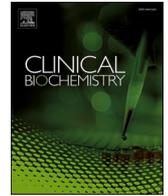


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Letter to the Editor

There is no absolute expectation about text recycling

To the Editor

As a scholar of scientific writing and research ethics, I read with interest David Avram Sanders's recent essay, "How to write (and how not to write) a scientific review article" [1]. Sanders raises an important concern about reviews that contain excessive amounts of recycled material. However, Sanders's essay misrepresents my writing and my views on text recycling (also known by the unfortunate term "self-plagiarism"). More importantly, Sanders brief discussion of text recycling misrepresents norms on text recycling in scientific writing.

Dr. Sanders states—as a simple matter of fact—that for an "original work, there is the absolute expectation that passages have not been published previously by others or all or a subset of the authors [1,2]." Clearly, no such expectation exists since authors routinely reuse passages published by others in the form of quotations. Reusing passages written by others *without appropriate attribution* is, by definition, plagiarism.

But with respect to reusing *one's own* previously published material, my essay, "Text Recycling in Scientific Writing" [2] (Sanders's reference #2) does not support the existence of such absolute expectations. In fact, my essay—and the body of work produced by the Text Recycling Research Project, which I direct—strongly suggests the absence of such blanket prohibitions. I also note here that Sanders's reference #1 (my reference [3]) makes no such claims either. In fact, Horbach and Halfman's paper explicitly discusses the lack of universal norms, and their empirical study is framed around the detection of "problematic text recycling"—which they define as containing more than 10% recycled material, implying that lesser amounts of text recycling are not problematic.

Unlike plagiarism, which is widely considered to be scientific misconduct, there is growing consensus that text recycling can be ethically acceptable (and sometimes even desirable) in some circumstances. The Committee on Publication Ethics's "Text Recycling Guidelines for Editors" [4] clearly establishes that text recycling may be acceptable in background sections...

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.

... as well as in Methods sections:

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.

Similarly, one the leading publishers of scientific research, John Wiley & Sons, states the following in its "Best Practice Guidelines on Publishing Ethics" [5]:

Journals may find it useful to establish a policy about how much, if any, and under what circumstances they consider it acceptable to recycle text and results between articles. This may be important, for example, for authors who wish to communicate results from a research project to multiple audiences. In this instance, full or partial results might be recycled for legitimate reasons, although the discussion and conclusions would be different.

Research from our group, including both a survey of journal editors and board members [6] and extended interviews with journal editors [7], confirms this lack of universal norms prohibiting text recycling.

Regarding the legal aspects of text recycling, our forthcoming white paper (which will be hosted by the Council of Scientific Editors) shows that the most common instances of text recycling in scientific writing are a "fair use" under U.S. copyright law.

Over the past decade, much has been written about text recycling. While attention to this complicated but widespread practice is good, much of the writing on the subject (including dozens of editorials in scientific and medical journals around the world) have been based largely on the authors' personal views or on one or two widely-circulated but now outdated or misleading documents. The members of the Text Recycling Research Project (textrecycling.org), an NSF-funded, multi-institutional initiative, are committed to producing sound and relevant empirical scholarship and—in the near future—model guidelines on the subject for editors and authors. We hope that our work will serve the scientific research and publishing communities in developing consistent and appropriate practices.

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