

UNDERSTANDING TEXT RECYCLING

A Guide for Researchers

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As a researcher, you may have occasion to reuse material from your own previously written documents in new documents. You might, for example, want to recycle passages from your approved ethical review protocol in a grant proposal, reuse some of the literature review from your grant proposal in a research article, or reuse the description of a procedure from one of your published articles in a new article that used the same procedure. While less common, you may also have occasion to translate your published work into another language or to republish your journal article as a book chapter. All of these examples can be considered cases of *text recycling*.

Unlike plagiarism, which is widely considered to be research misconduct^{1,2}, text recycling may or may not be appropriate depending on how and where it occurs. In some cases, especially when it facilitates clear communication, text recycling can be ethical, professionally appropriate, legal, and perhaps even desirable. In other situations, text recycling may be unacceptable because it infringes copyright, violates a publishing contract, inhibits communication, or misleads editors or readers. This document will help you understand these differences.

This guide is a product of the [Text Recycling Research Project \(TRRP\)](#), a U.S.-based multi-institution initiative funded by the National Science Foundation. While some of the issues addressed here are not universally agreed upon, this document is based on published research conducted by the TRRP as well as guidelines from a number of leading organizations of editors and publishers. These are listed under References at the end of the document.

TERMINOLOGY

Policies and guidelines that address text recycling often use the term “self-plagiarism.” However, that term is confusing. Unlike plagiarism, text recycling doesn’t involve taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as your own. Also, unlike plagiarism, there is wide agreement that reuse of your own materials is sometimes acceptable. To avoid these inaccurate implications, the term *text recycling* is now widely preferred. The Text Recycling Research Project defines text recycling as follows:

Text Recycling is the reuse of textual material (prose, visuals, or equations) in a new document where (1) the material in the new document is identical to that of the source (or substantively equivalent in both form and content), (2) the material is not presented in the new document as a quotation (via quotation marks or block indentation), and (3) at least one author of the new document is also an author of the prior document.

Text recycling always involves at least two documents: the document(s) from which the material is taken and the one(s) in which that material is placed. Because the ethics and legalities of text recycling depend substantially on the nature of these documents, consistent terms are needed for these as well. We use the terms *source* and *destination*.

¹ National Science Foundation. 45 CFR Part 689 – Research Misconduct. <https://www.nsf.gov/oig/pdf/cfr/45-CFR-689.pdf>

² Code of Federal Regulations. 42 CFR Part 93.103 – Public Health Policies on Research Misconduct. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CFR-2007-title42-vol1/pdf/CFR-2007-title42-vol1-part93.pdf>

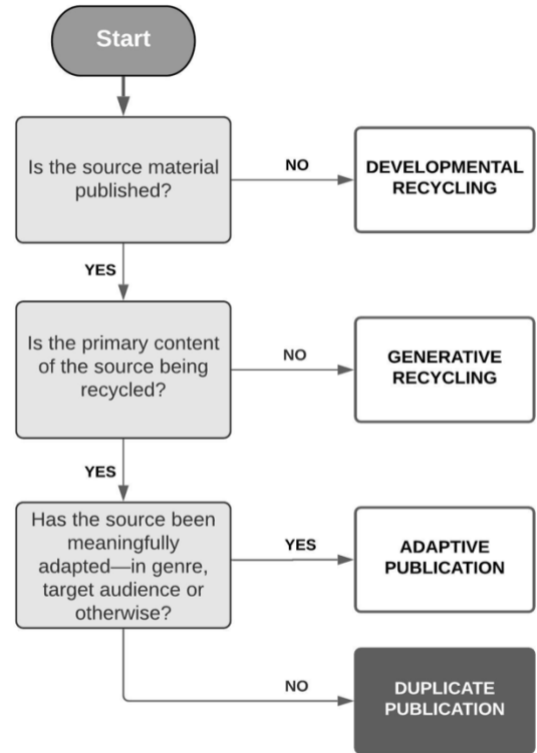
There are a number of distinct situations in which you might consider reusing material from your existing documents. Understanding these types of recycling will help you know whether it is acceptable, and if so, how to do it appropriately. Here is a brief overview of the types. The flowchart below shows how to identify the type of recycling you may be considering.

Developmental recycling is the reuse of material from unpublished documents. This is common in research and generally considered acceptable.

Generative recycling is the reuse of portions of a previously published document in a new work that makes an original intellectual contribution clearly distinct from that of the source. Whether it is ethical or legal depends on the specifics of the case.

Adaptive publication is the republication of an entire document or of its central part(s), but modified to fit a different context. The new context may, for example, be different in the target audience (different language or expertise) or genre. Whether this is ethical or legal depends on obtaining publisher permission and transparency with editors and readers.

Duplicate publication is the publishing of a work that is the same in genre, content, and intended audience as a previously published source document. This is widely considered unethical; in most publishing situations it would be illegal as well—whether as copyright infringement or a violation of author-publisher agreements.



Below, we expand on each type. Please note that we address conference proceedings, preprints and theses/dissertations in a separate section below.

TYPES OF TEXT RECYCLING

This section provides a discussion of each of the four types of recycling.

DEVELOPMENTAL RECYCLING

What is it?	Recycling material from unpublished documents produced as part of the research and writing process
Examples	Reusing material from a conference talk or poster in a journal article Reusing material from a grant proposal in a conference poster
Is this ethical?	Usually. Exceptions may occur when the source is widely available.
Is this legal?	Usually, unless the source document was produced under a “work-for-hire” arrangement, in which case you would need to obtain written permission from your employer.

Most cases of developmental recycling involve recycling from either workplace documents or “work-in-progress” documents.

Workplace documents

Researchers routinely produce documents that are essential for the research but are shared with only a limited set of readers. Common examples of these “workplace” or “internal” documents are ethical review protocols, grant proposals and reports, and conference proposals. Recycling to or from such documents is widely considered both ethical and appropriate. Because these genres are not published, there are generally no legal concerns as long as the source documents were not produced as work for hire. In the case of grant proposals, you should clearly indicate *where* any recycled material is included and include a reference to the source—whether a published paper, a prior proposal, or other document.

Work-in progress

In most research fields, sharing your work in progress (conference posters, presentations, and abstracts) is widely practiced, accepted, and even encouraged as a valuable part of the research process. As long as you didn’t produce those documents under a work-for-hire arrangement, you can recycle from these freely. If you did, get permission to recycle these from your employer.

In general, recycling material from unpublished sources is considered acceptable regardless of whether the new work will be published. That said, opinions about what counts as prior “publication” can vary by publisher and discipline. The Internet has enabled authors to easily provide access to their documents for, potentially, millions of readers, complicating our sense of what constitutes “published” material. Journal editors may or may not consider the sharing of new ideas, methods, or findings in online genres like blogs (e.g., WordPress sites), long-form online writing (e.g., Medium), newsletters (e.g., Substack), and microblogging (e.g., Twitter) to be “prior publication.” Also, because some research materials may be stored in widely accessible online locations such as research group websites, publication repositories, and data-sharing storage, some publishers may consider these to be unacceptable sources of recycled material. Researchers should consider these issues before placing unpublished materials on such sites.

GENERATIVE RECYCLING

What is it?	Recycling published material in a new work that offers a substantive and original intellectual contribution
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reusing the description of an experimental method from your published article in a new article • Reusing summaries of prior research from your published article in a new article
Is this ethical?	It depends on the amount and kind of recycled material and also whether the author was transparent with both editors and readers
Is this legal?	It depends on whether the amount and kind of recycled material infringe copyright and/or violate any publishing agreement you signed with a publisher. Limited recycling of methods or background material is likely legal under U.S. copyright law as a “fair use.”

This is the most complicated type of recycling because a number of factors can affect whether or not any specific case of generative recycling is considered ethical or legal.

Research articles are expected to offer substantive, original findings. Nevertheless, because researchers often need to communicate some of the same content across multiple papers in a line of research, they frequently have occasion to reuse some material from one of their prior papers in a new manuscript. While there is no consensus on just how much generative recycling is acceptable, limited recycling of certain types of materials is widely considered acceptable—especially when needed to accurately present new findings.

The most widely accepted materials for generative recycling are descriptions of methods, materials, statistical tests and other methodological details. Some publishers may also accept limited recycling of background information or discussion of prior relevant research. Be aware that publisher contracts and journal policies may place explicit limits on the amount and type of generative recycling allowed. When deciding whether a particular instance of

recycling is acceptable, editors will typically consider factors such as the amount of text being recycled, the nature of the recycled material (e.g., methods vs. results), and whether authors have been transparent about the recycling.

Rewording as an alternative to generative recycling

Authors sometimes believe that they should always reword recycled material rather than repeat it verbatim. If the audience or genre of the destination document is substantively different from that of the source, rewording (paraphrasing) may indeed be your best choice since you'll need to adapt the material for that new context.

But researchers often need to reuse material in which the genre and audience of the destination documents are essentially the same as that of the source—namely, in writing a new research article that builds on a prior article. In these situations, altering the wording of recycled passages can confuse readers as to whether the method (or research question, research site, etc.) is actually different from the author's previous work or is just being described using different words.

ADAPTIVE PUBLICATION

What is it?	Recycling published material containing the work's central content—but for a different readership, genre, or context
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reusing material from your published journal article in an opinion column, blog, or magazine article on the same topic • Translating your published article into another language
Is this ethical?	Only if authors are transparent with both editors and readers per publisher guidelines
Is this legal?	Only if authors obtain permissions from the holder of rights for the source (usually the publisher of the source)

Researchers sometimes choose to adapt a published document, often to reach a different audience. Examples include translating your published article into a different language, adapting an article to make it accessible to readers in a related field, and revising an article into a book chapter. Other examples include reprinting an article in an anthology or textbook. The acceptability of such adaptations depends primarily on whether authors are appropriately transparent and obtain required permissions. The details of how transparency is accomplished and which permissions are needed differ according to the source and destination genres. Transparency for adaptive publication extends to how such publications are represented in documents such as CVs and tenure and promotion materials.

DUPLICATE PUBLICATION

What is it?	Recycling published material along with the same primary content for the same audience and genre
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submitting a published article to another journal as a new work • Superficially changing a published article and submitting it to another journal as a new work
Is this ethical?	Rarely, because it usually entails an intent to deceive and because it distorts the scholarly record
Is this legal?	Rarely, because it likely infringes copyright and/or violates publishing agreements

If you reuse both the core ideas and the textual material from your previously published work without meaningful adaptation, the source and destination documents are essentially the same—duplicates. Submitting your already-

published manuscript to another journal is widely considered unethical and would also likely constitute copyright

infringement and violate the author-publisher contract of most journals.³ It is equally unethical to reuse the same essential content but change the writing in superficial ways (substituting synonyms, rearranging phrases, and so on) to deceive editors and readers into believing that the duplicate work is in fact new work.

SPECIAL CASES: CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS, PREPRINTS, AND DISSERTATIONS

As explained above, one important factor in determining if text recycling is ethical or legal is whether the source document was previously published. However, publishers differ as to whether some genres are considered “previous publications.” Here are the most common and important of these genres:

Conference proceedings

Many disciplines publish texts related to conference presentations. This genre causes some confusion because of disciplinary differences in the nature of the texts and their publication status. In some disciplines, conference proceedings are considered to be publications. In others, proceedings papers may have DOI numbers and be publicly accessible but not have the publication status of a journal article. In the latter fields, authors often use these papers as the basis for journal articles, revising and/or adding additional material as required by the journal. In fact, many scholarly societies explicitly invite authors of proceedings to submit proceedings papers to their journals, expecting that most of the proceedings document would be recycled. For these disciplines, recycling from a proceedings paper to a journal article would be *adaptive publication*. In disciplines such as computer science, however, conference proceedings are the final level of scholarly work—equivalent to a journal article in review process and status. In these fields, wholesale recycling from a proceedings paper to a journal article (or to another proceedings) would constitute *duplicate publication* and thus be unethical.

Preprints

Preprints allow researchers to lay claim to new findings without waiting for peer review and publication. Placing manuscripts on preprint servers has become standard procedure in many research fields, but the practice is uncommon or absent in others. Publishers differ as to whether they will accept submissions that have been posted as preprints. Journals that specialize in publishing research are increasingly including explicit statements in their policies allowing authors to recycle from preprints.

Dissertations

Dissertations come in several forms. In some disciplines, dissertations are entirely original works and may later be used as *source* documents; in other disciplines, dissertations are often compilations of the student’s published articles and therefore take on the role of *destination* documents. Like the other genres discussed above, dissertations share some features of published work: their abstracts are indexed and searchable, and they are almost always housed in accessible institutional repositories such as libraries or online databases. Most editors and publishers, however, do not see recycling text from original dissertations as problematic.

AUTHORSHIP AND PERMISSIONS

By definition, text recycling involves reusing “your own” work. In some fields of scholarship—philosophy and music, for example—most authors write alone. However, in many disciplines—especially science, engineering and medicine—the vast majority of publications are coauthored, usually with more than two authors and frequently with the number of authors in the tens or more. When the authors of the source and destination documents are identical, multiple authorship adds no complications for text recycling. But when the authors of the source and destination

³ Some journals, such as those published under a Creative Commons license, let authors retain the rights to their work. Even so, while submitting that published paper to another journal may not infringe copyright, it will most likely violate the author’s warranty regarding prior publication in the contract of the next publisher.

documents are overlapping but not identical—which is often the case—determining what constitutes “your own” prior work for the purposes of text recycling can be complicated, raising important questions about author rights and responsibilities.

Legally, under U.S. copyright law, all listed authors of a work hold equal copyright unless some other arrangement is made prior to publication; the same is generally true for the laws of most countries.

Ethically, however, there are no established standards for deciding which authors of the source document should have recycling rights or who should be asked for permission. Given this lack of standards, the TRRP recommends that corresponding authors obtain permission from any authors whose work is being recycled but who are not authors of the new work. (For more information, see “TRRP’s Best Practices for Researchers.”)

FURTHER READING

For practical guidance on how to recycle text ethically and legally, see the TRRP document “Text Recycling: Best Practices for Researchers.” This and other TRRP documents are available at textrecycling.org, where you can also access full text files of all published output from the TRRP.

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