

How to deal with text recycling

These guidelines are intended to guide editors when dealing with cases of text recycling.

Text recycling, also known as self-plagiarism, occurs when sections of the same text appear (usually un-attributed) in more than one of an author's own publications. The term 'text recycling' has been chosen to differentiate from 'true' plagiarism (i.e. when *another* author's words or ideas have been used, usually without attribution).

A separate issue, not to be confused with text recycling, is redundant (duplicate) publication. Redundant (duplicate) publication generally denotes a larger problem of repeated publication of data or ideas, often with at least one author in common. This is outside the scope of these guidelines and is covered elsewhere^{1,2}.

Journals should also ensure that they have a clear policy on duplicate publication, detailing what is considered a previous publication and informing authors of the need to declare any potentially overlapping publications and cite them.

How can editors deal with text recycling?

Editors should consider each case of text recycling on an individual basis as the 'significance' of the overlap, and therefore the most appropriate course of action, will depend on a number of factors. These factors will be discussed in more detail below and include:

- How much text is recycled
- Where in the article the text recycling occurs
- Whether the source of the recycled text has been acknowledged
- Whether the article is a research or non-research article
- Whether there is a breach of copyright
- In some circumstances, cultural norms at the time and place of publication

When should action be considered?

Text recycling can occur in submitted manuscripts or published articles. It can occur in different article types (e.g. research articles, review articles) and in different sections within the article. When significant overlap is identified between two or more articles, editors should consider asking for clarification and/or taking action. What is considered 'significant overlap' will depend on a number of factors including where in the article the text recycling occurs. This will be discussed in more detail below.

In general terms, editors should consider how much text is recycled. The reuse of a few sentences is clearly different to the verbatim reuse of several paragraphs of text, although large amounts of text recycled in the methods might be more acceptable than a similar amount recycled in the discussion.

When deciding whether to take action, editors should consider whether there is significant overlap with a previous publication and how significantly the degree of overlap impinges on the originality of the content for the journal's audience. While the factors discussed below should be taken into consideration when deciding on the significance of the overlap, editors need to decide whether the author has re-used text legitimately or has misrepresented previously presented ideas or data as new.

Research articles

Introduction/background

Some degree of text recycling in the background/introduction section of an article may be unavoidable, particularly if an article is one of several on a related topic. Duplication of background ideas may be considered less significant or even considered desirable, contrasted with duplication of the hypothesis, which will only be appropriate in very closely related papers. Editors should consider how much text is repeated verbatim, and whether the original source is cited (although editors should note that citing the source is not a justification *per se*).

Methods

Use of similar or identical phrases in methods sections where there are limited ways to describe a method is not unusual; in fact text recycling may be unavoidable when using a technique that the author has described before and it may actually be of value when a technique that is common to a number of papers is described. Editors should use their discretion and knowledge of the field when deciding how much text overlap is acceptable in the methods section. An important factor to consider is whether the authors have been transparent, stating that the methods have already been described elsewhere and providing a citation.

Results

Text recycling is almost always unacceptable in the results section if it duplicates previously published data. In such situations, editors should consider whether this is a redundant (duplicate) publication^{1,2}. Occasionally the authors may have legitimate reasons to include their previously published data, for example, if they are reporting an extension of their previous research. In such cases, this duplication must always be reported transparently and be properly attributed and compliant with copyright requirements. The re-use of data without clear scientific justification and transparency should be dealt with according to COPE guidelines for redundant (duplicate) publication rather than as 'simple' text recycling^{1,2}.

Discussion

Some degree of text recycling may be acceptable in the discussion; however, as the majority of the discussion should focus on putting the results of the current study in context, large amounts of text recycling is unlikely to be acceptable, especially if previously published ideas are presented as new.

Conclusion

Text recycling is unlikely to be acceptable in the conclusions of an article. If the conclusions contain recycled text, editors should consider whether the content of the article is novel.

Figures and Tables

Reproduction of previously published figures or tables may represent data duplication if the authors do not provide a justification (see 'Results') and, if reproduced without permission, may result in copyright infringement.

Opinion, review and commentary articles

Non-research article types such as opinion, review and commentary articles should in principle adhere to the same guidelines as research articles. Due to the critical and opinion-based nature of some non-research article types, editors should consider asking for an explanation and/or taking action 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.

What action should be taken if text recycling is discovered?

Text recycling in a submitted manuscript

Text recycling may be discovered in a submitted manuscript by editors or reviewers, or by the use of plagiarism detection software (e.g. CrossCheck).

If overlap is considered minor, action may not be necessary or the authors may be asked to re-write overlapping sections and cite their previous article(s) if they have not done so.

More significant overlap may result in rejection of the manuscript. Where the overlap includes data, editors should handle cases according to the COPE flowchart for dealing with suspected redundant publication in a submitted manuscript¹. Editors should ensure that they clearly communicate the reason for rejection to the authors.

Text recycling in a published article

If text recycling is discovered in a published article (for example by a reader alerting an editor), it may be necessary to publish a correction to, or retraction of, the original article. This decision will depend on the degree and nature of the overlap as discussed above, but also if appropriate, whether the authors are very junior/inexperienced. Editors should handle cases of overlap in data according to the COPE flowchart for dealing with suspected redundant publication in a published article².

Editors should consider publishing a correction to an article when the following apply:

- Sections of the text are identical or near identical to a previous publication by the same author(s) **but**;
- There is still sufficient new material in the article to justify its publication.

The correction should amend the literature by adding any missing citation and clarifying what the overlap is in the subsequent publication versus the original publication.

Rarely, retraction of a published article may be necessary. Editors may consider publishing a retraction of an article in the following scenarios:

- There is significant overlap in the text, generally excluding methods, with sections that are identical or near identical to a previous publication by the same author(s); or
- The recycled text reports previously published data and there is insufficient new material in the article to justify its publication in light of the previous publication(s), i.e. redundant publication. See COPE flowchart for suspected redundant publication in a published article²; or
- The overlap breaches copyright. If this is the case then legal advice may be needed.

The retraction should be issued in line with the COPE retraction guidelines³.

A dialogue with the authors during the process of investigation is important to ensure that the author(s) understand(s) the reason for the editor's actions.

How far back should these guidelines be applied?

Accepted practice, awareness of text recycling and the ability to detect it have changed over the past decades. Editors should balance the age of the article and accepted practice at the time against current standards when deciding whether to take corrective action.

Editors should take corrective action in the case of redundant (duplicate) publication regardless of the age of the article and should follow the COPE flowchart for dealing with suspected redundant publication in a published article².

Lessons for journals

When an editor discovers text recycling in a submitted manuscript or published article, it is advisable to check the journal's author guidelines to ensure they are clear.

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References / further reading

1. COPE flowchart for suspected redundant publication in a submitted manuscript
<http://publicationethics.org/files/Suspected%20redundant%20publication%20in%20a%20submitted%20manuscript%20%281%29.pdf>
2. COPE flowchart for suspected redundant publication in a published article
http://publicationethics.org/files/redundant%20publication%20B_0.pdf
3. COPE guidelines for retracting articles
<http://publicationethics.org/files/retraction%20guidelines.pdf>