

# TEXT RECYCLING

## TRRP BEST PRACTICES FOR RESEARCHERS

Text recycling is the reuse of textual material (prose, visuals, or equations) in a new document where (1) the material in the new document is identical to that of the source (or substantively equivalent in both form and content), (2) the material is not presented in the new document as a quotation (via quotation marks or block indentation), and (3) at least one author of the new document is also an author of the prior document.

The best practices here are intended to guide scholarly and research writers working in all disciplines. We advise authors who have questions about whether or how these best practices apply for any specific document to consult with a journal editor or mentor prior to submission. Researchers interested in learning more about text recycling can consult the TRRP document [Understanding Text Recycling in Research Writing: A Guide for Researchers](#).

*These recommendations apply only to reusing one's own work, not using material written by others. Authors should not engage in plagiarism. For advice on avoiding plagiarism, consult disciplinary guides.*

### RECYCLING TEXT ETHICALLY AND APPROPRIATELY

*Text recycling may be ethical or unethical, desirable or undesirable—depending on the context, the nature, and quantity of recycled material.*

1. Authors **should** recycle text where consistency of language is needed for accurate communication. This consistency can be especially important when describing methods and instrumentation that are common across studies. If the amount of recycled material is substantial, authors should determine whether permissions are needed (see Recycling Text Legally) and whether it is acceptable for the outlet (see Recycling Text Transparently).<sup>1</sup>
2. Authors **may** recycle text so long as the recycled material is accurate and appropriate for the new work and does not infringe copyright or violate publisher policies.<sup>2</sup>
3. Authors should be careful **not** to recycle text in ways that might mislead readers or editors about the novelty of the new work.<sup>3</sup>

### RECYCLING TEXT LEGALLY

*The legality of text recycling generally depends on copyright law and any author-publisher contract signed for the source document. (In some circumstances, there may be additional legal restrictions as well.)*

4. For most unpublished work (unpublished research manuscripts, preprints, grant proposals, conference posters, etc.), authors hold copyright and thus can recycle from that work without legal restriction. (Note: Under “work-for-hire” arrangements, authors do not hold copyright.)<sup>4</sup>
5. Most publishers require authors to transfer copyright to the publisher. Authors’ rights to recycle from their own published works are then limited by copyright laws, which differ by country. Publication contracts may, however, let authors retain some rights to recycle. These rights are contract-specific and differ markedly across publishers. Authors should know what their signed contract allows.<sup>5</sup>
6. If the amount or type of recycling exceeds what copyright law and the signed contract allows, authors should obtain permission from the publisher of the source document.<sup>6</sup>

### RECYCLING TEXT TRANSPARENTLY

*Appropriate recycling requires transparency with editors, readers, and coauthors.*

7. Authors should be transparent with editors, informing them about the presence of recycled material upon submission.<sup>7</sup>
8. Authors should be transparent with readers by including a statement notifying readers that the document contains recycled material.<sup>8</sup>
9. If the authors of the new work are not identical to those of the prior work, the corresponding author of the new work should obtain permissions.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

### RECYCLING TEXT ETHICALLY

- 1 In some situations, text recycling enhances communication through consistency of language across multiple documents. While the need for such consistency is most often relevant for descriptions of methods (experimental procedures, instrumentation, statistical analyses, and so on), it is occasionally important for other elements as well (e.g., descriptions of conceptual models, theoretical frameworks, or definitions).

In these situations, changes in language that do *not* correspond with actual changes in the new study can confuse readers, while consistency of language makes it easier for readers to recognize where differences truly exist.

- 2 In some cases, text recycling may not be strictly necessary to ensure accuracy in communication, but it can still be used in ethically appropriate ways. For example, an author may have previously published several sentences that describe a particular research question which remains relevant to a new study they are writing about. Another example would be reusing most of the text and figures from a conference poster in a later journal article on the same study. Authors may recycle in such situations, but they should be careful not to recycle any material that is not accurate or effective in the new context.

Editorial policies for text recycling may differ by venue. Some policies, for example, do not allow recycling of previously published material in Results or Discussion sections. In deciding when to recycle text, authors should familiarize themselves with key policies in their fields and seek guidance from publishers, editors, and mentors as relevant.

- 3 Authors should be careful to avoid text recycling in contexts where it may be viewed as unethical or misleading. This can occur at the document level and sentence level:

*Document Level:* Authors should not exaggerate or misrepresent the novelty of work to increase their publications. This occurs in cases such as fragmented publication (“salami slicing”) or duplicate publication. Arguments for the utility of text recycling in some situations are not intended to validate these practices.

*Sentence Level:* Authors should avoid making superficial changes in recycled material (e.g., substituting synonyms, rearranging phrases and clauses) because it can mislead readers and editors about the originality of the material and reduce clarity. When authors wish to reuse text, they should do so openly. When text recycling is not appropriate, writers should begin from a blank document to compose new passages rather than editing prior writing into a new form. If authors believe that recycling specific material is their best choice but are concerned that the amount or kind of recycling might not be acceptable to the editors, they should discuss this concern with the editors upon submission.

### RECYCLING TEXT LEGALLY

- 4 In general, authors hold copyright in their work if it has not been published. Exceptions are documents produced as “work for hire” or under other employment agreements that give copyrights to the employer.
- 5 Authors often mistakenly believe that they have unlimited rights to reuse any material that they wrote. But once authors have transferred copyright to a publisher, their rights to reuse that material are limited to what copyright allows—unless the contract they signed with that publisher alters those rights.

Copyright law in the United States includes a provision of “fair use” which grants authors who do not hold copyright the right to reuse published material under certain conditions. The most common uses of text recycling in scientific research reports (limited recycling of methods material, background material, or other technical details) would be considered a fair use and therefore be legal under U.S. copyright law as long as the author-publisher contract does not explicitly restrict it. Laws in some other countries include “[fair dealing](#),” which is not identical to fair use.

- 6 Many contracts explicitly grant authors the right to reuse material from their published papers in their own future works within specified limits; authors can legally recycle text within those limits without needing publisher permission. If a document was published under a Creative Commons or similar open-access license, authors generally retain extensive rights to recycle

from that document. More often, contracts will either grant authors specific, limited additional rights (regarding the number of words, the kinds of publications they can recycle in, and so on), or they may not address the matter at all.

Because contracts vary, authors should check the contract they signed with the publisher of the source document to determine whether and how it affects their rights of reuse. If authors wish to recycle beyond those limits in ways that are ethical and appropriate and not otherwise allowed under copyright law, they should request permission from that publisher.

#### **RECYCLING TEXT TRANSPARENTLY**

**7 WHY:** Almost all ethical problems with text recycling during the publication process can be avoided if authors are transparent with editors about their practices and intentions at the time of submission. By communicating directly about your writing practices, you allow editors to understand and respond supportively to your work. Editors may request changes that can be made before a submission goes out for review, preventing later issues that could delay publication or lead to retraction.

**HOW:** If a manuscript contains recycled material, note that in your cover letter. Provide enough information to allow editors to fairly judge whether the amount and type of material is appropriate according to the journal's policies—such as citations to the prior work(s) and brief explanations of how the prior work relates to the new work. It is especially important to disclose recycling of material that has been previously published or publicly circulated.

**8 WHY:** Transparency demonstrates respect for readers by alerting them to the presence of recycled material. It also helps readers understand how the present work is related to other publications that have contributed to an ongoing research agenda.

**HOW:** Journals have different practices for disclosing text recycling to readers. If the journal does not have a specific policy, include a footnote at the beginning of the document, such as this: "This paper contains recycled material from the following sources, within limits allowed by this journal: ..." followed by citations for sources of recycled material. If a section of the document contains a substantial amount of recycled material, consider adding a statement such as this to the note: "Substantial material in [this section] is recycled from our prior publication(s)."

**9 WHY:** Requesting and obtaining permissions from other authors is ethical practice, but it is also practical and strategic. Authors of collaboratively written source documents may retain some intellectual property rights, and recycling text without securing their permissions could lead to delays in publication or other consequences. While authors would ideally obtain permission from any prior co-authors whose work is being recycled, this may not be feasible, particularly when many authors are involved. Authors are encouraged to respect contributions of co-authors not represented in the new work, especially when those co-authors are their juniors.

**HOW:** If the corresponding author of both documents is the same, that person should obtain permission from any coauthors who initially wrote the material being recycled but who are not authors of the new document, when feasible. If the corresponding authors are different, the corresponding author of the new document should contact the corresponding author of the source document for permission to recycle from it.

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## Guidance for editors, publishers and other organizations on using this document

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We encourage journals, universities, government agencies and other organizations to adopt or adapt our best practices into their policies for authors. While views on some of these issues differ, these “Best Practices” are based on research and extensive consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of text recycling and its alternatives in different situations. Editors are encouraged to read our document “Understanding Text Recycling in Research Writing: A Guide for Editors” prior to adapting this document.

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