

CONFERENCE

Session Report

What Is Plagiarism? Putting Out Fires Around This Hot Topic

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 If I were to write this piece without crediting medical editor Vee White and medical and science editor Andrea Klingler for their research and presentation, it would be plagiarism.

The two shared their expertise about plagiarism at AMWA's Medical Writing & Communication Conference, November 3, 2022, in Denver.

Plagiarism is "[when] an author documents or reports ideas, words, data, or graphics, whether published or unpublished, of another as [their] own without giving

appropriate credit or attribution" (*AMA Manual of Style*, 11th edition, Section 5.4).¹

Between 2019 and 2020, White and Klingler surveyed 260 writers, editors, and publishing professionals about plagiarism. The largest proportion of responses came from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom but included widespread places such as Japan, Cyprus, and Uruguay.

The survey found that writers fear plagiarism's consequences most (Figure). Among 38 medical or science writer respondents, the largest proportion, 84%, thought the biggest consequence of plagiarism was that they would lose their job.

Gaps were obvious between how confident publishers were in writers' and editors' ability to produce plagiarism-free product and the confidence of editors and writers themselves to do so, with publishers being more skeptical.

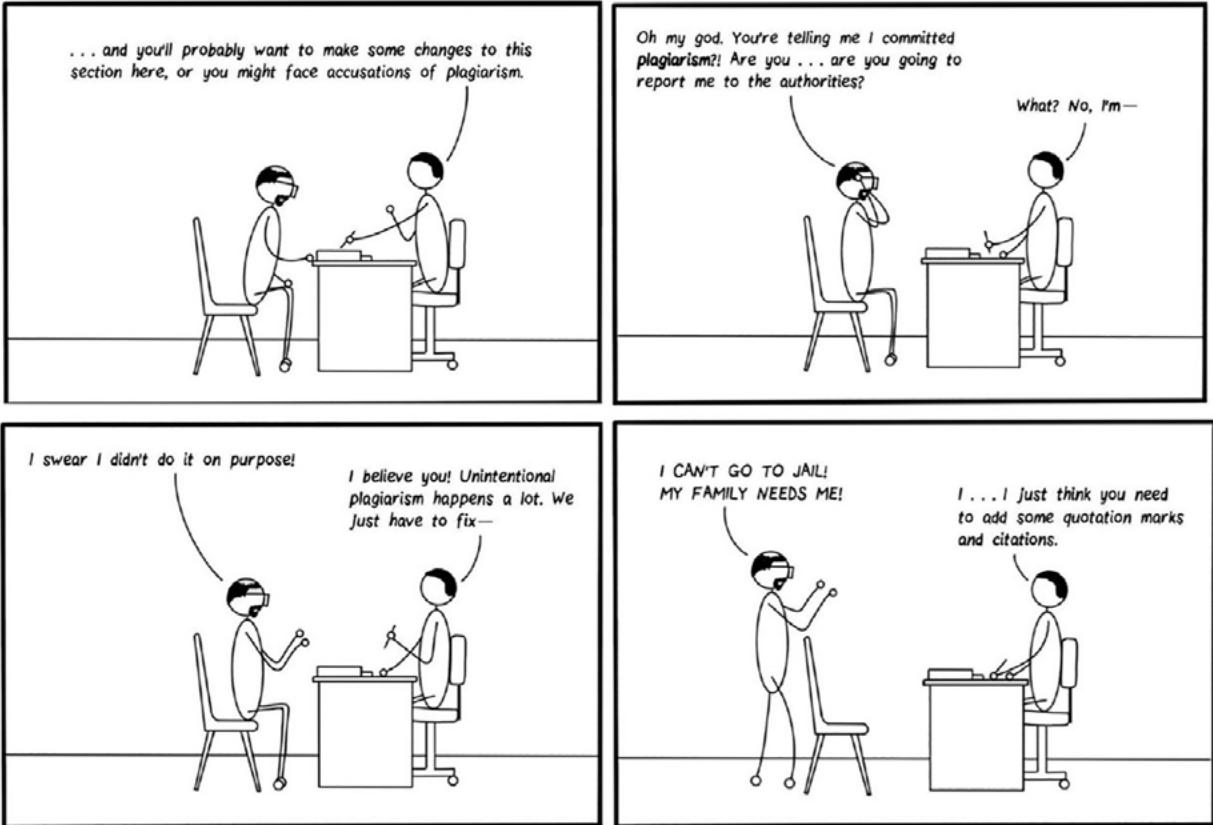


Figure. The Plagiarist. Cartoon reprinted with permission under a CC-BY NC license from Iva Cheung.²

Furthermore, among the subset of 79 medical/science communicators who were “extremely or very confident in their understanding of and their ability to avoid/identify [plagiarism], 26 (33%) had no or intentional-only training.”²

The presenters explained that intentional plagiarism is knowingly taking credit for someone else’s work. It is presenting someone else’s words, sentence, structure, or idea as your own. Unintentional plagiarism is done without intention and can be the result of poor paraphrasing, careless work like forgetting to insert a citation, or cultural differences.

Publishers’ top tactic for avoiding plagiarism in new content was to put clauses about the issue into their contracts with writers (71% of publisher respondents chose this option). For catching plagiarism in existing content, publishers depended on an editor’s keen eye (82% of respondents) and plagiarism-detecting software (74%).

Although the survey respondents tended to be highly experienced in their occupation, most reported receiving training on this subject in an academic setting, some as far back as in grammar school. Minimal anti-plagiarism training seems to be offered to writers and editors. With even less training in unintentional plagiarism, editors lack knowledge of this issue. Editors do, however, implement specific strategies to identify plagiarism.

White and Klingler offer tips to help writers avoid plagiarism²:

- Keep copied verbatim text separate.
- Remember to cite public domain and unpublished material too.
- Summarize, analyze, and synthesize.

- Remember that plagiarism includes more than words.
- Be careful when reusing your own previously published material.

They also counsel editors on how to help writers when plagiarism is an issue²:

- Prepare with concrete examples.
- Start the conversation with a different word.
- Ask questions.
- Avoid assumptions.
- Open discussion before deciding next steps.

See the Plagiarism Survey Project’s website at www.veewhite.com/plagiarism-survey.

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General Principles of Word Usage

Choose the right word for accuracy and clarity.
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