors. Based on the statement and a review of the manuscript, the editor will decide whether a manuscript avoids self-plagiarism as defined in this Statement. The editor could be concerned about copyright issues, as well as the ethical dilemma of artificially inflating the knowledge base. The editor who is concerned that a duplication may violate copyright laws will forward the manuscript to the publisher for guidance. Duplications judged either to be self-plagiarism or to violate copyright laws will be returned to the author with an explanation. As with other types of plagiarism, the editor will exercise judgment in whether the author will be allowed to “fix” the manuscript and resubmit or whether the problems are so egregious that the manuscript is to be rejected for publication in CEP outright.

To reiterate, these steps refer to manuscripts submitted for publication to Contemporary Educational Psychology. Readers who suspect plagiarism in articles already published in CEP are to contact the publisher directly. As we have already described, Elsevier’s Legal Guide for Editors Concerning Ethical Issues (2007) details the steps to follow for suspected plagiarism in published articles.

1.3. In conclusion

All of us are proud of CEP and believe that authors, reviewers, editors, and the publisher have held themselves to high standards. However, both the concerns of members of the Editorial Board and the challenges inherent in writing manuscripts to report scientific research suggest the need for this Statement. As the ad hoc committee responsible for preparing the Statement, we believe that clarifying a definition of plagiarism, specifying how to avoid it, and detailing the steps to take to eliminate it will serve to enhance the trust that readers have in the scholarship reported in the journal.

References


