



Cornell University®

2022
Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) Symposium:
Plagiarism

CASE STUDIES

Case 1: Plagiarism of Ideas

Arthur Dornfeld is a senior researcher at University X, whose lab studies development using chick embryos and chick cells in culture as a model system. As is common in the experimental sciences, Dornfeld frequently reviews manuscripts submitted for publication. He agrees to review a manuscript for a prestigious journal. The manuscript uses the mouse model system to study an aspect of eye development that is closely related to the topic focused on by his own laboratory. The manuscript reports findings on a particular gene called mBRK, showing that it plays a significant role in development of the eye. This is clearly an important and novel finding, and although Dornfeld writes in his review that the authors should do a few more controls, he writes to the editor that he is in favor of publishing the manuscript once these controls are carried out.

Dornfeld has a graduate student working in his lab, Samantha Long. She is studying eye development in the chick but has not been making much progress. He explains to her about the mBRK gene reported to be critical in the mouse system, and then tells her to obtain the equivalent chicken gene cBRK (for example by amplification from chicken DNA), and then to see if the same potentially exciting results also hold in the chicken system. Having recently attended a Responsible Conduct of Research workshop, Samantha raises the question: is it proper to use unpublished findings to further her own research? Dr. Dornfeld responds that since the lab that submitted the manuscript does not work in the chicken system, and since the mouse result no doubt will be published and thus publicly available in a few months anyway, there is nothing unethical about applying the knowledge from this manuscript to Samantha's own research.

Discussion Questions:

- Is it appropriate for Dr. Dornfeld to guide Samantha this way?
- Is this plagiarism?
- If Samantha feels that her PI's guidance is ethically wrong, what should she do?
- Are there any circumstances where it might be acceptable to use the information described in the manuscript for Samantha's research?

Case 2: Receiving Assistance

(Modified from: Kairis, R. (n.d.). *LibGuides: Plagiarism Workshop: Home*. Retrieved March 20, 2022, from <https://libguides.stark.kent.edu/c.php?g=308508&p=2059060>)

Kilgore Trout had to write a book report for an English class. He chose the book *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. to review. After handing in his initial draft of the paper the following passage was included:

"The element of time in *Slaughterhouse* is difficult to deal with. Billy Pilgrim's dream sequences act as flashbacks with him jumping from his days as a prisoner of war during World War II to his abduction by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. At times it is difficult to know when he is awake and when he is asleep."

Kilgore's uncle has taught English Literature at Harvard for 20 years and specializes in 20th-century American fiction. He advises Kilgore that Billy Pilgrim is not dreaming at any point in the novel but "time-tripping" from one event in his life to another. He suggests to Kilgore that the structure of time itself is altered in Billy's world and that Billy is bouncing from one event to another as though time were a circle instead of a straight line. After this discussion with his uncle, Kilgore hands in the final version of his report. The passage presented above is changed to the following:

"The element of time in *Slaughterhouse* is difficult to deal with. While the superficial reader may interpret the book as a series of flashbacks, Billy Pilgrim actually jumps from his days as a prisoner of war during World War II to his abduction by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. It is as though time itself has been transformed from the normal chronology of a straight line to a circle where Billy literally jumps or "time-trips" from one point on the perimeter to another."

Kilgore's instructor suspects he has plagiarized and does not accept his report. Instead, the instructor offers to allow Kilgore to write another report on a different book or fail the assignment.

Discussion Questions:

- Was Kilgore treated fairly?
- Did he plagiarize? If so, how might he cite him?
- Was he wrong to seek assistance from his uncle?
- How would you approach this situation if you were the instructor?

Case 3: Self-Plagiarism

(Drafted by: *Michael Hendrix, Research Compliance Fellow, Cornell University*)

Dr. Sheldon recently finalized a review article containing his NIH funded protein research. The manuscript has been accepted by a prestigious journal. However, unbeknownst to the journal editors, Dr. Sheldon and a few of his colleagues had previously published parts of the review article in other journals. In preparing his article for publication in the prestigious journal, Dr. Sheldon copied verbatim content from the article he published two years ago. In addition, the two-year-old research article was funded by the private sector actor. Since Dr. Sheldon did not alter the sections from his older manuscript, his new manuscript does not indicate that the included work was from a prior publication. In addition, the preceding paragraphs make the content appear as if the work was done under the auspices of Dr. Sheldon's current NIH grant.

Unaware of Dr. Sheldon's unattributed inclusions of his former work, the journal publishes the review article. Dr. Knight, the second author of the two-year-old manuscript, reads Dr. Sheldon's newly published manuscript and notices the content from the old manuscript is present without attribution. Dr. Knight emails Dr. Sheldon seeking clarification as to why their joint work was included without attribution or acknowledgment that the sections were older pieces of work. Dr. Sheldon tells Dr. Knight that it was an innocent mistake made due to overwork. He had intended to paraphrase the section and reference the prior work, but he never found the time to complete the task given his workload and deadlines. When Dr. Knight asks Dr. Sheldon to contact the journal to issue a revision, Dr. Sheldon refuses. Dr. Sheldon believes it's a minor issue, as he believes no one is harmed when content from past publications is included in newer work. "After all," he tells Dr. Knight, "this is my work. Why can't I copy it?"

Discussion Questions

- Is Dr. Sheldon right in saying that it is a minor issue with no need for correction?
- Does the type of article matter? Would the situation be different if it was a research article or a book chapter?
- Are there any ethical or legal issues with using past work, either verbatim or by paraphrasing without attribution?
- Who else might be harmed by the lack of attribution and citation?
- What should Dr. Knight do next?
- Are there ethical issues with reusing content without attribution from privately funded research in publicly funded work?