

Addressing Ethical Standards: Plagiarism

In the September/October 2004 issue of the *ASPB News*, we introduced a series of articles that will run over the next few issues on the topic of scientific misconduct in publishing. Our inaugural article featured image manipulation and referred readers to an excellent article on the subject written by Mike Rossner and Kenneth M. Yamada and published in the *Journal of Cell Biology*.

This issue's column focuses on an age-old problem that may well be the best known form of misconduct in publishing: plagiarism. "Ethics in Publishing: ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Author Misconduct" defines plagiarism as "taking material from another's work and submitting it as one's own."

The American Medical Association Manual of Style, 9th edition (Baltimore: William & Wilkins, 1998, p. 105) describes it as "presenting another's ideas or text without attribution." Plagiarism might be detected before publication, during the review process, or after publication. It can be virtually impossible to detect when the article is translated or when it appears in a less frequently cited journal.

Regardless of what definition is applied, using another's work without attribution undermines the "process by which credit and priority are established for experimental work and research ideas...and the system through which authors receive credit for their work" (*Responsible Conduct Regarding*

Scientific Communication, 1st edition, Society for Neuroscience, November 7, 1998).

ASPB holds authors—not the Society or its editors and reviewers—responsible for making sure that all of the ideas and findings included in a manuscript are attributed to the proper source. Specifically, "Ethics in Publishing: ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Author Misconduct" (<http://www.aspb.org/publications/ethics.cfm>) states that "authors shall

- Take credit only for work that they have produced.
- Properly cite the work of others as well as their own related work. It is the responsibility of the authors, not the Society or the

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editors or reviewers, to ensure that relevant prior discoveries are appropriately acknowledged with the original citations in manuscripts submitted for publication.

- Submit only original work to the journals, no part of which has been previously published in print or online as, or is under consideration as, a peer-reviewed article in another journal, as a non-peer-reviewed article (such as a review) in another journal, or as a book chapter.
- Determine whether the disclosure of content requires the prior consent of other parties and, if so, obtain that consent prior to submission.”

ASPB puts great stock in its role as steward of what constitutes ethical behavior and, conversely, ethical misconduct. Sadly, this is not simply an academic exercise.

Since the publication of our ethics policy in October 2003, the Society has encountered multiple apparent ethical violations. Some of these cases have been quite serious and have resulted in sanctions, and all have involved letters of education to coauthors. The most common type of ethical misconduct we have encountered to date is plagiarism. The Society will continue to

strive to educate all parties involved in the publishing process—from authors, to editors and reviewers, to staff—on proper ethical conduct in scientific publishing. To that end, we refer readers to “Avoiding Plagiarism, Self-Plagiarism, and Other Questionable Writing Practices: A Guide to Ethical Writing,” by Miguel Roig, Ph.D., published online at the Office of Research Integrity website: [http://ori.dhhs.gov/wbt/roig%20\(st%20johns\)/index.html](http://ori.dhhs.gov/wbt/roig%20(st%20johns)/index.html). The introductory material to the section on Plagiarism is reprinted here and is used with permission from Miguel Roig.

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PLAGIARISM

“Taking over the ideas, methods, or written words of another, without acknowledgment and with the intention that they be taken as the work of the deceiver.”

—American Association of University Professors (September/October, 1989)

As the above quotation states, plagiarism has been traditionally defined as the taking of words, images, ideas, etc. from an author and presenting them as one’s own. It is often associated with phrases, such as kidnapping of words, kidnapping of ideas, fraud, and literary theft. Plagiarism can manifest itself in a variety of ways and it is not just confined to student papers or published articles or books. For example, consider a scientist who makes a presentation at a conference and discusses

at length an idea or concept that had already been proposed by someone else and that is not considered common knowledge. During his presentation, he fails to fully acknowledge the specific source of the idea and, consequently, misleads the audience into thinking that he was the originator of that idea. This, too, may constitute a case of plagiarism. Consider the following real-life exam-

ples of plagiarism and the consequences of the offender’s actions:

- A historian resigns from the Pulitzer board after allegations that she had appropriated text from other sources in one of her books.
- A biochemist resigns from a prestigious clinic after accusations that a book he wrote contained appropriated portions of text from a National Academy of Sciences report.
- A famous musician is found guilty of unconscious plagiarism by including elements of another musical group’s previously recorded song in one of his new songs that then becomes a hit. The musician is forced to pay compensation for the infraction.

- A college president is forced to resign after allegations that he failed to attribute the source of material that was part of a college convocation speech.
- A member of Congress running for his party’s nomination withdraws from the presidential race after allegations of plagiarism in one of his speeches.
- A psychologist has his doctoral degree rescinded after the university finds that portions of his doctoral dissertation had been plagiarized.

In sum, plagiarism can be a very serious form of ethical misconduct. For this reason, the concept of plagiarism is universally addressed in all scholarly, artistic, and scientific disciplines. In the humanities and the sciences, for example, there are a plethora of writing guides for students and professionals whose purpose, in part, is to provide guidance to authors on discipline-specific procedures for acknowledging the contributions of others. Curiously, when it comes to the topic of plagiarism, many professional writing guides appear to assume that the user is already familiar with the concept. In fact, while instruction on attribution, a key concept in avoiding plagiarism, is almost always provided, some of the most widely used writing guides do not appear to offer specific sections on plagiarism. Moreover, those that provide coverage often fail to go beyond the most basic generalities about this type of transgression.

Although plagiarism can take many forms there are two major types in scholarly writing: plagiarism of ideas and plagiarism of text.

For the full article, please visit [http://ori.dhhs.gov/wbt/roig%20\(st%20johns\)/index.html](http://ori.dhhs.gov/wbt/roig%20(st%20johns)/index.html).

“Ethics in Publishing: ASPB Policies and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Author Misconduct” can be found at <http://www.aspb.org/publications/ethics.cfm>. ♡