



Is there such a thing as self plagiarism?

And, if so, is self-plagiarism, plagiarism?

It's a difficult question. And it requires that we first formulate a definition of "plagiarism."

Most definitions stand at odds with any notion of "self-plagiarism."

Let's take a look at four definitions.



Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work or ideas as your own, with or without their consent, by incorporating it into your work without full acknowledgement.

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>

I'll pause while you read Oxford University's definition.



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The key phrase here is "someone else's work." The entire definition revolves around what is and is not your work, not what you do with your work.



Students may not plagiarize. All ideas, arguments, and phrases, submitted without attribution to other sources must be the creative product of the student.

<https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/UVM-Policies/policies/acadintegrity.pdf>

Here's the statement from UVM's policy on academic integrity.



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<https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/UVM-Policies/policies/acadintegrity.pdf>

Like Oxford's statement, UVM's focuses on what is or is not the work of the student (and, we assume, the work of a faculty member). The UVM statement implies--without stating explicitly--that a student may submit work without attribution as long as that work is the student's own.



The expropriation of another author's work, and the presentation of it as one's own, constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism can also include the limited borrowing, without sufficient attribution, of another person's distinctive and significant research findings or interpretations.

<https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/statement-on-standards-of-professional-conduct>

Here's the statement from the American Historical Association.



The expropriation of **another author's work**, and the presentation of it as one's own, constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism can also include the limited borrowing, without sufficient attribution, of **another person's** distinctive and significant research findings or interpretations.

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AHA's primary (and, apparently, only) concern is whether the work used is the author's own work. We can read this statement to tacitly permit the reuse of one's work even without attribution. I suspect this is not how the statement's authors mean it to be read, but it is a valid if overly literal reading.



Plagiarism means the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results or words without giving appropriate credit.

45 CFR §689.1(a)(3)

And, finally, here's the statement on plagiarism from the *Code of Federal Regulations*. (I have to confess that, before preparing for this talk, I had no idea there exists a federal regulation defining plagiarism.)



Plagiarism means the appropriation of **another person's ideas**, processes, results or words without giving appropriate credit.

45 CFR §689.1(a)(3)

Here, too, the focus is exclusively on whether the work is one's own. As with the AHA statement, we could read this statement to permit the appropriation of one's own work.



Bupkis

So ... this is what we get from these statements when trying to understand “self-plagiarism.” They give us no help at all. In fact, they seem to imply the impossibility of self-plagiarism.

The logo for 'INSIDE HIGHER ED' is centered on a black rectangular background. It consists of the word 'INSIDE' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, with the words 'HIGHER ED' in a smaller, white sans-serif font directly below it. The text is contained within an orange rectangular box.

Scott McLemee, “Against Recycling,” *Inside Higher Ed* (December 20, 2019).

But some folks do take the the notion of self-plagiarism seriously. It is not a new concept. It receives relatively little attention, but it does raise its head now and then.

In a 2019 article for *Inside Higher Ed*, Scott McLemee reported finding some 50 articles denouncing self-plagiarism. I tracked down a few of these articles, and I’d like to examine some of the arguments they make.



On "self-plagiarism":

If your original work is published by one publisher, and subsequent works in which you use the same words are published by another, you're probably violating copyright law. If your publisher is the same for both the original and subsequent self-plagiarized works, you're still guilty of intellectual dishonesty. Readers must be able to trust that writers aren't misrepresenting the originality of their material"

Diana J. Mason, "Stealing Words," *The American Journal of Nursing* 102 No. 7 (2002): 7.

Let's start with a piece by Diana J. Mason, who edits the *American Journal of Nursing*.

[Pause for reading]

I believe that Mason errs in conflating two different issues. The first, copyright, is an entirely different matter from the second issue, plagiarism.



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Diana J. Mason, "Stealing Words," *The American Journal of Nursing* 102 No. 7 (2002): 7.

Let's take the first assertion. It is simply wrong to suggest that using the same words from one publication in another publication "probably" constitutes a violation of copyright law. The Fair Use provision in U.S. copyright law provides wide latitude for borrowing material from previously published work. Publishers would like us to *think* that any borrowing is a violation of copyright law, because such assumptions allow them to sell reprint rights. But such assertions ignore a host of case law built up through the decades.

And don't get me started on the current, perverse system of scholarly publishing, which demands that we turn over copyright in our work to commercial publishers, and then buy it back. But that's a rant for another day.



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Mason's second contention, however, is worth taking seriously.

Scholarship assumes that one does not misrepresent oneself. Anything that suggests novelty, but is not novel, is, as Mason suggests, a form of intellectual dishonesty. She is absolutely right that readers must trust authors not to misrepresent the originality of their material.

Whether such a misrepresentation merits the sanctions typically applied to other forms of plagiarism is another matter. But we cannot dispute that such false suggestions of novelty are misleading and therefore antithetical to the academic enterprise.



On “self-plagiarism”:

An author who repeats material in two different published works is not deceiving the reader about who wrote the material. The deception is of readers who invest time or money in a work with the expectation that its contents are different from, or at least differently expressed than, the contents of the author's other works. These readers are left feeling that they have received less than they had bargained for.

Laurie Sterns, “Copy Wrong: Plagiarism, Process, Property, and the Law,” *California Law Review* 80 No. 2 (1992): 513-553.

The second article is a long, law-review piece by Laurie Sterns.



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I agree with Sterns that simply repeating material is not necessarily a case of deceiving the reader about the original source of the material. She is right on this count.



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But I do take issue with her suggestion of a different type of deception. In short, she suggests that repurposing work deceives reader's expectations to encounter something new. Such an assertion is plausible, but I find it too clever by half.

When I read authors in my field, I expect a bit of repetition. I understand that, in framing new arguments, they need to repeat past findings. One cannot build a new frame without incorporating past work.

Now ... to be sure ... the way an author repeats herself *is* important. I'll say more about this in a bit.

My point for now is simply that repetition in and of itself is not wrong. It is not akin to deceiving the reader, as Sterns seems to imply. Readers should not necessarily feel cheated when encountering repetition.



Which brings me to the question of salami slicing. (It struck me that salami slicing is an appropriate concept for a brown-bag lunch.) A term used mostly in scientific literature, salami slicing refers to the practice of distributing original work via as many different publications as possible. Why, asks a salami slicer, should I cram all my new research into a single article when I can slice that work into a half dozen articles?

Minerva

A REVIEW OF SCIENCE, LEARNING AND POLICY

A more inconspicuous and less clear-cut form of duplicate-publication comprises those publications that are presented by the authors as containing new, original research, while in truth being produced on the basis of a slight modification of some theoretical or empirical aspect of a paper published previously by the same authors. Another comparatively widespread and less inconspicuous form of strategically produced redundant publications consists in what is commonly referred to as piecemeal publications (also referred to as 'salami slicing'). The obvious aim of piecemeal publication strategies is to increase publication outputs, often to the detriment of the scope, depth and coherence of the published content.

Peter Woelert, "The 'Economy of Memory': Publications, Citations, and the Paradox of Effective Research Governance" *Minerva* 51 (2013): 431-62.

Here I should reference two articles on this practice, both cited by Scott McLamee. The first is by Peter Woelert

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Peter Woelert, "The 'Economy of Memory': Publications, Citations, and the Paradox of Effective Research Governance" *Minerva* 51 (2013): 431-62.

I assume we can all agree with Woelert that salami slicing is detrimental, as he says, to the scope, depth, and coherence of published content. This strikes me as self-evident.



BULLETIN
ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Salami slicing:

- Forces readers to sort through multiple publications in pursuit of single questions
- Makes meta-analyses problematic
- Hinders a cohesive framing of the problem at hand
- Adds to the number of papers awaiting peer review – makes more work for referees.
- Wastes the time of authors

Christine Urbanowicz and Beth Reinke. "Publication Overlap: Building an Academic House with Salami Shingles" *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 99 No. 4 (2018): 1-6.

Christine Urbanowicz and Beth Reinke take these broad observations and level some particular, concrete objections against salami slicing.



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I agree with every one.

And, as a librarian, I find particularly troublesome the ways that salami slicing hinders meta-analyses and literature reviews.



But is salami-slicing self-plagiarism?

It is poor research, but does poor research practice necessarily constitute plagiarism?

I think not. Because it does not necessarily misrepresent the type of research conducted. It does not aim to deceive.



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Let's revisit, for a moment, the four definitions of plagiarism with which we started.

This time, I'll set aside each statement's focus on self-work vs. others' work, and focus instead on another element they share, namely a focus on acknowledgment and attribution.



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Oxford wants to know that students and faculty fully acknowledge the work they use.



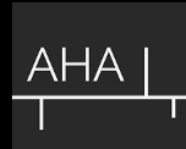
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UVM, too, is deeply concerned about attribution.



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The *Code of Federal Regulations* centers its concerns on appropriation.



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As does the American Historical Association.



So ... Let's return to our original question.

is there such a thing as self plagiarism?



I submit that there is.

So if there is, what is it, and in what respect is it wrong?

First, what it is not.



It is not salami slicing. While salami slicing is bad practice, and while it should be avoided for all the reasons I noted earlier, it is not plagiarism, because it does not constitute misrepresentation.

>>> Nor is recycling necessarily plagiarism. Some degree of recycling and self-reference is unavoidable. It is necessary.

Which leads me to propose my own definition of self-plagiarism.

Self-plagiarism occurs when one misrepresents oneself in one of two ways.

Self plagiarism occurs when an author either ...



PRODUCTIVITY



NOVELTY

Robert McCloskey, *Homer Price*
"Yellow Umbrella," *Pixers*

... misrepresents her own productivity, suggesting that she has done more work than she actually has ...

>>> or when an author suggests that his work is more novel than it actually is.

Let's consider a few examples.

Anglican Orders and Orthodox Politics

by BRYN GEFFERT

This essay examines the political and religious impetus behind Patriarch Meletios Metaxakis's recognition of Anglican orders in 1922. The favours surrounding recognition, the events that led up to it and the fall-out that followed shed light on the many difficulties faced by religious leaders in the post-war Orthodox world, difficulties that led to fierce jockeying among Orthodox clerics as they tried to establish themselves in relation to their coreligionists and to the larger Christian world. The controversy also offers insight into the problems inherent when a 'comprehensive' Church such as the Church of England enters into discussions with a more uniformly dogmatic confession such as Orthodoxy.

I can say that one of the most important events of the century at the beginning of which we find ourselves is just the work of the union of both Churches, the Holy Anglican and the Greek Orthodox. We can really congratulate ourselves that this question has arisen in our days in a more vivid manner. Let us hope that through our efforts it may in our days come to a happy issue: Archbishop Meletios¹

It is regrettable and disastrous that ecclesiastical diplomats in common with other politicians should frequently bow themselves down in worship of policy rather than of principle, of expedience rather than of justice and right, in their actions and pronouncements: editorial, *Orthodox Catholic Review*²



Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans

*Diplomacy, Theology, and the Politics
of Interwar Ecumenism*



BRYN GEFFERT

*University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana*

I would have been guilty of self-plagiarism had I not acknowledged that a chapter in my first book drew from material I first published in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. I would have been guilty of violating two principles: the principle of accurately representing my productivity, and the principle of accurately representing the novelty of my book.

RECAP



Self plagiarism might also occur when summarizing scholarship you've conducted previously, if one does not mention the scope and nature of that earlier scholarship.

>>> Any time we tread ground we've previously trod, we should call attention to the first set of footprints.



William Brown, *Chronicle of Higher Education*

And, without question, self plagiarism would occur when reprinting portions of text verbatim from one of your earlier publication without citation. Such cases have been discovered during portfolio reviews. And while I'm inclined to read such cases as carelessness rather than maliciousness, they are problematic, to say the least.

SOLUTION:
ASK OURSELVES TWO QUESTIONS



PRODUCTIVITY



NOVELTY

THANK YOU

So ... in conclusion, I think the solution to self-plagiarism is simple. We can ward it off by asking ourselves two simple questions:

>>> Does my new work suggest that I've been more productive than I really have?

>>> And does my new work suggest a degree of novelty that is not warranted?

As long as we acknowledge our earlier work and as long as we flag the ways we're we're now rehashing that work, we will be safe.

>>> Thank you.