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Getting it Right: Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism

In this editorial I want to alert you to the need to be careful in your writing by describing some strategies to avoid plagiarism. Too often authors submit manuscripts to journals that contain inaccurate referencing or plagiarised material. Often this is a result of such authors not knowing how to reference properly. But occasionally the plagiarism is a defiant, deliberate step to get published without putting in a great deal of original work. Quite simply, plagiarism is the act of you including in your writing material taken from other sources without due reference to the original authors of that work, in other words, cheating. In the global world of publishing, ethical issues such as plagiarism concern many editing teams. This is especially so when there is increasing pressure on researchers to get published at all costs.

Consequences of plagiarism

Often those who plagiarise do not realise that this act can have serious consequences such as breaching the copyright and intellectual content of other authors and the publisher of that material. If the plagiarism is proven it might result in a number of actions. Firstly, your manuscript might be rejected and your actions archived in the journal data base for future reference if you submit another manuscript. If a published article is found to contain plagiarised material, this article can be retracted from a journal or other publication; a serious matter since the reason for the retraction will become public knowledge on the journal website or a data base. There are three other consequences of serious plagiarism: an author or a publishing company may sue you for damages; your employer or funding body might be notified, and this may harm your career; and your reputation as a researcher or an author may be damaged. Quite a number of scientists or authors have had their reputations ruined by public discussion or reporting of their plagiarism in various media.

In my experience, novice writers are often confused or very worried about what and how to reference. They may also have trouble deciding what is 'common' knowledge compared to what is specific knowledge that has been taken from the literature. In this Journal our novice writers tend to be graduate students, who are writing their studies up for publication, or who are publishing for the first time in an international journal. The academic merit of all manuscripts is judged by a peer review process and by the editors of this journal, and your review and use of literature is an important part of this. No journal wants to publish an article that is full of non-original work, whether it is plagiarised or not. We need in our scientific writing to make unique contributions to our profession. So how do you avoid plagiarism?

Some strategies

Firstly, you need to ensure that you understand and use the referencing style of the journal you are writing for. In our journal you can find the referencing style in the Author Guidelines. If you do not understand them or need help, or cannot decide whether something needs to be referenced, speak with more experienced authors/researchers, your supervisor, or write to the editor. Secondly, looking at recently published articles in the PRIJNR will help you format your references properly. Thirdly, when you are writing a manuscript, a thesis or any other piece of scholarly work and you want to use the ideas of the writer(s), it is best to paraphrase the words of others and then reference everything you have used in your writing. Remember, journals do not want to

publish articles that have a lot of non-original material, whether plagiarised or correctly referenced, so the majority of the work in an article needs to be original. Next, it is a good rule of thumb that if you write 6–7 words in a word string directly from the work of another author, then you need to enclose this in quotation marks and provide details of the author(s) name, year and page number from where the quote was taken in your reference. However, keep your direct quotes to an absolute minimum; paraphrasing and correct referencing is better than a series of direct quotes. Another strategy is to submit your work to only one journal at a time. If you submit to simultaneous journals, there is then an outside chance that it might be published twice, and this is serious scientific misconduct. If the manuscript gets rejected or you withdraw it, then you can submit it elsewhere.

Lastly, I want to remind readers about the important need to correctly reference their own work if it has been published in print or online. This includes your previous published research studies, full conference proceedings, abstracts, or thesis. Just because you were the author of such published material does not abrogate your responsibility to reference it. You cannot copy your own work without the need to pay attention to referencing, copyright and intellectual content. For example, if you want to publish an article but you have published the abstract elsewhere, then ensure you paraphrase that abstract and reference it. If you want to publish a research study that has been published in an abbreviated form as a PowerPoint presentation then you need to be very careful not to plagiarise the published material. Remember too that you should not publish your sets of data in more than one place without permission from the editor and the publishing company, alerting the editor of the journal you are submitting to and referencing the data properly. However it is much better to not try to ever double publish the same sets of data!. If you want to publish a series of papers from one study, such as that contained in a thesis study, then you need to make a statement about how the current study relates to the larger study, and reference all works that have been published from this. Many journals will not publish articles from a thesis that has already been fully published online.

Anti-plagiarism software

These days many reputable journals examine each manuscript using anti-plagiarism software, and the range of software is gaining popularity within educational and research institutes, as well as the world of publishing. To make more certain that you have not plagiarised in your writing you can also take advantage of a number of anti-plagiarism software on the market today. Such software can be used by authors to check their work prior to submission, be it an essay, a manuscript or something else. In my role as Editor of *International Nursing Review* I check every manuscript, and re-submissions thereof, with Cross-Check by iThenticate (see the website: <http://www.ithenticate.com/products/crosscheck>). This has proven to be a valuable tool for the journal editorial team as well as authors and researchers. The software helps us to prevent scientific misconduct and maintain integrity of the journal since a manuscript can be very rapidly compared to billions of web pages. An originality score is given on the Cross Check report that indicates what percentage of material is taken from other sources. Additionally, direct quotes are highlighted, being compared to the original source(s) where the material was extracted from. I can use this report to help authors to reference their work better, and sometimes to reject their work if there are serious issues with referencing and originality.

Another well-known software to check your writing is turnitin (see: <http://turnitin.com>). If your institution uses either turnitin or Cross Check or other type of software, then use this to check your manuscript before submission. If you do not have access to these, then you can download free software suitable for Chrome, Safari or Firefox called Grammarly (website: <https://www.grammarly.com/plagiarism-checker>). Grammarly

can also check the grammar in your writing. We really encourage you to use this prior to submission to PRIJNR. Provide the Editor with a copy of the software report to show that your work has been correctly referenced.

So really there is no excuse to be accused of plagiarism. If you take the steps outlined above you will write better with ethical and scientific integrity, and can therefore make a unique and original contribution to knowledge in nursing and health care.

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