

What to Do When Plagiarism and Other Misdeeds Rear Their Ugly Heads

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The Office of Research Integrity of the US Department of Health and Human Services defines plagiarism as including “the theft or misappropriation of intellectual property and the substantial unattributed textual copying of another’s work”.¹ An editor who suspects plagiarism should pursue possible misconduct, publish retractions of fraudulent papers, and develop procedures for responding to allegations or indications of misconduct. An editor’s responsibilities do not include conducting a full investigation or deciding whether plagiarism occurred.

To pursue misconduct, the editor conducts a preliminary investigation, checking the manuscripts in question against one another and determining the level and amount of duplication. If evidence of plagiarism exists, the editor notifies the authors and authors’ superiors to request a full investigation. (How far the editor should go in pursuing an investigation and what distinguishes a preliminary from

a full investigation have not been clearly defined.) If the authors’ institutions determine that misconduct occurred, the journal publishes a notice of retraction. The notice of retraction is listed in the table of contents (and thus is indexed in PubMed), is positioned prominently in the journal, and details the specific misconduct that has occurred. If the article is posted online, a notice of retraction is attached to it.

As soon as possible, the editor should notify the copyright holder of the violation, not only as a matter of editorial ethics but also because a mishandled dispute could grow into a full-fledged legal battle. Journal policies typically ban authors from submitting manuscripts for some period after misconduct.

Self-plagiarism is the partial or complete duplication of material previously published or concurrently submitted elsewhere, more accurately described as duplicate publication, and is also of concern because of copyright violation. A particularly blatant example occurred when an author published essentially the same paper 10 times in nine journals. A researcher identified the duplicate publication and contacted the journal editors, who acted together to inform the corresponding author’s institution. A full investigation was completed, the author sent letters of retraction signed by all coauthors, and retraction notices were published in the journals.

Another notable instance occurred when a new author submitted five manuscripts to a journal over nine days. The editor became suspicious, and an investigation revealed that all the papers had been published previously; the author’s only “contribution” to one of the papers was changing the topic of the paper from aluminum gallium nitride to indium gal-

lium nitride—an alteration that would not have been caught by a search of PubMed or Google.

Why do authors plagiarize? Some are simply sloppy; others misunderstand authorship and duplicate publication. To stand out in a sea of information (and, often, misinformation), some authors try to separate themselves from others, even if that involves deception. Other authors are overloaded and cut corners to stay afloat. As a speaker noted, “Doing good work gives an author a good reputation, but a good reputation doesn’t ensure good work.”

Certainly we want to maintain the culture of trust in the scientific community, but we also need to pursue a culture of transparency and open discussion. Trust is good, but blind trust is irresponsible. Although most of the worst cases of plagiarism are eventually identified, much time and energy are wasted thereby.

How can a journal thwart potential plagiarists? Establishing and publishing an ethics policy, acknowledging submissions to all coauthors, requiring copies of all submitted and in-press manuscripts listed in the references, maintaining a “watch list” of authors whose work requires extra scrutiny, and following through on a reviewer’s suspicions are helpful steps.

Can editors do a better job of identifying plagiarism? We have an important role to play in keeping authors honest, identifying those who are dishonest, and ensuring the integrity and quality of the scientific literature. In sum: trust—but verify. 

Reference

1. Office of Research Integrity policy on plagiarism. ori.dhhs.gov/policies/plagiarism.shtml. Accessed 26 May 2006.