

Plagiarism — What Is It? How to Avoid It

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One of the best compliments a publication can receive is the desire of others to use its content for their own purposes, whether in a second publication or in informal sharing with colleagues. Unfortunately, the line between the compliment of borrowing and the fault of plagiarism is not well understood. Most people know that plagiarism is wrong, but many outside of publishing or academia may not understand exactly what it is and how to avoid it.

What Is Plagiarism?

To plagiarize is “to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one’s own; use ... without crediting the source”¹ Notice the word *steal*. The key to determining whether something is plagiarized is whether the writer clearly identifies what he or she has quoted or paraphrased from the original source. Using another’s published work without attribution is unethical and infringes on the rights of the author and the publication in which the original material appeared. “Plagiarism of published work violates standards of honesty and collegial trust and may also violate copyright law.”²

You can also expose yourself to accusations of plagiarism by using another’s words, even with proper attribution, if they are too close in form or content to the original source.³ This is a matter of degree, and sometimes is a judgment call, but it’s best to err on the side of caution and make the phrasing your own. Would someone reading your article alongside the article you’re citing feel that your content was basically cut and pasted from the source? If so, you’re risking plagiarism, and it’s best to write your paper so that it doesn’t closely resemble the source you’re citing.³

Some cases of plagiarism may arise because the author simply does not understand publication ethics, which are rarely taught in most professional academic programs. For example, we became aware of a physician who in all innocence, but without attribution, used large portions of *AFP* articles and patient information handouts in a weekly health column in his local newspaper. We applaud this physician’s efforts to bring high-quality medical information to his community. There is, however, a right way and a wrong way to borrow published information.

Crediting the Original Source

Authors and editors of *AFP* and other journals work hard to bring the most up-to-date information to their readers. Citing the original source gives your presentation of the material more credibility, and it provides the appropriate and deserved credit to the originally published work.

This can be done very simply. For example, if you want to use information from an article in this issue for a newspaper column, you can credit it as follows: “According to an article in the December 15, 2010, issue of *American Family Physician* ...” and then paraphrase the information you want to convey. Reuse of published content in a more formal publication, such as an article submitted to another medical journal, requires more formal attribution in footnotes or references. In this case, either quote the material exactly and enclose it in quotation marks, or paraphrase the material, being careful to keep the original meaning. As mentioned, however, the challenge is in making the wording your own, so that the paraphrase doesn’t look too similar to the original source, especially for large portions of text. With either method, the source must be cited.

When to Ask for Permission to Use Published Work

Directly quoting significant portions of a published work or reproducing a table or figure requires more formal permission from the original publisher. Unfortunately, copyright law does not specify how much text may be used without approaching the original publisher for permission. The best approach: when in doubt, ask. We are here to help you disseminate important primary care information to your colleagues and patients. If you have questions, please contact us at afpedit@aafp.org.

REFERENCES

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3. iParadigms, LLC. Types of plagiarism. http://www.plagiarism.org/plag_article_types_of_plagiarism.html. Accessed November 22, 2010. ■