



# Internet Journal of Medical Update

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## Editorial

### Originality in Medical Writing

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Research publication involves the presentation of new scientific ideas against a background of established knowledge. This body of widely accepted information, referred to as “the literature” is what the author’s message is evaluated against and consists of a conglomerate of ideas originating with other precedent writers. Naturally, the bulk of a research article consists of reiteration of other people’s ideas with the author’s voice playing a small if pivotal role.

Plagiarism of text is presenting others’ sentences as one’s own and plagiarism of ideas is presenting others’ ideas as one’s own. How then do I, as an author of an original scientific work, re-present others’ ideas? Obviously, by the convenient literary devices of quotation and referencing.

However, is the tiny superscripted number at the end of a sentence lifted verbatim from another article an absolution of plagiarism because it links to a listed reference several pages away? Alternatively, do I make the sentence my own by inverting tense, speech and voice to disguise its source? Where, between the need to accurately re-present the ideas of others and the fear of being labeled a copycat, is it safe to stand? Can I duplicate sentences from other texts and build my article with referenced quotations claiming the originality of authorship for the compilation if not for the content?

Technology has made it possible for me to research, write and publish a respectable scientific article entirely on my cellphone. The internet, once available on every desk, is now in every pocket. Whereas once references were searched for and downloaded from library shelves, and copied out by hand from dusty leather-bound volumes, today I don’t even need to read the on-screen text that I select, cut and paste.

The same technology provides me with access to a glut of softcopy as well as unethical shortcuts and subterfuges to concoct and compile articles ‘the way we learnt at school’.

With modern education often requiring children to work on “school projects”, they turn to the internet as an easier source of information than the library. These projects are intended to teach children how to seek out information primarily from printed sources, to sift, evaluate and collate it, and finally present it from their viewpoint. Given an obscure topic, a student would be expected to look up encyclopedias, reference books and journals and read about the subject, collect material and make notes, and learn enough about it to present relevant information suited to the school level. Today a school project is a ‘cut and paste’ exercise from sundry web pages, and some students would actually read their project only after it was printed. They learn not about an extracurricular subject but the methodology of concocting an impressive article with the Control, C and V keys.

I shall not try to analyse the moot ownership of concepts, ideas and phrases, nor shall I debate litigious terms like plagiarism, copyright violation, content scraping and intellectual property theft. Instead, I shall try to understand what constitutes originality and creativity in a literary genre where aridity is almost an ideal, and fiction blasphemy.

In the field of scientific reportage where rationality, accuracy and logic rule against bias and imagination, is it possible or even desirable to write anything original. Novel ideas and concepts abound, but do they not derive from precedent? Is there anything new under the sun?

I like to think of the craft of collage creation as a metaphor for scientific writing. You start with a message or theme the expression of which, not necessarily the content, is to be uniquely your own. You collect scrap, bits of data or coloured paper and you arrange and paste these in a pattern that gets your message across. Let us assume the theme for the collage is terrorism. You could paste a number of news photographs on a board and the theme would be abundantly clear but not uniquely your

expression thereof. You could paste fragments of photographs in an arrangement that would highlight say, here victims, there destruction, elsewhere futility, with swatches of hue and abstract patterns to express the emotions and feelings that colour such barbarism. If, however, you were to be entirely “creative” and arrange only raw colours and patterns, avoiding the use of images as “unoriginal”, you would probably not get your message across. A collage is, after all, an assemblage of different forms to create a new whole.

A few months ago, the Wikipedia pages for Buerger’s disease and Raynaud’s disease were vandalized by the insertion of some irrelevant words and names. Some were obviously rubbish and deleted soon after, but a nonsensical definition of Buerger’s disease as “t\*\*\*\*\*g streptococcus” was not removed. A Google search for these words today gives seventy-five web pages quoting this phrase. Thus a reprehensible smear of web graffiti has been accorded the status of scientific fact by the authors of reputed websites who should have known better than to scrape content without thinking and reading.

I removed the irrelevant words from the wiki pages but who can trace all those erroneous ramifications and correct them? Horrifyingly, when I checked a month later, three additional websites were quoting that nonsensical phrase. Indeed the same vandal had also fabricated eponyms for Pott’s spine and Raynaud’s phenomenon that looked perfectly legitimate and by repeated blind quotation might have even become established fact! Embarrassments such as these occur only in unthinking ‘cut and paste’ slipshod patchwork, and underline the hazards of quoting without possessing background knowledge.

There is no alternative to using the concepts, reasoning and language, even the bare words and text, of others who have spoken before if we wish to be understood. Nevertheless, we should speak from within. Rather than parroting our predecessors, we should incorporate their ideas into our corpus of knowledge, making them uniquely our own before broadcasting them. There can never be a copyright on knowledge.

The story may belong to someone else. The voice should be our own.

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