Author Guidance on Self-Plagiarism: A Review of Top-Tier Journal Guidelines

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Abstract

Objective: Self-plagiarism, the unattributed reuse of one's own work (encompassing text-recycling and duplicate or redundant publication), can have serious ethical and legal implications and is recognized as scientific misconduct. The number of publications discussing and characterizing self-plagiarism has increased in recent years (based on a search of PubMed and Web of Science™), but authors may remain unaware of the issue. We reviewed author guidelines from top-tier journals to assess current guidance on self-plagiarism.

Research design and methods: Author guidelines for the top 100 (by impact factor) biomedical journals were reviewed for explicit guidance on self-plagiarism, identified by the key words "self-plagiarism," "text-recycling," "redundant," or "[author's/one's] own," in the context of reuse of work. Guidelines were also reviewed for stated use of search tools (eg, CrossCheck/iThenticate) to identify plagiarism/self-plagiarism in submitted manuscripts.

Results: Across the top 100 journals, 44 unique author guidelines (accounting for shared guidelines among journals with the same publisher) were identified and reviewed. Of these, 16/44 (36.4%) had explicit guidance on an aspect of self-plagiarism (56/100 individual journals). However, only 3/44 (6.8%) guidelines mentioned "self-plagiarism" by name (28/100 individual journals). 15/44 (34.1%) stated they use search tools such as CrossCheck/iThenticate (41/100 individual journals).

Conclusions: Many top-tier journals do not have explicit guidance for authors on self-plagiarism. Given the ethical and legal implications of self-plagiarism, more comprehensive guidance from journals could be beneficial to increase author awareness and understanding of the issue.

Introduction

- Self-plagiarism is defined as the **"reuse [of an author's] own previously written work or data in a 'new' written product without letting the reader know that this material has appeared elsewhere"**[1] and is recognized as a form of scientific misconduct that can have serious ethical and legal implications.
- In practice, self-plagiarism can take several forms, including duplicate/redundant publication, salami slicing (or fragmentation), and text recycling (**Table**); the common feature is an overlap with previously published material without appropriate attribution.
- In extreme cases, self-plagiarism may be a deliberate attempt to deceive or distort the literature by presenting existing data as new data; however, in many cases, self-plagiarism arises simply from error or from authors not being aware that the practice is unethical.
- Lack of awareness may be compounded by some authors questioning whether text recycling should be considered inappropriate[2,3] despite clear guidance from professional associations, such as the Office of Research Integrity[1] and the Committee on Publication Ethics.[4]
- The number of publications discussing and characterizing self-plagiarism has increased in recent years; in a search of PubMed and Web of Science™, 58 publications on self-plagiarism were identified in total, with 43 (74.1%) of these published from 2009–2014.
- Nevertheless, Retraction Watch (http://retractionwatch.com/), which monitors retractions issued by journals, indicates that self-plagiarism is still a frequent reason for retractions, suggesting that many authors remain unaware of the seriousness of the issue.

Table. Forms of Self-Plagiarism[1]

Duplicate/Redundant Publication	• Extreme cases of duplicate publication may involve republication of all the same data and text with only superficial changes • A redundant publication may reproduce much of the same data but with a slightly different interpretation and/or minor new analysis • Would also encompass inclusion of any part of previously published data without attribution
Salami Slicing	• The practice of unnecessarily splitting a single data set across multiple publications (fragmentation) • May include data augmentation, where new data are collected and added to existing published data and submitted as an entirely new study
Text Recycling	• The reuse of portions of the author's own previously published text

Objective

- To assess the guidance on self-plagiarism available to authors when submitting manuscripts to biomedical journals.

Methods

- Author guidelines for the top 100 biomedical journals by impact factor were reviewed for the presence of *explicit guidance* on self-plagiarism.
  - *Explicit guidance* was defined as the use of 1 or more of the key words "self-plagiarism," "text recycling," or "redundant," or the term "[author's/one's] own" in the context of reusing published work.
  - Use of the term "self-plagiarism" specifically was also recorded as a separate measure.
- Author guidelines were also reviewed for the presence of *any guidance* that could be either explicit or suggestive of a policy on self-plagiarism; for example, the policy may simply state that the submission must contain original material not published or submitted elsewhere.
- Author guidelines were also reviewed for explicit plagiarism policies (defined as use of the term "plagiarism") and stated use of search tools (eg, CrossCheck/iThenticate) to identify plagiarism/self-plagiarism in submitted manuscripts.
- Journals from the same publisher with shared author guidelines were grouped together. Both the total number of journals and the number of unique guidelines (accounting for shared publishers) with *any guidance* (explicit or suggestive) and with *explicit guidance* were calculated.

Results

Shared Author Guidelines

- Across the top 100 journals (mean impact factor, 17.5; median, 13.7; range 51.7–9.1), 44 unique author guidelines (accounting for shared guidelines among journals with the same publisher) were identified and reviewed.
- The most common shared guidelines were from Nature Publishing Group (n=28), Cell Press (n=14), and Elsevier (n=9).

Guidance on Self-Plagiarism

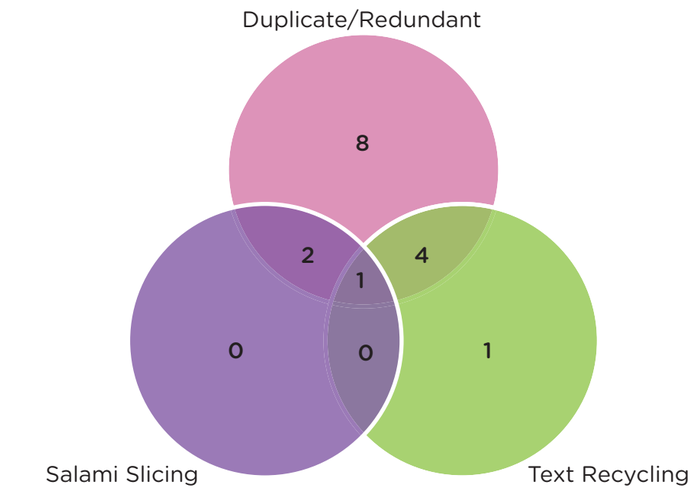
- Among the top 100 journals, 86 (86.0%) provided *any guidance* (explicit or suggestive); this included 56 (56.0%) that had *explicit guidance* on an aspect of self-plagiarism, including 28 (28.0%) that mentioned "self-plagiarism" by name (**Figure 1**).
- Of the 44 unique guidelines, 31 (70.5%) had *any guidance;* this included 16 (36.4%) that had *explicit guidance* on an aspect of self-plagiarism, including 3 (6.8%) that mentioned "self-plagiarism" by name.

Figure 1. Journals With Policies on Self-Plagiarism

"All journals" indicates the top 100 biomedical journals by impact factor. "Unique guidelines" indicates the 44 unique author guidelines collapsed across publishers in common among these top 100 journals.

- Of the 16 unique guidelines with explicit guidance, 15 addressed duplicate/redundant publication, 3 addressed salami slicing, and 6 addressed text recycling (each either alone or in combination; **Figure 2**).
  - Salami slicing (typically the term "fragmentation" was used) was addressed only in combination with duplicate/redundant publication.
  - Text recycling was addressed alone in 1 policy but was more often addressed together with duplicate/redundant publication.

Figure 2. Forms of Self-Plagiarism Addressed by Journal Guidelines

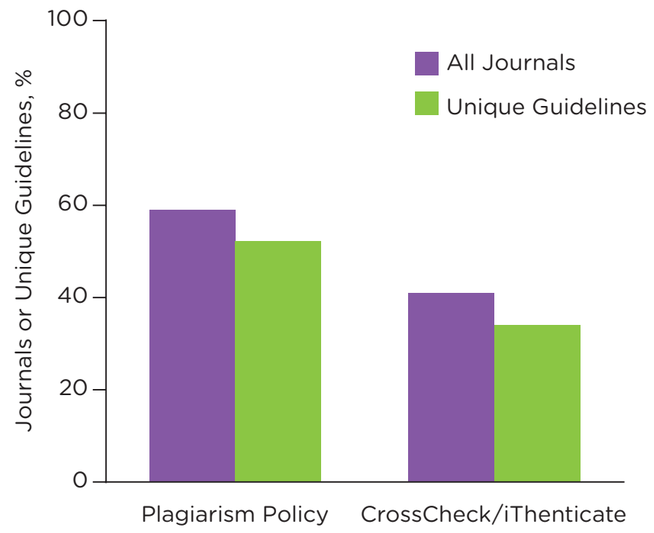


Of the 44 unique guidelines, 16 were determined to have an explicit policy on self-plagiarism. These were sorted according to the form(s) of self-plagiarism (based on the terms shown in the **Table**).

Plagiarism Policies and Plagiarism Detection Software

- Journals were more likely to have an explicit plagiarism policy than an explicit self-plagiarism policy, with 59 of the top 100 (59.0%) journals and 23 of the 44 (52.3%) unique guidelines explicitly mentioning plagiarism (**Figure 3**; compared with 56.0% and 36.4%, respectively, for self-plagiarism).
- 41 of the top 100 (41.0%) journals and 15 of the 44 (34.1%) unique guidelines stated that plagiarism software, such as CrossCheck/iThenticate, was routinely used (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Journals With an Explicit Plagiarism Policy or That Indicate That Plagiarism Detection Software Is Routinely Used



"All journals" indicates the 100 top biomedical journals by impact factor. "Unique guidelines" indicates the 44 unique author guidelines across these 100 top journals.

Limitations

- Only a limited number of journals were surveyed (and only those with a high impact factor) so it is not clear how directly these findings apply to all biomedical journals.
- Author guidelines were reviewed as available on each journal's website, but some journals may provide additional guidance to authors during the submission process.

Conclusions

- **Of the top 100 biomedical journals, only 56.0% have explicit guidance for authors on self-plagiarism. When collapsed across publishers, this proportion decreases to 36.4%.**
- **Given the ethical and legal implications of self-plagiarism, more comprehensive and explicit guidance from journals could be beneficial to increase author awareness and understanding of the issue.**

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