



# Editors' Update

Your network for knowledge

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## Plagiarism – how is copyright protecting you?

Copyright is defined as the sole right to reproduce a literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work. Academic work, such as the manuscripts, journals and papers published by Elsevier, is also subject to copyright and Elsevier asks all of the authors whose work it publishes to transfer their copyright to Elsevier itself.

“We have looked at the administrative issues surrounding (multiple) authorship – such as the protection and enforcement of copyright, and the prevention of plagiarism – and our legal analysis shows that it’s much preferable for Elsevier to retain the ownership of copyright, in countries where this is permitted, in order to deal with potential infringements,” explains Mark Seeley, Senior VP and General Counsel of Elsevier. “If we didn’t own the copyright on the work we publish, we’d have to involve the author in any disputes and keep going back to them every time we wanted to reproduce the work, for example online.”

### Journal Publishing Agreement

Until recently, all Elsevier authors were asked to sign a Copyright Transfer Agreement (CTA), but this has recently been replaced by a Journal Publishing Agreement (JPA). “We make revisions to the agreement on a regular basis – at least once a year – so the JPA should not be viewed as a completely new agreement, but merely an update of the CTA,” Seeley continues. “The most recent changes clarify certain questions about authorship, the

funding status of research, posting policy and posting for commercial purposes. Issues such as these go beyond copyright and this is the reason for the change of name. It’s simply more accurate.”

The latest improvements include more precision about the definition of various versions of manuscripts and how authors can use them. “I think it’s universally agreed that the final published version of a manuscript – including the peer review, copy editing, formatting and pagination – should be the authoritative version, but authors can still publish earlier versions of their work on their own and institutional websites, for example,” Seeley says.

The JPA also enables Elsevier to protect its revenue streams, which are required to fund other parts of the business and the publishing process as a whole.

### Author-friendly policy

Elsevier’s policy, for a number of years, has been that authors are permitted to publish their manuscripts, including editing resulting from the peer review. “We ask them not to use the final published

version of the manuscript, however, so that everyone knows that the Elsevier version is the authoritative version,” Seeley continues. “Lots of publishers don’t allow the incorporation of peer-review changes and insist that manuscripts are deleted from other sources over time. We’ve spent time talking to authors about what’s important to them, however, such as using their manuscripts in teaching and passing on their work to research colleagues. We have tried to accommodate their wishes as far as possible and I believe we’re also clearer about what is and isn’t permitted than most other publishers.”

### Avoiding plagiarism

Put simply, plagiarism is the practice of passing off someone else’s work as your own. In practice, however, this can be difficult to monitor. “Elsevier can provide support to help avoid plagiarism,” Seeley resumes. We’re working with the CrossRef organization to see if submitted papers can be checked against papers previously published using text-recognition software.”

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Another method of combating plagiarism is to formulate clear policies and supply guidance on the issue. In 2005, Elsevier issued a 'headline' statement on EES, which stipulated that all papers submitted should:

- be the authors' own original work, not previously published elsewhere;
- reflect the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner;
- properly credit the meaningful contributions of co-authors and co-researchers;
- not be submitted to more than one journal for consideration;
- and be appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.

"In September 2006, we established the Ethics Helpdesk as a pilot project to act as a resource, and provide advisory support to editors and their coordinating Elsevier staff (publishing editors) in addressing queries about issues such as plagiarism, authorship disputes, multiple submissions and research misconduct," says Seeley. "This has already generated a Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) manual, which covers authorship complaints, plagiarism, multiple publication, the misappropriation of research results, research errors and fraud, and research standards violations, among others. Of course, many of our editors deal with issues such as these on a regular basis, but it's still useful to bring together all our standard procedures in one place, not least of all for external editors and new members of staff."

#### Who's responsible?

In the first place, it is down to editors to identify possible instances of plagiarism and to initiate possible action. "Our editors are experts in their chosen fields, so they are in the best position to identify possible misuses of work,"

Seeley continues. "Elsevier will, however, supply tools to support editors in any investigation that may be necessary. Our publishing editors will assist in the process and we're also prepared to provide legal support, if needed.

"It must be a collective effort, so if an external editor suspects plagiarism, they should contact the appropriate Elsevier publishing editor immediately. The pilot shows that the publishing editor is the first resort for editors in these issues and the Ethical Helpdesk is there to support publishing editors. We're also moving towards placing the SOP manual, with all its tools and procedures, online this summer, making it easily available to all of our external editors and publishing staff."

#### Case scenario

While some of the ethical issues raised during the publishing process can be quite

Including DOIs facilitates a faster, more efficient and probably more enjoyable review process.

blurred – ranging from the use of false results to prove research, to questions about the correct identification of multiple authorship – cases involving plagiarism are reasonably straight forward to deal with.

"An author who is perhaps new to publishing may have copied small or large portions of someone else's paper in their own. Once the possibility of plagiarism has been raised, the first thing we do is ask the editor to contact the author for an explanation. In some cases, the allegations are unfounded and no further action is necessary. At the other extreme, when plagiarism is proven to have taken place, we will issue a retraction, stating the reasons why. Unfortunately, when this sort of thing happens, it receives a lot of media

attention, but thankfully cases aren't very common and we very rarely have to remove an article completely. "I must also stress that correctly attributing portions of work to the rightful author completely negates the possibility of being accused of plagiarism, so there really is no excuse for not doing so. Nevertheless, there have been some issues raised about whether authors are fully aware of standard procedures and their responsibilities, so we felt it was important to produce the SOP manual to provide clear guidelines."

#### Cultural differences

It has been alleged that the traditions of originality and plagiarism are not as well understood in certain parts of the world as they are in others. "I have heard rumors about lapses in China, for example, but I haven't come across many actual cases," says Seeley. "I suspect that most academics and researchers in

China, and elsewhere, are well aware of the rules and conventions on copyright and plagiarism."

The traditional concept of plagiarism covers not only passing off someone else's text as your own, but also

their ideas. The scientific convention is that you should identify and credit your sources but, while it's inappropriate to pass off someone else's ideas as your own, that shouldn't preclude discussion of those ideas. "The most important message to get across," Seeley concludes, "is that if you attribute the borrowed work correctly, you have nothing to fear."

#### Useful links (click below)

[Ethics Helpdesk](#)  
[Publishing Ethics](#)  
[STM Guidelines](#)  
[CrossRef](#)  
[Academic Use of a Journal](#)