Description

Unintentional plagiarism remains a persistent risk in scholarly writing and it shows up at all career stages. Even inadvertent textual similarity can trigger desk rejection, damage reputations, and prompt retractions that distort the scholarly record. As automatic plagiarism detection advances, editors and professional editors sit at a critical control point: by combining automated screening with human judgment, they reduce false positives, guide authors to correct attribution, and protect the integrity of the literature. This article explains what unintentional plagiarism is, when and why it happens, how editing workflows can prevent it, and practical, implementable tips for editors and authors.

What is Unintentional Plagiarism?

Unintentional plagiarism occurs when an author reuses text, ideas, or structure from another source without adequate citation or with insufficient paraphrase, but without deliberate intent to deceive.

Common Forms:

- Patchwriting or poor paraphrasing (close rewriting that preserves the original structure).
- Missing or incorrect citations (e.g., citation errors, forgotten references).
- Reusing standard methodological phrasing or definitions without contextualization.
- Self-plagiarism (recycling one's earlier text without attribution).

Point to note: similarity-detection scores indicate textual overlap, not intent — editorial judgement is essential to distinguish acceptable reuse (e.g., standard methods) from problematic overlap.

Why Unintentional Plagiarism Happens

- Time pressure and "publish or perish" incentives that compress writing and referencing time.
- Language barriers: non-native English speakers struggle to paraphrase technical text reliably.
- Poor training or unclear institutional expectations about citation norms.
- Misunderstanding of what counts as "common knowledge" in a field.
- Over-reliance on automated tools without human contextual review. Studies and reporting from the field underscore these causes and the need for education alongside screening.

The Editorial Role: What Editors Must (and Can) Do

Editors have both an ethical duty and practical levers to reduce unintentional plagiarism. Authoritative editorial guidance (e.g., ICMJE and COPE) frames editors' responsibilities to screen submissions, investigate concerns, and liaise with authors or institutions when necessary.

Key Editorial Actions

Early Screening

- Run every submission through a vetted similarity-checking service (CrossCheck/iThenticate or equivalent) as a routine part of initial triage before peer review.
- Use automated reports to facilitate human review, not to make automatic decisions.

Human Contextual Review

- Check whether matches are in Methods, References, or boilerplate text (often permissible) versus novel analysis or discussion (red flags).
- Evaluate paraphrase quality and whether appropriate attribution is present.

Clear Communication with Authors

- If overlaps appear minor or unintentional, ask authors for revisions and explicit clarifications (e.g., provide original sources and explain any reused text).
- Escalate to COPE flowcharts and institutional contact if the overlap suggests serious misconduct or if authors do not respond.

Training and Policy Transparency

- Publish clear author guidelines about citation, self-plagiarism, and acceptable reuse.
- Share examples of acceptable vs unacceptable reuse to reduce ambiguity.

How Editing Services and Workflows Complement Editorial Checks

Pre-submission editorial services (language editing, manuscript preparation) can reduce accidental overlap by:

- Correcting poor paraphrase and improving attribution language.
- Standardizing references and ensuring citations are present where required.
- Preparing authors to interpret similarity reports before submission.

Practical Checklist: How Authors and Editors Avoid Unintentional Plagiarism

For Authors (Before Submission)

- Run a pre-submission similarity check and review each match; remove or properly cite any unacknowledged reuse.
- Keep meticulous notes and a reference manager record while drafting to avoid "citation drift."
- When paraphrasing, change both wording and structure and cite the original; use short direct quotes only when wording is critical.
- Declare reused text (e.g., methods previously published) in cover letters and cite the earlier work.

For Editors (At Submission and Review)

- Use similarity tools to triage and then perform a manual, contextual review of matches.
- Distinguish standard phrasing and methodological similarity from novel-text overlap.
- Apply COPE flowcharts for consistent handling of suspected plagiarism (e.g., contact authors, request explanations, involve institutions when necessary).
- Provide authors with constructive revision requests rather than immediate rejection for clear cases of unintentional overlap.

Case Example and Evidence-Based Insight

A peer-reviewed study of research students found that awareness does not always translate to correct practice: while most students reported knowledge of plagiarism concepts, many had not read the regulations in full and reported unintentional overlap across disciplines. This highlights that screening alone is not enough training and editorial guidance are essential.

Additionally, public investigations (e.g., image sleuthing and external audits) show that technological detection combined with human expertise uncovers problems that might otherwise remain hidden reinforcing the need for systematic editorial checks.

Comparison: Automated Tools vs Human Editorial Judgement (How Is It Different)

- **Automated tools:** fast, consistent, and broad (large database comparisons), but they report similarity, not intent.

- **Human editorial judgement:** interprets context, distinguishes acceptable reuse, and evaluates intent and significance.
- **Best practice:** combine both – use tools for triage and humans for nuanced decisions. (fa-help.turnitin.com)

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Treating a similarity score as an absolute measure of plagiarism.
- Ignoring discipline-specific norms (some fields reuse standard methods text).
- Failing to document the rationale for editorial decisions when overlap is found.

Actionable Next Steps (For Institutions, Editors, and Authors)

- **Institutions:** make training on paraphrasing and citation mandatory for early-career researchers.
- **Editors/publishers:** adopt a two-step workflow (automated similarity + human contextual review) and publish clear policies aligned with COPE/ICMJE.
- **Authors:** incorporate pre-submission checks and, when in doubt, cite generously and explain reused text in cover letters.

Final Note

Maintaining research integrity requires both technology and judgment. Editors and professional editors are not merely gatekeepers; they are educators and partners in ensuring clear attribution and honest reporting. Implementing structured editorial workflows, combining similarity checks with human review, and educating authors will substantially reduce unintentional plagiarism and protect the credibility of scholarly communication.

Enago's manuscript-editing and proofreading services help authors refine paraphrase and citation practices while improving readability reducing the chance that mechanical similarity checks will flag text that only needs clearer attribution.

Category

1. Reporting Research

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