

Text Recycling in the Writing Center: Some Ethical Guidelines for Tutors

Michael Pemberton
Georgia Southern University

Susanne Hall
California Institute of Technology

Helping tutors learn how to recognize and address plagiarism in conference sessions is a common topic in most tutor training manuals and courses, and while those outside writing centers might assume that responding to plagiarism is a simple and straightforward process, that is not always, or even usually, the case (Gruber; Brown et al.). Many student conduct codes reflect an unfortunate and inaccurate assumption that all forms of plagiarism are examples of academic dishonesty that deserve punishment, but writing center tutors frequently encounter examples of plagiarism that result not from an intent to cheat but from students' incomplete understanding of academic discourse and expected citation practices. In writing centers, we want to help writers understand the unique conventions of academic writing so that their ideas will be recognized as part of an ongoing conversation, and foremost among those conventions is explicitly acknowledging the original sources for language, ideas, or data that they themselves did not create. Thus, tutors receive training on how to help students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it through the judicious use of direct quotes, paraphrases, and most importantly, appropriate attribution and citation (Bouman; Fitzgerald and Ianetta 99-107).



MICHAEL PEMBERTON



SUSANNE HALL

The lack of consensus among faculty and school administrators about how to define and respond to plagiarism in student writing has caused challenges for writing centers. Not only have centers had to grapple with occasional accusations that they *foster* plagiarism (Leahy and Fox; Clark and Healy; Shamoon and Burns), but research on “patchwriting”—borrowing language and phrasing from source texts when drafting—has further complicated centers' ability to determine what might be unethical reuse and is merely a byproduct of academic and/or disciplinary enculturation (Howard; Jamieson and Howard). Most writing center professionals operate with an awareness that working with sources and avoiding plagiarism is a complex, culturally-specific writing practice that many academics misunderstand and oversimplify.

In this article, we would like to argue that these same misunderstandings are embedded in attitudes toward another type of “plagiarism” that has rarely, if ever, been discussed in writing center research or tutoring guides—“self-plagiarism” or students' reuse of their own previous writing for a new paper, assignment, or context. What should a tutor do, for example, if a student reveals that they have taken a portion of a paper written for an earlier class and included it as part of a new paper for a different course? Some academic institutions, professional organizations, and faculty consider this just another type of academic dishonesty and refer to it

as “self-plagiarism.” Others, ourselves included, take a more nuanced view. We call this practice “text recycling” (TR) and have worked for several years as part of a large research group to better understand the practical, ethical, and legal issues involved when academic researchers reuse and/or repurpose their own writing. In this article, we will offer a brief overview of some of our research, discuss how it might be relevant to tutoring sessions, and offer a few practical strategies for helping students make ethical decisions about recycling their previously written texts in their papers.

INVESTIGATING AND UNDERSTANDING TEXT RECYCLING

Over the last six years, funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, we joined with colleagues as co-PIs in the Text Recycling Research Project (TRRP) to investigate the practice of text recycling in professional academic research settings. We researched the different and distinct contexts in which TR takes place, how frequently recycling occurs in published research, where it typically appears in research articles, and what researchers and editors believe about the ethics of authors reusing and repurposing their own writing. Readers who wish to take a deep dive into our research findings can access our publications, white papers, and guideline/policy documents on the TRRP website, <https://textrecycling.org>, but a few key findings are useful to share here as we believe they provide an important context and useful ethical framework for thinking about how to address TR in educational settings and writing centers in particular.

For the purposes of our project, we define text recycling as “the reuse of textual material (prose, visuals, or equations) in a new document where (1) the material in the new document is identical to that of the source (or substantively equivalent in both form and content), (2) the material is not presented in the new document as a quotation (via quotation marks or block indentation), and (3) at least one author of the new document is also an author of the prior document” (“[What Is Text Recycling](#)”). In the project’s initial phase, we surveyed academic journal editors and editorial board members across a wide range of disciplinary areas about their beliefs and attitudes toward text recycling. As might be expected, there were differences of opinion about the acceptability of TR (depending, for example, on factors such as how much text was involved, the rhetorical purpose of the recycled text, the nature of the original source), but a clear majority felt that TR could be useful and appropriate in some situations and with some limitations (Hall et al., “Attitudes”).

We believe that the same basic principle applies to student writers in educational and classroom contexts: under some circumstances and in some situations, students’ reuse of their own texts, in whole or in part, can be useful and consistent with best practices for writing and learning, and writing centers should incorporate this principle as part of their praxis for working with students in conferences.¹ Our document, “[TRRP Model Policy and Guidelines for Text Recycling in the Classroom](#),” includes a discussion of the implications of text recycling in classrooms, but for now, consider the following reasons (and there are likely others) why students might want to reuse some of their previously written texts in subsequent coursework:

- **Extending prior work.** A student is engaged in a project or a field or topic of study across courses. Their engagement is deepening over time. They wish to return to and extend writing on a prior topic to continue learning more about it. This includes many capstone assignments, such as theses and major projects, which represent the culmination of a student’s learning and often draw on work from earlier courses.
- **Seeking credit.** A student may have previously failed to get credit for a piece of writing and wishes to reuse it in order to do so. For example, consider a student who withdrew

from a lab course after completing the first lab report and then takes that course in a subsequent term. The assignment for the first lab is the same as in the previous term.

- **Repeated Assignment.** Some common assignments appear in multiple courses and present an almost unavoidable need to recycle writing. A résumé or literacy narrative, for example, may call students to cover the same information in the same genre in a new course.
- **Efficiency.** The student has written something relevant in the past and wants to reuse some or all of it in order to finish a new assignment in an expedient manner.

These all seem like rational reasons to reuse one's own writing, so the key question becomes whether or not they are *ethical*, and why. Instructors (and, by extension, institutions) must answer that question; ideally, instructors would thoughtfully assess the uses and limits of allowing text recycling within their courses and offer students clear guidance about what is allowed. However, just as our TRRP research showed that journals did not offer authors adequate guidance for text recycling, we have observed that students often receive little guidance about this topic in courses. We think writing centers can help address this issue. Writing centers can be a key institutional support for writers who are navigating questions of whether and when to reuse their own work, and they can also be a resource for faculty who wish to consider these issues.

TUTOR STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING TEXT RECYCLING IN COURSEWORK

Helping a writer make choices about text recycling in the context of assigned coursework begins with understanding what policies govern this practice at your university/college, in the relevant school/division, and within the course itself. Tutor training should familiarize writing center staff with broader institutional policies on text recycling (often still called “self-plagiarism”) in coursework. Not all such policies are clear or well-constructed, and writing center staff discussions of these policies may reveal questions that writers are likely to have about the policy. Institutional policies often refer to a prohibited practice of *resubmission of one's work from a prior course* in ways that might imply to some students that the policies are about submitting the same entire paper twice. Does a new paper that contains several sentences from an older paper but is otherwise a completely new and original work constitute a violation of your institution's policy? What about several paragraphs in a long paper? We have seen policies that are ambiguous on that point. We recommend inviting a colleague who works on supporting and enforcing the student academic misconduct policy to a staff meeting to interpret and discuss these policies. The conversation can both help ensure writing center staff members understand these policies and offer administrators feedback on the limits or weaknesses of the policy.

How might the topic of text recycling come up in a session with a student working on assigned writing for a course?² Some students might directly raise a question to a tutor about whether or not they are allowed to reuse prior writing, expecting the tutor to know the rules that govern this practice. For other students, it might never occur to them that reusing their own writing, which they produced through their own hard work and critical thinking, could be disallowed. For that reason, we recommend that tutors consider including a question like “Have you ever written a paper on this topic before?” into their regular repertoire of agenda-setting questions. The answer to this question could be relevant in several ways, but one of them would be that if the answer is yes, a follow-up question like, “How similar will this paper be to what you wrote in the past?” could help the tutor determine if further discussion about text recycling is relevant. To be clear, we're not encouraging interrogation of writers on this point; rather, we're suggesting questions of broad utility that might also surface a writing practice that students could be unaware is potentially problematic.

Writers may also need help seeing that writing decisions that seem practical and straightforward to them may be seen as unethical by their instructors or the institution. They may be confused by a practice that was accepted in one course being deemed unethical in another. Writing center tutors can help students understand that instructors can have fundamentally different philosophies about the goals of their courses that affect their stances on text recycling. Some instructors expect every student to generate original work throughout the course, regardless of their prior knowledge of the topic; in those cases, the instructor may impose a very strict policy against students reusing any work from previous courses. On the other hand, some instructors may be more focused on whether or not students achieve the desired learning outcomes for their course, and they might be more open to students reusing portions of earlier writing projects as a way of demonstrating competency. In both cases, however, tutors can help students think reflectively about why they believe it is reasonable to recycle their previous writing and then talk about how to broach that possibility with their instructor. This is similar to work we do with writers in many areas, where we can help them formulate questions, draft emails, and prepare for conversations with professors that students might otherwise lack the confidence or awareness to have. It is especially important that these conversations take place with regard to text recycling.

All the TRRP's materials on text recycling for researchers emphasize the importance of transparency between writers and readers. When a writing center tutor lacks the information required to offer a student writer specific guidance about whether and how much of their prior work can be recycled, they can instead emphasize the importance of transparency, encouraging the writer to talk to mentors and instructors for more specific guidance. Communication and transparency are key—not only to clarify what might be acceptable or not to a particular instructor (as this information is rarely included explicitly in course materials or syllabi) but also to protect the student from future disputes or misunderstandings.

Notes

¹ In our project, the TRRP distinguished between professional, publishing researchers and writers completing assigned coursework. Though there are certainly similarities between the two groups and contexts, there are also important differences that may require different policies and, in the case of writing centers, different approaches to intervention and tutoring. As we note in the [“TRRP Model Policy and Guidelines for Text Recycling in the Classroom,”](#) “the primary aim of professional research writing is generating a written product that is valuable to *readers*, while the primary aim of classroom writing is a process of learning that is valuable to *the writer*” (1). This is not to say that professional research writing does not lead to learning or that classroom writing is not of any value to its readers. However, the goals that set the processes in motion are quite different, and the different aims of these writing processes affect the ethical and practical implications of the decision to recycle one's own prior writing.

We also recognize that the categories “researcher” and “student” are not mutually exclusive. The same person can be both a researcher and a student during a semester or quarter. While undergraduates most often write for course assignments, they sometimes also write as researchers seeking publication of their work. Graduate students, too, are typically expected to write for courses as well as for publication during their time in graduate school. We are distinguishing between writing situations, not people.

² We are aware that writing centers also support writers composing documents outside of the classroom. Centers that support research writing intended for publication may find utility in reviewing and sharing our other resources with writers, including the [“TRRP Best Practices for Researchers”](#) guide and [“Understanding Text Recycling: A Guide for Researchers”](#) (Hall et al., “Understanding”). Some writing centers also support application writing for jobs, fellowships, and academic programs. This is an area of writing the TRRP has not focused on, and we do not currently have any specialized resources to share in this area.

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