

A note from the copy editor

Striking a blow for originality

The copy editors of *Tumori* are mostly silent and invisible figures working in the background. They materialize briefly when authors notice changes on proof copies of their papers accompanied by a query in brackets [*AUTHORS: Change OK?*]. Authors may also encounter the copy editor earlier, when they receive the edited manuscript with a request to remove duplicate references or clarify passages that are difficult to understand. Sometimes an author might be asked to rewrite portions of text that are not strictly original.

How does a copy editor notice that portions of text are not original but copied from other sources? For one thing, copy-paste writing gives itself away by a number of signs, for example a mix of British and American spelling, inconsistent terminology or abbreviations, and uncalled-for changes of verb tense. Texts with extensive copy-pasting (also known as patch-writing) often show a lack of cohesion between sentences or paragraphs, and there may be odd-looking changes in the style or quality of the writing, as if the author is speaking with different voices.

Authors of scientific papers resort to copy-pasting for a number of reasons: lack of time, a lack of writing skills, gaps in knowledge, and insufficient command of a non-native language. The “publish-or-perish” factor is also likely to play a role. Moreover, writing is, to quote Miguel Roig, an expert on plagiarism in science writing, “an arduous task even for experienced scientists who do have English as their mother tongue,” and “the allure of misappropriating portions of others’ text with little or no modifications can be quite strong for some authors, especially those with less than a full command of written English.”¹ This does not mean, though, that authors who are native speakers of English have never been caught copying.

Although the reasons for copy-paste writing are often quite understandable, the practice has a number of consequences that authors may not be sufficiently aware of. In addition to the previously mentioned readability issues (lack of cohesion, multiple voices), copy-pasting often leads to a lack of focus on the subject at hand because of the inclusion of redundant information or excessive detail from earlier research. It also seems to affect authors’ capacity for critical thinking, with the propagation of mistakes as a noxious side effect. On an ethical level, when authors “take the work or idea of someone else and pass it off as their own”², they blur the boundaries between their own findings and those of others. This is particularly harmful in biomedicine, where there is a need for authors to take responsibility for what they write and a need for readers to know who to address when questioning the data reported. Readers are misled, and so are journal editors and peer reviewers. There are also legal issues at stake if copy-pasting is extensive enough to call the attention of copyright holders, opening up the possibility of litigation.

All of this is not to say that a research paper needs to be textually original from start to finish as if it were a piece of literature. Methods sections, where different descriptions of the same procedure might hamper the replicability of the procedure, do allow for a certain extent of text copying, provided the text is updated regarding any changes in protocol. A copied sentence here or there in the Results because the phrasing was just right may also be quite acceptable. In fact, *The Lancet* published a letter by two doctors from Iran who make a plea for journal editors to adopt a certain degree of leniency towards limited text copying by authors who are not native speakers of English and who may not have access to professional editorial assistance³. However, when the occasional sentence turns into chunks of two or more, and when there are many such chunks in an article, all of the above issues may come into play.

Authors should also realize that more and more journals (including this journal) use electronic tools for plagiarism detection because the practice of copy-paste writing has become so common in the Internet age.

A few recommendations to help write truly original papers:

- Even when under pressure to publish, take your time to work on the text of a paper.
- Always focus on your own message, using your own “voice”, even when interweaving information from different sources.
- Pay attention to information flow and cohesion.
- If you wish to include the occasional direct quote, put it in quotation marks.
- Cite your sources (on first mention of information).
- Seek writing assistance when needed. This may range from translation or professional editorial assistance to asking a native-speaker colleague (or a non-native speaker with a higher level of proficiency in English) to correct your manuscript.
- Do not paraphrase for paraphrasing’s sake by changing the word order in a sentence, replacing words with synonyms, or changing active to passive voice indiscriminately; rather, rethink and rewrite the information from other sources in the context of your own work.

- Be informed about plagiarism and how to avoid it. A useful resource is the guide to ethical writing that Miguel Roig created for the US Office of Research Integrity⁴.

Good and focused writing will get your message across in a way that is likely to stand the test of time and earn the respect of your peers. If you want your ideas to live long, express them with your own voice and make that voice distinctive.

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