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Identifying Plagiarism

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When does plagiarism occur? Is there an established percentage, a rule of thumb, a saturation point that we can use to determine when plagiarism has taken place? Or is it simply that "plagiarism is plagiarism"? The answer may lie somewhere between the stark (and perhaps too simple) dictum and the convenience of ready-made measures. In most cases, the dictum can be applied appropriately: plagiarism is plagiarism.

However, there are in fact degrees of plagiarism: one can steal an entire paper, or a section of a paper, or a page, a paragraph or a sentence. Even copying phrases without credit and quotation marks can be considered plagiarism. In other words, paraphrasing done improperly can qualify as plagiarism.

So, there are several basic factors to consider when evaluating a case of possible plagiarism:

- Amount or quantity (full paper, a section of a paper, a page, a paragraph, a sentence, phrases)
- Use of quotation marks for all copied text
- Appropriate placement of credit notices
- Improper paraphrasing

Possible plagiarism scenarios

Potentially complicating the effort to identify plagiarism is the fact that each of the above basic factors can be combined with other factors, creating a range of possible plagiarism scenarios. Here, then, is a full list of possible scenarios, starting with the worst case:

1. Uncredited Verbatim Copying of a Full Paper, or Uncredited Verbatim Copying of a Major Portion (more than 50%) within a Single Paper--An instance is where a large section of the original paper is copied without quotation marks, credit notice, reference, and bibliography. This case also includes instances where different portions of a paper are copied without attribution from a number of papers by other authors, and the sum of plagiarized material is more 50%, or

   Uncredited Verbatim Copying within More than a Single Paper by the Same Author(s)--This includes instances where more than one paper by the offending

author(s) has been found to contain plagiarized content, and all the percentages of plagiarized material in each of the discovered papers sum to greater than 50%.

2. Uncredited Verbatim Copying of a Large Portion (greater than 20% and up to 50%) within a Paper.--An instance is where a section of the original paper is copied from another paper without quotation marks, credit notice, reference, and bibliography. This case also includes instances where different portions of a paper are copied without attribution from a number of papers by other authors, and the sum of copying results in a large portion of plagiarized material (up to 50%) in the paper, or

   Uncredited Verbatim Copying within More than One Paper by the Same Author(s)--This includes instances where the sum of plagiarized material from the different papers would constitute the equivalent of a large portion (greater than 20% and up to 50%) of the discovered paper with the fewest words.

3. Uncredited Verbatim Copying of Individual Elements (Paragraph(s), Sentence(s), Illustration(s), etc.) Resulting in a Significant Portion (up to 20%) within a Paper--An instance could be where portions of original paper are used in another paper without quotation marks, credit notice, reference, and bibliography.

4. Uncredited Improper Paraphrasing of Pages or Paragraphs. Instances of improper paraphrasing occur when only a few words and phrases have been changed or when the original sentence order has been rearranged; no credit notice or reference appears with the text.

5. Credited Verbatim Copying of a Major Portion of a Paper without Clear Delineation. Instances could include sections of an original paper copied from another paper; credit notice is used but absence of quotation marks or offset text does not clearly reference or identify the specific, copied material.

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Plagiarism, in short

The extreme and more obvious cases notwithstanding, the above scenarios provide us with some basic determining factors we can use when attempting to deal with allegations of plagiarism between authors.

Amount or quantity does not play a part in defining plagiarism. However, the amount of material plagiarized should play an important part in determining the appropriate corrective action.

Credit notices or references are not sufficient to deflecting a charge of plagiarism if quotation marks or offset text have not been used to identify the specific material being copied.

Paraphrasing can leave an author open to a charge of plagiarism if he or she has changed only a few words or phrases or has only rearranged the original sentence order. Even a proper paraphrasing of the original text can lead to a charge of plagiarism if the original source is not properly cited.

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Discussion

Any discussion on a subject such as plagiarism must be founded on a few, basic ideas on which all can agree. A discussion will help refine our understanding, but we need to start with some accepted basics.

Consistency

One such idea, as already mentioned, is that plagiarism is plagiarism, regardless of the amount having been copied. However, scale is important, especially in trying to determine an appropriate corrective action. Introducing scale as an important consideration also brings the idea of "consistency" into the discussion. Until the "Guidelines for Adjudicating Different Levels of Plagiarism" had been developed and approved, there had not been any measure or method for linking "scale" with a corresponding corrective action so that consistent and fair judgments may be reached across all IEEE organizational units and over the years. Early in the discussion, consistency was seen as a critically important subject for the successful development of effective guidelines.

Are there valid exceptions to the rules against plagiarism in technical writing?

The fundamental nature of scientific/technical writing on and reporting of research results is that so much of it is closely based on the archival literature. Is it not required for new work to call upon and use the work that has already been published, at least in order to establish a necessary level of authentication and validation? New work depends on the very close and careful use of the archive. Therefore, are exceptions to be made for scientific/technical writing where the rules against plagiarism are concerned?

Similarly, some opinion has it that since technical writing is not "literary" writing, i.e., not at the level of Shakespeare, it is therefore acceptable to use a "certain amount" of someone else's text without having to indicate the specific text, especially when a citation or reference appears in the vicinity of the copied material. The same school of thought would argue that the use of quotation marks and/or indented text to signify the use of someone else's text would interrupt the flow of the writing, would interfere with the reader's comprehension of the work, especially since there would be, by necessity, so much of it (quote marks or indents). Again, should the nature of technical/scientific/archival writing allow exceptions to the proper use of, in this case, quotation marks and/or indented text?

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing will always be a difficult area to adjudicate. Since plagiarism involves not only the unacknowledged reuse of some else's words but also someone's ideas, it is possible to render a properly paraphrased section of text and still be open to a charge of plagiarism if proper credit for the *idea* has not been given. Even so, we should be able to agree that changing only a few words or phrases or only rearranging the original sentence order of another author's work will be defined as plagiarism.