

TRRP Model Policy and Guidelines for Text Recycling in the Classroom

Educational institutions are increasingly establishing policies regarding students reusing materials from their previously submitted assignments. Institutions have had to formulate these policies without resources that fully review the underlying issues. As a result, these policies are often idiosyncratic or may inadvertently restrict instructors from allowing reuse that aligns with course learning goals.

In addition to providing a model institutional policy, this document reviews the underlying issues, explains the value of this policy, and offers suggested syllabus language and guidance for instructors.

Throughout this document, we use the terms “text recycling” and “reuse” to refer specifically to a writer reusing **their own** prior writing, not the writing of others or prose produced by AI tools. You can find a complete definition of [text recycling](#) on our website.

WHY RETHINK TEXT RECYCLING IN THE CLASSROOM SETTING?

While previous documents from the Text Recycling Research Project (TRRP) focused on professional researcher and publishing contexts, this document focuses on the reuse of writing by students in coursework. Although there are a number of similarities between research writing for publication and student writing for course credit, there is an important difference as well:

- In both cases, the acceptability of reuse is determined by context. Some stakeholders (such as publishers and educational administrators) will opt to address this complex issue by imposing a blanket prohibition on text reuse. We believe this is counterproductive; just as researchers should, in some contexts, be able to recycle text in their research, we believe that in some contexts students should be able to reuse their own writing.
- In both cases, ethical reuse of writing requires transparency and communication. Researchers must be clear about reuse with editors and readers; students must be clear with instructors.
- The most important difference is that the primary aim of professional research writing is generating a written product that is valuable to readers, while the primary aim of classroom writing is a process of learning that is valuable to the writer. Therefore, policies for classroom settings should differ from the [TRRP Model policy for research writing](#).

There are many situations in which the acceptability of students’ reuse of their prior writing is unclear. The following scenarios illustrate some of these situations. While there is no single correct response to each scenario, they illustrate why instructors might have a range of responses when students ask to reuse their own prior writing.

TRRP MODEL INSTITUTIONAL POLICY ON REUSE OF WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM SETTING

Student reuse of their own prior work can promote learning in some contexts and inhibit it in others. Because contexts differ in this regard, students are expected to adhere to the following policy on reuse:

Students cannot reuse material from another course (whether at this degree-granting educational institution or another, including high school) without their current instructor’s explicit permission. If that permission is not explicitly granted in course syllabus or assignment requirements, students must get written permission in advance. If the student had one or more co-authors on the original document, they are not allowed to recycle from that document unless that instructor explicitly agrees to an exception.

- **Class context scenario 1:** A student withdrew from a science lab course mid-semester. Before that, the student successfully completed the first two of five required experiments and the associated lab reports. The student retakes the course next semester, completing all of the same lab experiments. For the first two labs, can she resubmit her reports from last semester—with minor revisions for any differences in data collected in the current term?
- **Class context scenario 2:** An advanced writing course encourages students to pick up a writing project they began in a prior course and develop it further for submission to a publication. A student wrote a short story in a creative writing course in his prior year and wants to revise it in this course. Can he use that story as a starting point for this assignment?
- **Class context scenario 3:** A student in an introductory history course wrote a short paper that analyzed a particular historical document. Later, in an advanced history course, the student plans to write a longer research paper that analyzes this document along with four other primary sources. Can the student reuse their previously written analysis in drafting the new paper?
- **Class context scenario 4:** A business course assigns students a résumé assignment. Some students in the course previously took a different course that also required them to write a résumé. Can these students resubmit those résumés (with minor updates) for the current course?
- **Class context scenario 5:** In a prior course, students write a research proposal but don't actually conduct the study. This semester, a student is conducting the research she proposed in that course and will write a report on the study for her senior thesis. Can she reuse the introduction, literature review, and methods material from her proposal in drafting her thesis?

To promote student learning while also encouraging ethical writing practices, the TRRP has created a model institutional policy regarding students' reuse of their own texts across different courses (not within the same course). The policy leaves substantial responsibility and decision-making to the individual instructor. It emphasizes the importance of transparency and active communication between students and instructors because both students and instructors are responsible for creating the conditions for learning and ethical writing.

FURTHER GUIDANCE FOR INSTRUCTORS

As the above scenarios show, some forms of text recycling by students constitute cheating or otherwise avoid full engagement in coursework while, in other circumstances, allowing text recycling may promote learning and engagement—such as when students build on their prior work to undertake more ambitious projects. Thus, policies about text recycling should always align with the learning goals of a course. When creating a course-specific policy for text recycling, consider the goals of the writing assignments and how allowing a particular type of reuse could detract from, enhance, or have a negligible effect on students reaching those goals. If you do not anticipate students recycling material in your course, you may simply include your institution's policy in your syllabus.

Instructors should make their policy about text recycling explicit in their syllabi or assignments. The following best practices may be helpful:

- If you do not want students to recycle materials from prior work, create unique assignments that draw on the course material in specific ways. The more generic the assignment, the more likely it is that previous work could be submitted. If appropriate, ask students to integrate information from class discussions and lectures into their written work; such course-specific information will not appear in students' previous work.
- If you intend to have students deliberately build on previous work, give them explicit guidelines on the assignment prompt and build a sequence of processes or activities into the assignment to

ensure that it extends and expands prior knowledge. Make sure your course syllabus clearly explains how they may and may not reuse their own writing.

- Regardless of your policy on reuse, support the process of completing significant assignments by building in rough drafts, providing opportunities for feedback (such as peer response), and requiring revisions.

SAMPLE SYLLABUS STATEMENT

The statement below offers instructors a model syllabus statement. Instructors may wish to adapt this language for their specific contexts.

Our school's policy on student reuse of their own writing is as follows:

[Insert your institution's policy here.]

Students in this course who wish to reuse their own prior writing should follow this guidance:

- If you wish to resubmit *the entirety* of a written document produced in a different course (possibly with minor modifications), you should email me your prior document and explain why resubmission is justified.
- If you wish to recycle *portions of* a prior document produced in a different course in producing a new document for this course, you should write an email to me that includes the source document with the material you intend to reuse highlighted, describe where it came from, and explain how this new use differs from the prior document. If the ways in which you are reusing your prior material change during the project, you should email me again to discuss this.

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