

---

## Essays in Editing

---

### Handling plagiarism at the manuscript editor's desk

**Mary Ellen Kerans**

*Freelance editor and translator, Barcelona, Spain; mekerans@gmail.com*

**Marije de Jager**

*Freelance editor and translator, Rovereto, Italy; mfh@marijedejager.eu*

In our experience of freelance copyediting for small English-language science journals mainly based in Spain and Italy, peer review processes allow for the acceptance of manuscripts with a substantial amount of copy-paste writing of various types. The amount of such writing is often sufficient to open the authors to a charge of plagiarism. The number of manuscripts in which this problem appears is sufficient to increase the burden of work and stress for copy editors who worry about bringing such papers into the literature. One of us reported consistently finding textual plagiarism in around 30% of accepted manuscripts at one well-indexed medical journal over a two-year period,<sup>1</sup> although the seriousness varied from manuscript to manuscript. We find that some copy-pasted prose is confusing and choppy, requiring a great deal of time to copyedit. The problem is sometimes more serious, however. In a few cases in our experience, plagiarism has involved as much as 90% of a manuscript or amounted to duplicate publication. These manuscripts reach copy editors because the chain of evaluation by editors and peer reviewers focuses on content and has not included assessment for plagiarism.

While the publishing community's awareness of plagiarism has grown, its ability to address the problem consistently has not. The reactions of editorial board editors on one listserve varied from surprise to indignation to awakening awareness,<sup>2</sup> and one formal study of attitudes confirmed editors' deep concern.<sup>3</sup> Editors may even express surprise that textual plagiarism is improper. Open discussion on forums (see the many threads published by the World Association of Medical Editors [WAME]) suggests that there is some consensus, however, that a policy of "name and shame" may be disproportionate<sup>4</sup> unless handled educationally, in a way that is "titrated" to "fit the crime."<sup>5</sup> The assumptions are that offenses may be the result of poor or scant guidance and that authors can be educated by editors.

The need for consistent procedures has been recognized by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), which provides flowcharts showing how to handle suspected plagiarism appropriately, based on the degree of seriousness.<sup>6</sup> That editorial boards remain confused, however, seems clear from the 2009 controversy surrounding an accepted paper that was withdrawn from ahead-of-print posting after plagiarism was detected in the introduction section, but not before the author had complied with a request to rewrite the offending section.<sup>7</sup> That the paper was withdrawn anyway confused the author and suggested that the editorial board did not really have clear ideas about how to proceed. The

most ambitious effort from publishers and editorial boards to stem plagiarism has come from the CrossCheck project ([www.crossref.org/crosscheck.html](http://www.crossref.org/crosscheck.html)), which pools texts into a database that allows subscribing journals' staff to flag possible plagiarism or duplicate publication before editors' and peer reviewers' valuable time is wasted.

We think the CrossCheck approach, used before peer review, is ideal – but small journals are often not inside a well-informed or well-supported publication structure. We have worked for journals that receive and accept manuscripts with "patch writing" (see the table for terms used to talk about plagiarism) and have therefore become concerned about developing a way to proceed both ethically and helpfully in our work. The COPE guidelines start at a point when plagiarism has already been detected by a reviewer or, after publication, by a reader,<sup>6</sup> yet we have found that peer reviewers do not notice signs of this practice in the text. Furthermore, in authors' editing, before submission of a paper to a journal, we have also had to counsel young scientists who find themselves in settings where copy-paste writing is encouraged by peers and mentors. In both these contexts, we have had to find ways of speaking to authors strictly without destroying their ability to proceed with a manuscript. Finally, within the activities of the association Mediterranean Editors and Translators, where many manuscript editors and translators share experiences, colleagues who have found plagiarism in the course of researching terminology sometimes ask for advice.

As a result, with support from the editorial boards and research directors who we have edited for, we have worked out a consistent approach, one that we have seen others have also been able to apply. Without access to sophisticated tools, we have been able to detect plagiarism before too much editing time has been wasted. For lesser-degree patch writing, we have consistently been able to obtain authors' rewrites of choppy, copy-pasted text before we complete the final edit. Finally, in cases of extensive plagiarism or duplicate publication, we have been able to argue for rescinding acceptance in a timely way before the journal was embarrassed. In this essay we will describe the main features of that approach for the benefit of journals that do not have plagiarism detection services such as CrossCheck.

#### **Six-step guide for manuscript editors**

Our stepwise approach starts with a preliminary look at the introduction and discussion sections of the manuscript for red flags of plagiarism. These include an uneven style or quality of writing, a mixture of British and American

spelling, inconsistent terminology or abbreviations, repetitiveness or excessive detail, and a lack of cohesion between sentences or paragraphs.

**Step 1** then determines the amount of copied material. This can be done by pasting candidate phrases into Google

or Google Scholar and seeing if they come up positive (in bold type; figure 1). Googling for plagiarism can be time-consuming, but not more so than having to deal with plagiarism late in the publishing cycle. We therefore recommend googling as a way for copy editors to get started

### Terms used when discussing plagiarism

Terms	Our definition	Comments
<b>Copy-paste writing, or cut-paste writing</b>	The reuse of text published by others in one's own manuscript – usually for the sake of using “good, already-published English” or of producing a manuscript faster. The reused text may be substantial strings of words that may be sentence fragments, sentences, several sentences or whole paragraphs. Authors might do this with or without attribution.	We pay particular attention to the introduction and discussion sections of a manuscript. In contrast, as the phrasing in methods can be quite monotonous in some fields with established procedures, we need not be concerned with boilerplate language in this section. We also do not worry about very short copied phrases, provided they fit well with the new author's message and prose.
<b>Micro-plagiarism</b>	A form of copy-paste writing in which the copied texts are consistently small (a clause or a sentence or two) but frequent in one or more sections.	If accomplished well (good interweaving of source-text phrases and the author's own voice, plus impeccable citing), this type of writing may even be considered good language-learner behavior. Certainly it is common, even for native speakers, to write this way in the sciences. A problem arises for the author when his or her article seems stale because the phrasing seems too familiar. A problem arises for both the author and the copy editor when such writing is unskilled and the connections between ideas are unclear (see <i>patch writing</i> ).
<b>Patch writing, or mosaic writing</b>	The end result of copy-paste writing. These terms convey the choppiness a text can have when copy-paste writing strategies are used.	These texts can be quite hard to copyedit if the sense is difficult to follow. Alternatively, they can also seem deceptively easy to copyedit if there are hefty blocks that flow well, even though serious writing problems, such as the lack of a hypothesis before an objective, might be masked in such fluent-seeming texts.
<b>Plagiarism</b>	Copying of substantial amounts of text with an intent to deceive the reader into assuming that the writing and ideas belong to the author.	Many only use this word if large blocks of text or ideas have been appropriated and attribution has been omitted. Strict definitions, however, consider all the preceding types to be plagiarism.
<b>Self-plagiarism</b>	Reuse of substantial portions of text from one's own previous work.	Consensus is lacking on whether or not this is an oxymoron; some insist that plagiarism must involve the appropriation of someone else's work. This practice also overlaps that of redundant publication.
<b>Duplicate or redundant publication</b>	Reuse of one's own previous work that goes beyond text (ie, the use of wholly or substantially overlapping data).	Some claim that such redundant publication is of less concern when the article type is an editorial, review, or other non-research essay. <sup>8,9</sup>
<b>Translated plagiarism</b>	The use, after translation, of strings of sentences, paragraphs, or even larger blocks of prose, with or without attribution, keeping the informational structure of the original intact.	Found in editorials, review articles, and discussion sections of research articles. Since all words have been changed through translation, some are surprised this is plagiarism. However, we have found paragraphs or chapters that are uncharacteristically easy to back-translate to English because the progression of ideas in the translated text is identical to that of an existing text in English.* We think this should be classified as plagiarism even if a citation is affixed.

\*An error in the published version of the table (which had "in another language" instead of "in English") has been corrected here. An erratum notice appeared in the subsequent issue of *European Science Editing* (November 2010; 36[4]:101).



Figure 1: Google results that detect plagiarism in Step 1.<sup>10</sup> Note that full access to the article is not needed

immediately. We are currently testing inexpensive detection tools online, given that CrossCheck is unavailable to freelancers working for non-subscribing journals. One such tool, CheckForPlagiarism (www.checkforplagiarism.net), seems to be working well by screening manuscripts as a whole and giving a similarity report. Although this service is intended for use by universities who must check many texts, the developers were open to reducing access fees for a small user who needs to check only a few per week.

Step 2 documents the plagiarism by identifying the original sources. Plagiarism detection software will do this automatically; when using Google, the editor must manually highlight the copied passages and indicate where they were found (figure 2). It is important to say that Steps 1 and 2 can be accomplished even if the freelance editor does not have access to subscription-protected full texts; the Google output (figure 1) is sufficient.

Step 3 assesses the level of seriousness. A review paper that is 90% copied from a number of other publications

must obviously be returned to the editor in chief with a recommendation for de-acceptance, given that simple rejection is no longer an option since the authors have already been sent an acceptance letter. When we find lesser plagiarism, such as the author’s own writing interspersed with shorter copied fragments, we proceed to the next step, which will involve heavy copyediting and tactful education of the author.

Step 4 consists of rewriting one or more patch-written fragments. In doing so, our intention is not paraphrasing for its own sake, but rewriting to make the text flow better and clarify the author’s message, placed in the context of the literature. If there turn out to be many such fragments, this revision will provide examples for the author to use in the next step. If there are only a few in the manuscript, the rewriting can be considered as part of heavy copyediting, although we do note for the author the reasons for rewording (better clarity and avoidance of plagiarism).

Step 5 elicits revision by the authors themselves. We send the authors an email explaining that plagiarism has been detected in their manuscript (and documented as recommended in Step 2) and that this is not acceptable to the journal. We express the problem firmly, but in neutral, straightforward terms without being moralistic or accusatory (see de Jager and Kerans<sup>10</sup> for an example email). The authors are asked to rewrite the highlighted passages in their own words, taking the rewrites by the copy editor as a guide. They are reminded to add citations to the original sources if these are missing. If English is not their native language (E2 authors), we assure them that we will review their revised text for language mistakes before publication. It may be helpful to suggest they turn to a local language professional (a translator or author’s editor) if revising is particularly difficult for them.

Step 6 comprises the checking and editing of the revised manuscript. Papers that have been extensively rewritten may have changed so much that they will have to be re-examined by the editor in chief. In a few cases in our experience, such papers had to undergo a second peer review. In any case, publication may be delayed at least one issue.

The main goals of this approach are to assist with gatekeeping (prevent papers with more or less serious degrees of plagiarism from appearing) and with educating (show authors how to interweave information deriving from different sources, with due acknowledgement). Our experience has led us to recommend that editors in chief mention in the instructions for authors that plagiarism will be checked for. We also stress the importance of joining a plagiarism detection service like CrossCheck, so that plagiarism can be detected before peer review and copyediting. If for some reason it is preferable that copy editors do the screening, the extra work involved should be duly remunerated.

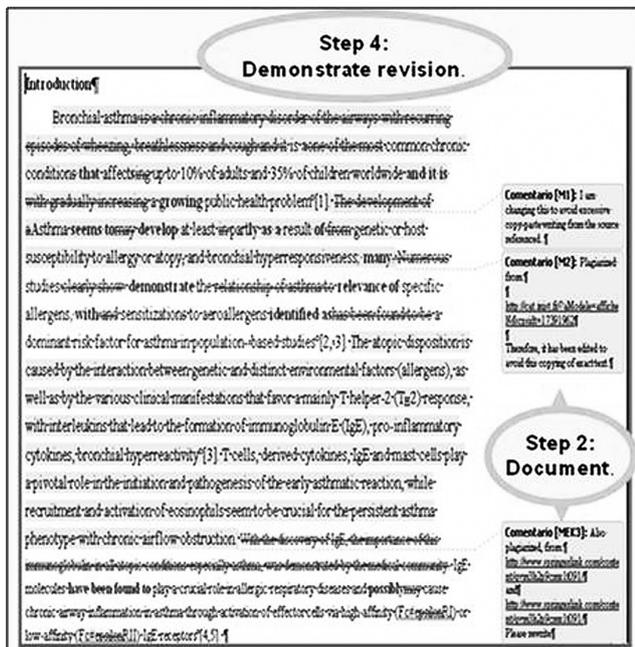


Figure 2: In Steps 2 and 4, we document the plagiarism detected and exemplify the type of revision we are requiring. Thus we take an educational approach and recognize that some authors may need to learn how to handle intertextuality<sup>10</sup>

**Discussion**

In assessing seriousness, it may not always be clear where to draw the line between unacceptable and acceptable copy-

paste writing, but good judgement by someone familiar with the literature is essential. An approach based on automatically considering strings of a certain number of words to denote plagiarism will be misleading in some sciences in which sentences often carry terms that are several words long. In particular, the uncritical use of detection software should be avoided. Whoever screens for plagiarism should guard against indiscriminate rejection of a paper on the basis of a multi-sourced similarity report. Interweaving of information from other sources in a way a reader can follow easily, and proper citing, make all the difference. We have emphasized the importance of checking the introduction and discussion sections, where the reader wants to see the author's thoughts well differentiated from those of others. In contrast, the use of set phrases or boilerplate language in the methods section may be justifiable.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in case reports, we have seen an author appropriate language that has been crafted by others and would not necessarily rule that out, especially if it helps an E2 author write a clear paper in English and if the discussion message stays firmly focused on the author's own conclusions.

Editors at different points in the publication process handle the issue in different ways. Pre-submission manuscript editors who help authors prepare texts in a setting where a microculture of copy-paste writing may have emerged can protect an author from the possibility of embarrassment (or worse) by pointing out that journal editors ask for original contributions and are becoming alert to ways of detecting plagiarism. Mention can be made of published WAME threads and COPE cases, showing that the issue is being taken ever more seriously. In-house copy editors may have access to tools such as CrossCheck, which makes screening for plagiarism easier, although – as mentioned above – each case will still have to be assessed individually. In-house copy editors may collaborate closely with journal editors and be more likely to have a say in the acceptance process. Freelance copy editors typically have varying degrees of autonomy and authority. Some will be instructed to flag copied text but let the chief editor decide how to deal with it. Others will be given almost complete freedom to approach authors in cases of microplagiarism along the lines described above. In all of these cases, it is our responsibility to make sure no false accusations are made.

Most, but not all, such manuscripts seem to come from E2 authors and it is often speculated that cultural differences influence perceptions of good practice. The Chinese, for example, have been said to engage in adulatory plagiarism. However, Chinese graduate students' patch writing has also been interpreted as a passing developmental strategy,<sup>12</sup> part of strategic drafting as they, like other young authors, strive for a voice and learn to distinguish their ideas from those of others. Another explanation given for the apparent greater frequency of patch writing by E2 authors is that they are practicing acceptable "appropriation of proper syntax" rather than of ideas.<sup>13</sup> Although this argument is persuasive, we warn authors in pre-submission editing that choppy copy-paste writing or overuse of boilerplate language may make their research seem less novel than it is. In any case, these arguments do not persuade us to change our approach

when we find patch writing in a text for publication, partly because we are facilitating authors' entry into a culture of international science, partly because we have seen patch writing even by native speakers of English, and partly because universities in Anglophone countries are also concerned about the problem, producing a body of literature on the topic (see McCabe,<sup>14</sup> McCabe and Treviño,<sup>15</sup> and Roig,<sup>16</sup> for example). Our experience coincides with the findings of McCabe and Treviño, who have shown that ethical writing is more or less likely to occur according to a research or educational setting's "microclimate" of ethics.<sup>15</sup> In authors' editing, where it is possible to see authoring practices close up, one of us (MEK) has observed that even within a single hospital department some research groups engage in more strictly ethical writing practices than others. In science, the spectrum of copy-paste writing – from relatively minor choppy patch writing all the way to deliberate, extensive plagiarism or duplicate publication – does not seem to be mainly a matter of national or linguistic cultural preference but rather circles of influence or individual aberration.

Textual plagiarism is misconduct that is relatively easy to detect, much easier than data fabrication or falsification. We have described a realistic role for manuscript editors, although we stress that screening for plagiarism and taking the necessary action after having detected it takes up precious editing time. We urge editorial boards to include specific statements about screening in the instructions to authors in the interest of discouraging copiers. Patch writing or more extensive copying may become a thing of the past within journals' discourse communities if consistent messages are given patiently. Failing to face the issue directly seems likely to encourage the belief that the practice is a normal, widely accepted one.

The poster presented at the 10th EASE Conference, Pisa, Italy, September 2009, is available on the EASE website ([www.ease.org.uk/latest/index.shtml](http://www.ease.org.uk/latest/index.shtml)).

## References

1. Kerans ME. Plagiarism. In: WAME Listserve discussion, 15 May–6 July 2008. <http://www.wame.org/wame-listserve-discussions/plagiarism> [accessed 14 March 2010].
2. Plagiarism. WAME Listserve Discussion, 15 May–6 July 2008. <http://www.wame.org/wame-listserve-discussions/plagiarism> [accessed 14 March 2010].
3. Long TC, Errami M, George AC, Sun Z, Garner HR. Responding to possible plagiarism. *Science* 2009;323:1293–4.
4. Wager L. How to handle plagiarism without destroying the author. In: WAME Listserve discussion, 14–18 February 2005. <http://www.wame.org/wame-listserve-discussions/how-to-handle-plagiarism-without-destroying-the-author> [accessed 14 March 2010].
5. Callahan M. How to handle plagiarism without destroying the author. In: WAME Listserve discussion, 14–18 February 2005. <http://www.wame.org/wame-listserve-discussions/how-to-handle-plagiarism-without-destroying-the-author> [accessed 14 March 2010].
6. Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). What to do if you suspect plagiarism. [http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/02A\\_](http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/02A_)

- Plagiarism\_Submitted.pdf [accessed 8 March 2010].
7. Abbott A. Editor retracts sperm-creation paper. *Nature* 30 July 2009; <http://www.nature.com/news/2009/090730/full/news.2009.753.html> [accessed 8 March 2010].
  - 8 Self-plagiarism: unintentional, harmless or fraud? (Editorial). *Lancet* 2009;374:664.
  9. Chalmers I. Intentional self-plagiarism (Letter). *Lancet* 2009;374:1422.
  10. De Jager M, Kerans ME. A manuscript editor's guide to handling plagiarism. Poster presented at the 10th EASE Conference, Pisa, 16-19 September 2009. Available from: [http://www.metmeetings.org/index.php?page=metm10\\_workshop\\_handling\\_plagiarism](http://www.metmeetings.org/index.php?page=metm10_workshop_handling_plagiarism).
  11. Roig M. Ethical writing should be taught. *BMJ* 2006;333:596–597.
  12. Gu Q, Brooks J. Beyond the accusation of plagiarism. *System* 2008;36(3):337–352.
  13. Refinetti R. How to handle plagiarism without destroying the author. In: WAME Listserv discussion, 14–18 February 2005. <http://www.wame.org/wame-listserve-discussions/how-to-handle-plagiarism-without-destroying-the-author> [accessed 14 March 2010].
  14. McCabe D. Cheating: why students do it and how we can help them stop. *American Educator* 2001;25(4):38–43
  15. McCabe D, Treviño LK. Honesty and honor codes. *Academe* 2002;88:37–41.
  16. Roig M. Some reflections on plagiarism: the problem of paraphrasing in the sciences. *European Science Editing* 2007;33(2):38–41.
-