

Plagiarism and medical writing

Vasumathi Sriganesh, Parvati Iyer

QMed Services, Mumbai, India

Correspondence: Dr. Vasumathi Sriganesh, A-3, Shubham Centre, Cardinal Gracious Road, Chakala, Andheri (E), Mumbai - 400 099, India.
E-mail: vasu@qmedin.com

Plagiarism constitutes an action where authors use matter from different publications, usually without referencing them, and try to pass it off as their own work. Plagiarism seems to have increased with the availability of Internet access, simply because so much matter is easily available and it is so easy to copy matter. This appears to be happening across the world and is significantly prevalent in India as well. Recent medical literature suggests that while plagiarism is definitely a punishable offence, there is a deep need to educate writers on the nuances of plagiarism. This article attempts to explain, and illustrate with examples, what kind of writing is considered plagiarism and what is not. We have also touched upon some implications of plagiarism.

Key words: Plagiarism

What is plagiarism?

There are several definitions. To start with, plagiarism is not merely copying. It is actually stealing matter or ideas from others without giving credit to them. An excellent website, www.plagiarism.org, explains that even acts like not putting quotation marks while quoting someone or not mentioning a source correctly (so that a reader can check it) constitutes plagiarism.^[1]

Types of plagiarism

A specific section of the [plagiarism.org](http://www.plagiarism.org) website^[2] explains that there are broadly two types of plagiarism—one where the author gives no credit or does not cite the source and the other where the author does cite the source. The first does not need explanation, but the second type very often confuses authors. Many believe that they can copy a sentence or two (or even lots more) and just cite the source, but that is not enough. One must take care to carefully identify the portion that is copied verbatim and highlight it by putting it in quotes and then cite the source. Sometimes authors prefer to quote paragraphs by putting them down in a separate area and in italics. What is important is that one must visually demonstrate that a piece of writing has been copied.

Why educate authors about plagiarism?

In the recent past, editors of Indian medical journals have expressed concern on the issue of plagiarism. Awareness and education about plagiarism are essential to bring

down the number of such incidents.^[3] Also, editorial boards (almost all of which have members who work with no remuneration), face a big challenge when plagiarism is reported.^[4] The mere task of taking action against the offenders is a waste of valuable time.

Points to remember

Here are some points to remember, when taking matter from another source to include in an article.

1. When copying a sentence or two, put them in quotes. Mention the source and also reference it correctly. It is a good idea to explain or elaborate the quote in your own words. This will (or should) explain why you chose to quote the original author. In case you modify a quote for any reason, explain the modification too. This is best done for definitions and quotable quotes.
2. Do not copy significant portions like entire paragraphs. Ideally read the matter, close the source, and write it in your own words. If you have a problem with language, get help.
3. If you feel that you need to use significant amounts of material from a source, you need to paraphrase the same. This again means writing it in your own words. If you find it difficult to make the necessary changes, the website mentioned earlier gives good examples of the kinds of changes that constitute plagiarism and those that constitute correct paraphrasing.^[5]
4. If you need to use a picture, cartoon, graph, or table, it is not enough to reference it. You need to write to the author or copyright owner and get permission to use it. You also need to mention 'Reproduced from _____ (source) with permission of the author (or copyright holder).' An added courtesy would be to send a copy

of your article to the author from whose work you took the material.

5. 'Public domain' is another area of confusion. Works in the public domain refer to works that have either never been copyrighted or are not protected by copyright, because they have crossed the number of years of protection after publication. Again it is important to quote the source, but you can freely use matter from such publications. Many people mistake matter that is available free on the Internet as 'public domain.' Matter available free to view, is NOT necessarily matter free to copy or distribute, unless explicitly so stated as part of a 'Commons' license. Remember that most sites are copyright protected (look for the symbol ©). Even if the symbol does not exist, it is a good idea to believe that matter is copyright protected unless the site clearly tells you that you can copy and distribute the matter. Most sites that allow free copying and distribution, still appreciate being given credit!
6. Another confusion, which really stems from the one above, is about abstracts of articles. Many believe that because abstracts are free on the Net, material can be copied from abstracts. Remember that abstracts are also the copyright of the author or publisher, depending on the journal's policies.
7. An interesting and important point to remember, especially when taking matter from Internet resources, is to make sure that the source you are referring to does not contain something that has been plagiarized from elsewhere! If it does, you may get into trouble.

Detecting plagiarism

How does an editor, or anyone else reading a paper, detect plagiarism? Here are some examples of what we have come across or heard from editors of medical journals:

- a) In a case report, the language used in the introduction and discussion sections is very different from the language used to describe the case. This is because the 'well-written' passages have been copied from other sources.
- b) In a particular paragraph, the language is excellent, but there are 'reference numbers' that do not match the actual references cited at the end of the article. The authors have copied the paragraph verbatim from a source and included the same reference numbers that the original author(s) had quoted.
- c) In the 'References' section, there are some that raise suspicions. In one case, there was a reference to a journal 'New Technology Journal Biomedical Materials Research - Vol 23, 1953'. Common sense said that such a journal could not have existed in 1953. On checking, it was revealed that the author had seen two consecutive references in a journal article, mixed up the bibliographical details of both and given this reference. This is a classic example of quoting a work wrongly
- d) An author copied matter from one journal, but wrote

the name of the section ('Images in Radiology') instead of the title of the Journal (Journal of Postgraduate Medicine) when citing the same.

- e) An author submits one article with relatively poor grammar and syntax and then submits the next article with excellent grammar and language. There may be several other ways to detect plagiarism, but we wished to highlight some that we have encountered or heard about directly.

Implications of plagiarism

- a) For the author, the consequences may range from a mild reprimand from the editor or society to a severe punishment that may include being debarred from writing for an extended period of time.
- b) For the editors, there is a significant waste of productive time; valuable time is diverted in the effort to check for plagiarism and to make sure that the content in the journal is in keeping with its ethical standards. Please remember that virtually all editors work in an honorary capacity.
- c) For the medical community, loss of face is an issue. For example, if researchers from other countries find their work appearing in Indian journals, there is a loss of face for Indian journals. Recently two articles in Indian journals have been retracted after the respective editors got notifications of plagiarism from foreign authors.^[3,4]

An even worse possibility is the publication of what may be 'incorrect' information or knowledge, thanks to plagiarism. We encountered one case report recently, where almost the entire description of a case was copied. Only the age of the patient was changed, from 50 years to 17 years. If such articles escape the plagiarism check and if its scientific findings were, in fact, valid only for older patients, then readers would have been misinformed that the conclusions were true for younger patients as well.

References

1. What is plagiarism? [Last accessed on 2007 Aug 1]. Available from: http://www.plagiarism.org/learning_center/what_is_plagiarism.html.
2. Types of plagiarism. [Last accessed on 2007 Aug 1]. Available from: http://www.plagiarism.org/learning_center/types_of_plagiarism.html.
3. Available from: http://www.plagiarism.org/learning_center/paraphrase.html [Last accessed on 2007 Aug 1].
4. Sapatnekar SM. Plagiarism. *J Assoc Physicians India* 2004;52:527-30.
5. Nayak BK, Maniar R. The scourge of plagiarism. *Indian J Ophthalmol* 2006;54:75-6.
6. How to paraphrase properly. Available from: <http://www.plagiarism.org>.

Source of Support: Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared.