

Cases from the Ombuds Committee¹

Can you copy from yourself? Plagiarism and text recycling

A recurring topic in our ombuds work is publications in which the ideas of others have been passed off as one's own (plagiarism) or in which texts from one's own earlier publications have been reused without making this visible (self-plagiarism). IT tools, such as iThenticate, recognise such text passages with great sensitivity, so that such cases have already been submitted to the ombuds committee for review on several occasions. We then usually come to the conclusion that the relevant publications must be corrected or withdrawn. In the context of qualification theses, such findings can, in the worst case, lead to the rejection of the thesis or the withdrawal of the title.

The reader of a publication assumes that the ideas presented are new and that the text and the ideas presented originate from the authors named. If text passages have been taken verbatim from the publications of other scientists, readers expect this to be clearly labelled and the source to be cited. If this is not the case and there may even be several such unlabelled copies in a publication or qualification paper, it is easy to suspect that the thoughts of others are being passed off as one's own.

But is it also a problem if you reuse your own earlier texts (so-called text recycling)? Recycling your own texts is problematic if this is not made transparent, i.e. if you reuse them without citing the source (so-called self-plagiarism), giving readers the impression that you are publishing new ideas. Apart from the deception about the originality of the content of a publication, self-plagiarism is also problematic in a second respect. Researchers can use such a procedure to seemingly increase their productivity and thus gain an advantage in academic competition. For example, if a new text is copied together from three earlier papers and published as apparently new and original under a different title, the productivity appears higher to the outsider than is actually the case. We therefore also recommend retracting or correcting a publication in the case of self-plagiarism.

But there is also legitimate text recycling. To a certain extent, repetition of one's own texts is accepted in some disciplines. Even if the repeated publication of one's own texts does not make other people's ideas one's own – i.e. one is not plagiarising in the true sense of the word – rules must be observed. For example, the DFG requires that repetitions of content from previous publications be limited to "the extent necessary for understanding the context" (Code, Guideline 13).

iThenticate and other plagiarism software also recognise when a section has been copied verbatim and then changed by editorial work. Even if the corresponding source is named, in such a case at least the suspicion of plagiarism or a text recycling to be classified as problematic could arise and lead to an examination procedure by the ombuds committee. Only those who refrain from "copy & paste" throughout the entire work process are completely safe here. Minor identical formulations or similarities with other texts are of course unavoidable – sometimes there are just not many ways to formulate an issue correctly and concisely. For this reason, all publications at iThenticate have a certain percentage of initially "conspicuous" passages, which are not categorised as problematic in the course of our manual review.

¹ *Translated with the help of DeepL.com (free version)*

