

# Optical Engineering

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## **Plagiarism and Double Publication**

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## Plagiarism and Double Publication

Like many of you, I was introduced to the ethics of plagiarism in elementary school, and instruction about what constitutes plagiarism was reinforced throughout my education. Therefore, I was surprised as I started my tenure as Editor of this journal to discover that a fair amount of time would be spent handling issues related to plagiarism and double publication. The SPIE policy concerning plagiarism is clear:

SPIE defines plagiarism as the reuse of someone else's prior ideas, processes, results, or words without explicit attribution of the original author and source. Unauthorized use of another researcher's unpublished data or findings without permission is considered to be a form of plagiarism even if the source is attributed. SPIE considers plagiarism in any form, at any level, to be unacceptable and a serious breach of professional conduct.

In October 2014 we began screening all manuscripts using the CrossCheck plagiarism detection software. Manuscripts that exceed set thresholds for duplication of prior publications are carefully scrutinized to assess possible ethics violations. We have seen an unexpectedly high incidence of manuscript cases triggering such a review, making this process quite time consuming for the journal staff and myself. However, this effort far outweighs the damage that might be done to the journal had plagiarized material been published without detection, and also helps ensure that the extremely valuable time of reviewers is not wasted on suspect manuscripts.

Of the 647 manuscripts submitted since we initiated this review process, 20 papers (roughly 3%) have been rejected for ethics violations—a larger fraction than I anticipated. Some of these cases consist of large blocks of text, typically multiple paragraphs and occasionally even full sections, directly duplicating previously published material, often without appropriate citation. Others duplicate substantial segments of text either without attribution or sometimes citing the source but copying excessively. In all cases authors are given an opportunity to respond to the evidence before final editorial action is taken. Unless the author provides a reasonable explanation, the paper is rejected and all authors are restricted from

submitting manuscripts to *Optical Engineering* for a period of time, the length of which depends on the severity of the violation. When confronted, some authors have rationalized these occurrences by either pointing out novel content in the manuscript, arguing that duplication was limited to background material, or claiming lack of understanding regarding the policy. These are unconvincing responses as the SPIE policy expressly forbidding “reuse of someone else's . . . words without explicit attribution” is a well-established norm in the world of scholarship and science. Even cited material should not be directly copied, unless placed in quotations, nor should it be duplicated with only small changes.

Some manuscripts include cited or non-cited phrases and sentences from a small number of sources patched together to form introductory and background sections. The authors in these cases are often from countries where English is not the native language, and appear to be using prior publications as a crutch to help them present their work in English. I recognize the pressure on scientists and engineers in many countries to publish in recognized English language journals, and the difficulty preparing a scientific paper written in a foreign language. However, this practice still raises ethics concerns, especially as the written material assumes a closer likeness to the original sources, even if the actual research is unique. I must warn authors to avoid this practice, and I encourage professors and mentors of especially young authors in such countries to instruct them on these ethics concerns and help to make English translation and editorial services more readily available.

Another situation concerns double publication, or an author's reuse of portions of his or her own prior work. The automated plagiarism detection software also identifies these cases although, in many situations, the practice is acceptable. While submissions to *Optical Engineering* must pass a standard of originality for acceptance, some duplication of background material and even common results is not unusual, although it is typically expected that the prior work be cited as part of the literature review. Perhaps making this situation even more common, the SPIE proceedings-to-journal policy (see my [December 2014 editorial](#)) expressly allows content from SPIE and potentially other conference proceedings to be included in journal submissions. In such situations, I advise authors to either appropriately cite this prior work or at least provide some sort of acknowledgment of the original conference proceedings papers. This will help the editorial board, reviewers, and readers understand the relationships between the papers and avoid a misperception of impropriety.

While the topic of plagiarism is as uncomfortable for me today as it was in elementary school, it is important to the integrity of *Optical Engineering* that the editorial board take decisive actions to minimize its occurrence in published content. We are taking such action, and need your attention as authors to remain squarely within the SPIE policy.

**Michael T. Eismann**  
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