Editorial/

Plagiarism, Copyright Violation, and Dual Publication: Are you guilty?

by Mary P. Anderson, editor-in-chief

Let us imagine you are writing a paper for submission to a journal. You need some introductory material including site description, explanation of methods ... that sort of thing. Hey, you just published a paper in another journal that has exactly what you need. Why not just lift the text verbatim (or maybe change a few words here and there) and also a few of the figures and insert it all into the new paper? After all, the words and figures are yours and you have a right to use them. Or do you?

You likely signed an agreement when the first paper was published that transferred copyright to the publisher. You cannot publish the material again unless you obtain permission from the original publisher and cite the first paper as the source of both text and figures. Failure to do so constitutes a violation of copyright and self-plagiarism.

Plagiarism occurs when one appropriates as one’s own the writings and/or ideas of another. It is still plagiarism if you adapt someone else’s ideas to a new problem without citing your source (e.g., Notice of Plagiarism 2004, Ground Water 42, no. 1: 2). In his classic paper, C.V. Theis (1935, Transactions of the American Geophysical Union 16: 519–524) adapted a solution from the heat flow literature to solve a problem in well hydraulics. He was careful to cite his source. Theis’ paper revolutionized the field of ground water hydrology. Citing your source does not diminish the significance of your work.

Self-plagiarism occurs when one reproduces portions of your work without citing the original work. What should you do when vital background information needs to be conveyed by way of introduction in one or more related papers? Strictly speaking such repetition should be avoided, but duplication of a site map or site description in multiple publications is at least understandable. Nevertheless, the source of the map and description must be cited. Journals will generally allow reproduction of limited amounts of material without obtaining special permission. For example, the American Geophysical Union allows individuals “to use figures, tables, and short quotes from the journal for republication in scientific books and journals.” The Geological Society of America allows reproduction of “a single figure, a brief paragraph, or a single table” as fair usage. The National Ground Water Association also grants requests to reproduce material free of charge but requires that you contact the Director of Publications, Mr. Thad Plumley (tplumley@ngwa.org), with your specific need. Permission is always granted when citing your own work.

Related issues are dual submission and dual publication (Voss 2005, Hydrogeology Journal 13, no. 4: 545–548). Dual submission occurs when an author submits the same, or essentially the same, paper to two (or more) journals. Dual submission may seem like a good idea; you tell yourself that you double your chances of getting the paper accepted, save some time if one journal rejects the paper, and you can always withdraw the paper from one of the journals if it is accepted by both. This practice, however, is strictly prohibited by journal policy. Upon submitting a paper to a journal, authors are asked to confirm that the work has not been previously published and is not under consideration by another journal. It is a waste of reviewers’ and editor’s time to process a paper that will be withdrawn if accepted by another journal. There is a good possibility that both journals will send the paper to at least one of the same reviewers. The reviewer will likely alert the editors to the occurrence of dual submission, leading to an embarrassing situation for the author.

What about dual publication? When is there enough new material in a paper to justify another journal article? Sometimes, the title, abstract, and conclusions sections clearly indicate the material in the two papers is basically the same. But if there is doubt about the degree of overlap, my philosophy is to focus on the figures and tables. As long as most of the figures and tables are different, the accompanying text also must be different. Suspicion about overlap grows if two or more figures/tables are the same in both papers.

The next time you need to use previously published material, please remember to cite your sources and thereby avoid the stigma of plagiarism. Also, be aware that dual submission violates journal policy. Finally, authors and reviewers alike should be vigilant to prevent dual publication.