Description

A growing number of journals now screen submissions for text overlap before peer review, and similarity reports can flag not only copied material from other authors, but also reused passages from an author's own prior papers. Before submission, it can help to run an independent similarity screening. Enago's plagiarism checker (powered by iThenticate) can help researchers identify overlap before journal screening.

That reality creates a common (and understandable) dilemma for researchers at every career stage: when does efficient reuse become self-plagiarism, and when is it a legitimate, transparent form of building on prior work? This article clarifies the meaning of self-plagiarism, explains how it differs from acceptable reuse, and provides practical, field-agnostic steps to reuse earlier writing, figures, and datasets without risking desk rejection or an ethics investigation.

What self-plagiarism means in scholarly publishing

Self-plagiarism (often discussed as text recycling, redundant publication, or duplicate publication) generally refers to reusing substantial parts of one's own previously disseminated work *without clear disclosure and appropriate citation*, in a way that misleads editors and readers about what is new. Wikipedia summarizes self-plagiarism as reusing significant identical or nearly identical portions of one's own work without acknowledging the reuse, and notes that in scholarly publishing it is often framed as duplicate or multiple publication.

Importantly, self-plagiarism is not only about "copy-paste." It can also involve reusing a previously published dataset, results, tables, figures, or an argument structure while presenting the overall contribution as novel. The U.S. Office of Research Integrity's educational materials emphasize transparency about prior dissemination and warn that the provenance of data should never be in doubt.

A useful way to think about the boundary is the reader and editor expectation: journal articles are evaluated as new contributions to the literature. When reuse is hidden, it can distort the scholarly record, waste reviewer time, and inflate an author's publication output without a proportional new contribution.

Reuse of work: the principle that makes it acceptable

Reuse becomes ethically and editorially acceptable when it is transparent, properly cited, and consistent with journal policy and copyright/licensing.

Many publisher and society policies treat “reuse” as permissible when the author cites the original and clearly explains what is new. For example, ACM defines self-plagiarism (redundant publication) as verbatim or near-verbatim reuse of significant portions of one’s own published work *without citing the original source*, and it explicitly notes that reuse based on the author’s previously published work can be acceptable when an appropriate reference is made and the prior publication is disclosed at submission.

At the journal level, Nature Portfolio states that “text recycling” is a form of self-plagiarism and that reuse of text requires appropriate attribution and citation to avoid misleading perceptions of unique contribution.

The key takeaway is straightforward: reuse is not inherently wrong; undisclosed reuse is.

What’s allowed vs what’s not: a practical comparison

The lines vary by discipline and journal, but the patterns below hold across most peer-reviewed venues.

Scenario	Usually allowed (with conditions)	Usually not allowed (or high-risk)
Reusing 1-2 standard sentences (e.g., generic instrument description)	Sometimes tolerated, but still safer to rewrite and cite if it is distinctive	Reusing large blocks verbatim across multiple papers
Reusing a methods description	Often acceptable *in limited form*, especially for highly technical, invariant methods, but transparency and citation matter	Copying the entire methods section verbatim across multiple publications without citation or disclosure
Reusing an introduction/ literature review	Possible if clearly cited and appropriately reframed for a new question	Recycling the same narrative and claims to create “new” papers with minimal new contribution
Reusing figures/tables from a prior paper	Possible with permission/licensing compliance and proper credit lines	Reusing copyrighted figures without permission; presenting old figures as new
Submitting the same or substantially similar manuscript to multiple journals	Rarely allowed; generally prohibited	Duplicate submission and duplicate publication

Scenario	Usually allowed (with conditions)	Usually not allowed (or high-risk)
Publishing a secondary/translated version for a new audience	Allowed in some cases if conditions are met and both editors approve	Republishing the same article in another journal without editor approval and clear labeling

When secondary publication is genuinely justified (for example, to reach a different readership or language group), the ICMJE describes conditions for acceptable secondary publication, including approval from both editors, a different target audience, faithful reflection of the original, and explicit citation/notice that the work was published previously.

The most common “gray-zone” cases (and how to handle them)

Text recycling in methods sections

Methods are often where overlap happens, particularly in labs or research groups that run standardized protocols. ORI’s discussion of text recycling notes that limited reuse in methods sections can have benefits, but it still emphasizes adherence to ethical writing principles and transparency when reusing previously disseminated text. Source:

What helps in practice is to (1) rewrite where feasible, (2) cite the original protocol paper, and (3) avoid making the methods section the “anchor” of a recycled manuscript. Editors typically care less about overlap in generic methods language than about overlap in the *intellectual contribution* (rationale, results, interpretation).

“Salami slicing” and redundant publication

Some journals and publishers describe “minor overlap” as cases where a publication can theoretically stand alone but still has redundant elements (e.g., closely related methodology and framing). Wiley’s integrity resource distinguishes between major overlap (often leading to retraction considerations) and minor overlap (sometimes referred to as “salami slicing”), noting that views vary across journals.

The safest strategy is to ensure each paper has a clearly distinct research question, a defensible incremental contribution, and visible cross-citation that makes the relationship between papers obvious to readers.

Reusing one’s own published text when copyright has been transferred

Even when a researcher wrote the original wording, the right to reuse may be constrained by the publishing agreement (unless the work is published under a reuse-friendly license such as certain Creative Commons licenses).

For that reason, ethical reuse is not just “cite yourself.” It also requires checking what the license allows and whether permission is required to reuse specific elements (especially figures and tables).

What to disclose, when to disclose it, and why timing matters

A common mistake is disclosing overlap only after the similarity report triggers questions. Instead, disclosure should happen at submission.

Many venues explicitly require disclosure when a submission builds on earlier work. IEEE, for example, states that if authors used previously published work as a basis for a new submission, they must cite the prior work and briefly indicate how the new submission offers substantial novel contributions beyond the previous one. Source: https://www.comsoc.org/publications/magazines/policy-self-plagiarism

Early disclosure helps editors evaluate novelty fairly and reduces the risk that overlap is interpreted as deceptive. It also protects co-authors, who may not be fully aware of what text or figures were reused.

How to reuse prior work ethically: a step-by-step workflow researchers can apply

1. **Map what is being reused** (text, figures, tables, data, hypotheses, or analysis pipeline).
2. **Identify the prior dissemination status** (published article, preprint, thesis, conference proceeding, institutional repository, grant report).
3. **Check journal policies on overlap and prior publication** and align the manuscript accordingly.
4. **Rewrite by contribution, not by synonym**.
5. **Cite and label reuse clearly**.
6. **Handle figures/tables with licensing in mind**.
7. **Draft a concise "relationship to prior work" note for the cover letter**.
8. **Run a similarity check before submission** and interpret it manually.

Examples of acceptable reuse (done transparently)

Secondary publication for a different readership can be legitimate when handled with editor approval and clear disclosure, as described by ICMJE's conditions. (ICMJE)

Reusing a dataset across multiple analyses can also be valid when each analysis addresses a distinct question and the papers cross-cite clearly. (ICMJE)

What can go wrong: consequences researchers should anticipate

Consequences vary by journal and severity, but policies across publishers and societies commonly include manuscript rejection, publication corrections, retractions, and sanctions.

Even when a case does not escalate to formal sanctions, overlap concerns can slow review, trigger additional documentation requests, and create reputational risk for the research group.

Conclusion: transparency is the real line between reuse and self-plagiarism

Self-plagiarism concerns rarely arise because authors build on prior work; they arise when that reuse is unclear, uncited, or positioned as wholly new. The most reliable way to stay on the right side of journal ethics is to treat reuse as a documentation task.

Enago's copy editing can help refine phrasing, improve paraphrasing quality, and ensure that citations and attribution statements read clearly.

Category

1. Publishing Research

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