

Special Challenges: Multiple Manuscripts, Self Plagiarism

It is important for authors to recognize potential pitfalls associated with writing multiple manuscripts on the same or similar topic. It is possible to “self-plagiarize” if not careful.

Authors typically complete a copyright agreement with the publisher before the manuscript is published. At that point, they no longer “own” that precise word set. That means they cannot cut and paste, slice and dice, or otherwise use the same wording (with few exceptions) in multiple manuscripts. That level of duplication is considered “self-plagiarism”.

To avoid this dilemma, authors must carefully plan for multiple manuscripts on an academic or other topic. Looking at the overall content of the original work or project, they should outline or otherwise separate the original content into separate prospective manuscripts, ensuring each manuscript is unique. For instance, in the monograph on academic papers, I used the example of potentially submitting separate manuscripts on your course paper’s literature review, findings, and overall discussion. If it becomes necessary to duplicate language in more than one manuscript, you cite your previous publication just as you would any other source.

If you know you will be submitting multiple manuscripts from one project, you could consult the editor of your prospective journal. One option in breaking your academic paper into multiple manuscript is to consider whether you might have adequate content for an informative “series”. Years ago, I chaired a team convened to discuss Medication Adherence. The goal was to provide a well-referenced, practical resource on the topic. Upon completion, we realized the writing team had content for three sequential publications. We consulted the executive editor for recommendations on whether a series would be possible. She agreed we should submit and, ultimately, they were published in sequence. I have included the references to this set as an example of what can be accomplished without redundancy.

Journal editors easily detect even self-plagiarism. As they receive manuscripts, they generally submit them to software designed to detect plagiarism or overlap between previously published articles. If you recently completed an academic program, your faculty probably used similar software for your course paper. Some amount of overlap is common, as there are only so many ways an author can describe certain populations, settings, processes, etc. When the editor reviews the overlap report, they may not have a given definite cut-point in mind for what overlap is acceptable. Instead, they consider what content the system detected. Sometimes, they will ask the author(s) about the overlap in verbiage. If you are sending multiple manuscripts over time, detection of accidental self-plagiarism may be delayed but will ultimately be detected, potentially resulting in retractions. If in doubt, ask the journal editor for recommendations.

There are a few articles on this topic in the Nurse Author & Editor library. Searching the broader Wiley database will identify many more. However, I’m providing a link to one that does

an excellent job at covering the issue. A later paper will describe the broader definition and issues surrounding plagiarism as it relates to publication ethics, beyond the risk for self-plagiarism while writing multiple manuscripts from one project.

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