Dear Readers,

Many of you are familiar with the “Blurred Lines” controversy in which the Marvin Gaye estate won judgment for copyright infringement. Many artists are outraged, fearing this will set a dangerous precedent, claiming that all music is derivative in some way. What is considered “original” versus “copied” can be ill-defined -- which side does “was-influenced-by” sit on? This has made me ponder how we authors face this same issue every time we prepare a manuscript. We all gasp at the word “plagiarism,” look over our shoulders as we whisper the word, almost as if we would with “murder.”

And yet almost everyone reading this column has infringed on someone else’s work, almost certainly without realizing it. It’s not something we would ever consciously do.

It is exceptionally difficult to find ways to incorporate relevant information in an original way when citing a resource, especially since there is a limited and acceptable way in which we are trained to communicate certain data in the medical field. The online resource iThenticate is a service we can use to check for verbatim overlap when preparing our manuscripts, but this only gets us so far.

According to our Assistant Editor:

Copying another author’s words verbatim is only the most obvious type of plagiarism. Let’s say you change a couple of words in a sentence -- that’s still plagiarism, even if you attribute it to the source. The new sentence is too close to the original. In addition to attribution, it needs quotation marks around all of the words not changed. (If you ask me, it’s easier to just use the original and put quotes around the whole thing.) If you significantly change both sentence structure and words, a.k.a. paraphrase, it’s also plagiarism -- unless you attribute it. Paraphrasing is fine as long as you give credit to the source. Plagiarism isn’t only about another author’s words, though. You can plagiarize yourself. And regardless of the words you use, restating another author’s idea or interpretation without attribution is plagiarism (and a much more complicated subject).

I guess imitation is not always the highest form of flattery.

If you’d like to explore this more, try “Avoiding plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other questionable writing practices,” by Miguel Roig, PhD (https://ori.hhs.gov/avoiding-plagiarism-self-plagiarism-and-other-questionable-writing-practices-guide-ethical-writing). It speaks specifically to science writing.

Fraternally,
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