

Common Misconceptions

about Text Recycling in Research Writing

Researchers often have reason to repeat some content from one of their prior documents, but they aren't always certain how to do this ethically or legally. If they rely on what they've heard from colleagues or read online, what they are told may not be accurate.

TEXT RECYCLING (AKA "Self-Plagiarism")

is the reuse of textual material when the source (old) and destination (new) documents share at least one author, and the recycled text does not appear as a direct quote.

5 Authors can avoid the complications of text recycling altogether by merely rewriting or quoting the reused material.

While the desire to avoid the complexities of text recycling is understandable, suggested alternatives are often not viable:

- Rewriting is not inherently more ethical, especially if the aim in reworking the material is to disguise it. Similarly, superficial changes in wording—whether substituting synonyms or rearranging clauses—don't resolve concerns about copyright infringement.⁶
- Some researchers have been told to put all recycled material in quotation marks. But researchers rarely recycle entire blocks of text verbatim; instead, they edit the material to make it appropriate for the new study. This would require multiple sets of quotes for a single passage, which would not only confuse readers but be unacceptable to most editors.^{4,6}

1 Text recycling is widely considered unethical.

Researchers are sometimes told that text recycling is fundamentally unethical and should always be avoided. While some uses of text recycling are unethical, it is often acceptable and sometimes even desirable, such as when a new study includes some of the same methods used in the researcher's prior work. In fact, many journal editors believe that some uses of text recycling have a place in research writing.^{1,2}

2 Text recycling is a form of plagiarism.

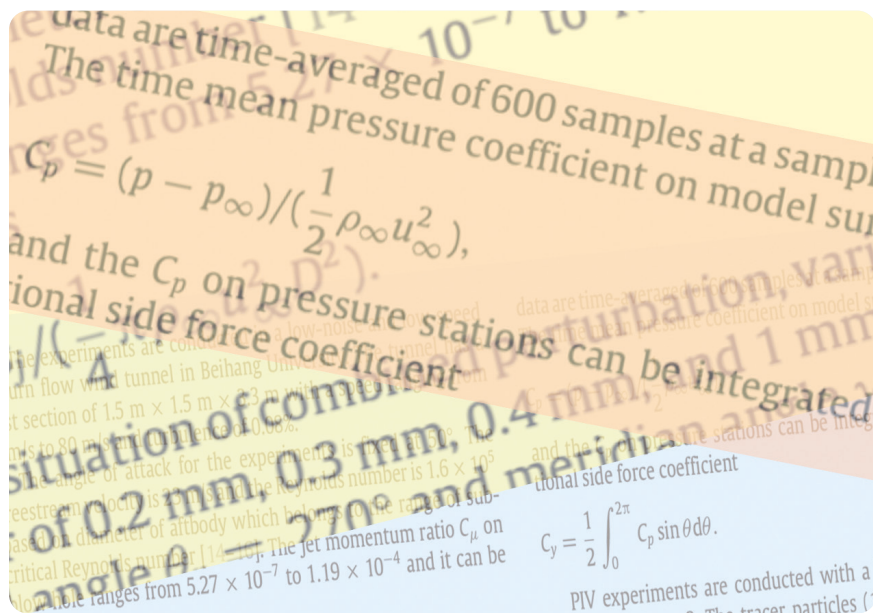
Reusing material from one's own prior documents is often called "self-plagiarism," but text recycling is not plagiarism. Text recycling doesn't appropriate the intellectual property of others or deprive them of credit for their work.³

3 Respectable researchers never recycle text.

You might think that text recycling is uncommon, but it's not. For example, researchers often recycle from conference posters when writing articles, and they routinely recycle large parts of conference papers into articles as well, often at the invitation of their professional societies. Recycling is even common—although in much smaller amounts—from one published research paper to another.⁴

4 Text recycling infringes copyright.

Many people believe that recycling text from published papers infringes copyright and could lead to lawsuits. In actuality, the most common instances of text recycling in research writing are allowed as a "fair use" under U.S. law. While the laws of other countries vary, limited amounts of recycling from one published paper to another are not likely to raise legal concerns if attribution is given, and publisher permission can be sought when needed.⁵





The Text Recycling Research Project (TRRP) focuses on researchers' reuse of materials from their own prior work in new documents. Our aims are to understand the practice of text recycling, build consensus among stakeholders, and promote ethical and appropriate practice. The TRRP works with an advisory board of experts from major publishers, editor organizations, scholarly societies, government research agencies, and research integrity offices. The TRRP is supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation: Cultivating Cultures for Ethical STEM program (SES-1737093).

REFERENCES

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A comprehensive bibliography of our research with full-text links is available at textrecycling.org/publications

RESOURCES

Resources for researchers and editors are freely available at textrecycling.org/resources/

For Researchers

"TRRP Best Practices for Researchers," provides concise guidance for action

"Understanding Text Recycling: A Guide for Researchers," provides in-depth explanation of key terms, special cases, and further reading for researchers

For Editors and Publishers

"Understanding Text Recycling in Research Writing: A Guide for Editors," provides in-depth explanation of key terms, special cases, and further reading for editors

"TRRP Model Text Recycling Policy," offers publishers and journal editors a model policy to adopt or adapt

"TRRP Guide to Developing Text Recycling Policies," gives publishers and editors guidance for developing their own text recycling policies

"TRRP White Paper: Text Recycling in Research Writing: U.S. Copyright Law and Fair Use," provides an overview of legal issues related to text recycling