Avoiding Plagiarism in Today’s World: A Professional Responsibility

Plagiarism is the “act of using another person’s words or ideas without giving credit to that person” (Merriam-Webster, 2011a). Alternative terms include piracy, theft, stealing, appropriation, and thievery. These words remind us that plagiarism’s scope extends beyond the failure to reference a published quote. Plagiarism involves the taking of another’s ideas, thoughts, and concepts from any source and making them one’s own. This concept encompasses not only material that has been copyrighted and published but also unpublished works, speeches, tweets, blog posts, photographs, drawings, electronic media, presentations or workshops, videotaped or audiotaped materials, and information obtained from the Internet.

The Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2015) addresses plagiarism both directly and indirectly, primarily within Principle 5 (Veracity) and its related Standards of Conduct. For example, Principle 5H clearly directs occupational therapy personnel not to plagiarize: “give credit and recognition when using the ideas and work of others in written, oral, or electronic media” (AOTA, 2015, p. 6). This principle highlights the ethical obligation to represent and document the contributions of others accurately in all forms of communication. Principle 5B additionally reminds occupational therapy personnel to “refrain from using or participating in the use of any form of communication that contains false, fraudulent, deceptive, misleading, or unfair statements or claims” (p. 6). Failing to cite a source appropriately can deceive readers into believing that the thoughts contained in the
document are those of the author. Any reader who then cites that author further diminishes the credit due the original source.

The Code of Ethics also reminds us that we need to comply with laws and policies relevant to plagiarism, such as federal copyright laws. Principle 4E explicitly states, “Occupational therapy personnel shall maintain awareness of current laws and AOTA policies and Official Documents that apply to the profession of occupational therapy” (AOTA, 2015, p. 5).

**Intentional and Unintentional Plagiarism**

Plagiarism can take several forms. While it is sometimes a conscious act, *unintentional plagiarism* is the accidental appropriation of the ideas and materials of others because of a lack of understanding of the conventions of citation and documentation. Unintentional confusion of another’s ideas with one’s own still constitutes plagiarism (Adam et al., 2017; Skandalakis & Mirilas, 2004). Examples of plagiarism are found in Exhibit 1.

**Exhibit 1. Intentional and Unintentional Plagiarism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intentional Plagiarism</th>
<th>Unintentional Plagiarism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Copying entire documents and presenting them as your own (University of Victoria Libraries, 2013).</td>
<td>• Misunderstanding paraphrasing, the parameters of common knowledge, or the statute of limitations on the attribution of ideas (University of Victoria Libraries, 2013; Washington State University, 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cutting and pasting from the work of others or reproducing sentences verbatim from others, without properly citing the authors.</td>
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- Stringing together the quotes and ideas of others without connecting their work to your own original work.
- Actively or intentionally using the words, ideas, or concepts of another without citing the author as the source (Duke University, Office of the Dean of Academic Affairs, Trinity College, 2009).
- Making only minor changes to the words or phrasing of another’s work without properly citing the authors (Washington State University, 2018).
- Having difficulty discerning one’s own ideas from the ideas of the many works one has read.
- Believing that material previously obtained from school, publication, or a presentation is common knowledge or in the public domain and therefore does not require citation.

### Legal and Ethical Standards Regarding Plagiarism

The *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics (2015)* (AOTA, 2015) establishes that “occupational therapy personnel shall give credit and recognition when using the work of others in written, oral, or electronic media” (Principle 5H; p. 6), thereby documenting their sources, whether they be books, journals, or websites. More important, copyright law requires that a practitioner either present only one’s own ideas or accurately cite those of others, which makes plagiarism both a legal and an ethical issue (U.S. Copyright Office, n.d.). Copyright law applies
not only to literary works (§102.a.1) but to pictorial and graphic works (among others) as well
(§102.a.5). It gives the holder of the copyright the exclusive right to reproduce copyrighted
works (§106.1). Under the fair use section of the copyright law (§107), one may reproduce
copyrighted material for teaching, scholarship, or research as long as it is cited, is used for
nonprofit educational purposes, and does not affect “the potential market for or value of
copyrighted work” (§107.4). Lack of awareness about correct citation of information acquired
through electronic media or other sources does not excuse the writer from the obligation to
provide accurate documentation of those sources.

Avoiding Plagiarism in the Electronic Age

With the increasing use of electronic media as resources, occupational therapy
practitioners and students face additional challenges in appropriately citing sources when they
write a paper or article for the classroom or for publication. Increased use of online sources
allows individuals to cut and paste content from a variety of Internet sources into a “new”
document—a form of passive or unintentional “electronic plagiarism” (Sinha et al., 2009). One
should understand that a paper that is essentially a “patchwork” or “pastiche” of material taken
from various Internet sources fails to rise to the level of an original work (Blum, 2009, as quoted
in Rosen, 2009).

Public Domain

Although the Internet has certainly simplified the process of research for the practitioner,
researcher, educator, and student by making information readily available, it has resulted in
confusion regarding the issues of defining intellectual property and public domain. The public
domain is defined as “the realm embracing property rights that belong to the community at large,
are unprotected by copyright or patent and are subject to appropriation by anyone” (Merriam-

Webster, 2011b). Guidelines for what is considered to be in the public domain include work that was never copyrighted (e.g., work done before copyright law was established), those works for which the copyright has expired, the work of government agencies, and facts such as census information (Stanford University Libraries, 2018).

Information available to all on the Internet is not necessarily in the public domain. When in doubt as to whether information is in the public domain, look for guidance on the bottom of the Web page as to the author’s willingness to freely disseminate the information. Proper citation is important even when the information is in the public domain. Citation is an important way for others to locate further information on a topic.

**Photographs and Images**

Photographs and images on the internet may be copyrighted. Clinicians, students, and even experienced academicians may inadvertently violate copyright laws by copying an image and using it in a presentation, client education handout, proposal, or other material. It is common belief that material found in search engines such as Google Images are public domain material. In reality, photographs may cost up to a few hundred dollars to use (see, e.g., alamystockphoto.com, 2018; Medical Artworks, n.d.). One needs only to go to a site like Pinterest to see examples of all kinds of occupational therapy evaluation forms, handouts, and intervention plans, many of which have copyright stamps visible in the background.

**Academic Rules and Resources**

All educational institutions have rules against plagiarism reflected in their student guides, and many have honor codes as well. Some universities have useful guides for students that help them avoid the pitfalls of plagiarism when preparing papers (see, e.g., Princeton University, 2018; Purdue University, 2018). The American Psychological Association (APA) also provides
helpful plagiarism prevention information (Cooper, 2016). In many universities, plagiarism is grounds for academic suspension or probation and may even lead to expulsion. It is crucial that students preparing everything from assignments for the classroom to doctoral dissertations learn how to avoid plagiarism.

**Citation of Electronic Sources**

Occupational therapy practitioners and occupational therapy students may take several steps to avoid committing plagiarism. One must always put direct quotes in quotation marks and include the appropriately cited source (Stolley & Brizee, 2010). If authors borrow significant words from the work of another, they must quote those words and give credit to the author who coined them. When paraphrasing statements or borrowing concepts or ideas from another’s work, one must include a reference to the source after the adopted information. One should consider introducing the quote or paraphrased language by crediting the author by name in an introductory statement, such as “According to Reilly . . .” (Stolley & Brizee, 2010).

The prevalence of the Internet and online journals in disseminating knowledge has led to new protocols that delineate the proper way to identify online sources of information, including blogs, conference abstracts, and digital books. Those unfamiliar with the standards for citing references should consult such resources as the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2010) and the *APA Style Guide to Electronic References* (APA, 2012). Writers should seek out those with more experience in publishing to mentor them in the process of preparing an article or paper correctly.

Additionally, many universities offer web-based resources for preparing citations correctly. Students may be able to use plagiarism prevention tools available from their learning management system to determine whether their papers could be construed as plagiarized. For
example, Safe Assign (Blackboard, 2018), a plagiarism prevention service available on Blackboard (www.blackboard.com), assists students by teaching them proper citation and helps educators by providing a mechanism to identify plagiarism by their students.

**Examples of Plagiarism in Occupational Therapy**

**Case Scenario 1. Tiffany**

Tiffany was recently hired by a new outpatient clinic that wants to start a comprehensive arthritis program. She completed her Level II fieldwork at a hospital where there was a well-developed arthritis program. Tiffany went online to the hospital’s website, downloaded their evaluation forms and handouts on joint protection, made a few changes, and reprinted them with the logo of her current employer’s clinic. She also wrote a short article for the clinic’s webpage about the benefits of an outpatient arthritis program, using data gathered from websites of other successful programs.

Tiffany’s actions constitute intentional and unintentional plagiarism and several breaches of the Code of Ethics. Although she substituted the logo of her new facility and changed the order of a few items on the handouts, she was deceiving the public into believing that the evaluation and handouts were created at that facility. This is an act of plagiarism, violating Principle 5H. Tiffany’s actions could also be considered a breach of Principle 6, Fidelity, because she used her position as a student to gather information from another organization to provide a benefit to her new facility, thus creating a conflict of interest (Principle 6C).

Tiffany must first ask permission to use the handouts from the facility that developed them. If permission is granted, she must then acknowledge the facility that developed the handouts and state that they are reprinted or used with permission, even if she paraphrases language or changes the order of the instruction sheets. Paraphrasing data from other facilities’
websites to create her article may imply that there are already satisfied consumers. This is a violation of Principle 5E, which directs occupational therapy practitioners to “ensure that all marketing and advertising are truthful, accurate, and carefully presented to avoid misleading recipients of service…or the public” (AOTA, 2015, p. 6).

**Case Scenario 2. Bob**

Bob was a newly hired instructor in the occupational therapy assistant program at a local community college. His teaching course load included a class on physical disabilities. Bob prepared his lecture on stroke and included information on neurodevelopmental treatment (NDT) and proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation that he received while in occupational therapy school and at continuing education courses. To make his PowerPoint more interesting, Bob copied a video from the Neuro-Developmental Treatment Association website. He cited one of his old school textbooks from 20 years ago, but he assumed that the NDT principles were now “general knowledge” and in the public domain in the rehabilitation sciences and that specific citations were not necessary from information from the conferences or websites.

Although Bob might have felt that the information was general knowledge in the field, it is still mandatory that he cite references for his information, and adequate documentation will help students locate further information on the topic. A reference librarian or medical library may be helpful in locating the original source. Information gained from continuing education courses, although often not copyrighted, must still be referenced when one is preparing a lecture. In addition, Bob may be violating Principle 1C (Beneficence) by teaching techniques that are not current (AOTA, 2015, p. 2).

**Case Scenario 3. Carlotta**
Carlotta was required to present an in-service to the therapy staff as part of her Level II fieldwork experience. She gathered information about her topic from web-based sources and copied some slides from one of her classes into her presentation. She left some sources off her reference list because she did not know how to format citations for websites, and she assumed that material her professor used in school was now public domain.

By not correctly citing her sources or obtaining permission from the faculty member, Carlotta committed plagiarism, even if it was unintentional. It is imperative that all information be referenced appropriately. Because information from the Internet varies significantly in its reliability, it is especially important that the person receiving the information know the source so that he or she can weigh its usefulness and quality. Providing the URL of a document helps readers locate the material on the Internet, and retrieval dates might be necessary if the information is time sensitive or likely to change. In addition, providing a document’s digital object identifier (DOI) helps readers locate the source (APA, 2010).

**Case Scenario 4. Isaac and Dina**

Isaac and Dina were graduate students working on an assignment for one of their occupational therapy courses. Isaac was friends with some students who graduated 2 years earlier and read their papers to get some ideas. The following week when Isaac wrote his paper, his ideas were strikingly similar to those of previous students. Although he never intended to copy someone’s ideas, he committed plagiarism when he confused his ideas with those of others. Dina was surprised when she received a failing grade on her assignment, because the website from which she purchased the paper said it had received a grade of A. Isaac’s unintentional plagiarism and Dina’s intentional plagiarism were both identified by the plagiarism checking service utilized by the faculty member.
Summary and Conclusion

Occupational therapy clinicians, researchers, educators, and students must be vigilant about avoiding plagiarism. AOTA members are expected to demonstrate a high standard of professionalism. This professionalism requires occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students of occupational therapy at all levels to respect the works of others, as an extension of respect for the author. When in doubt, one should cite the source of words, thoughts, and ideas that might have originated from others. Writers must never represent someone else’s words, thoughts, or ideas as their own. It is crucial to provide accurate citations and references to all sources, including electronic ones, when preparing in-services, continuing education presentations, or facility handouts or when authoring research or other articles, to maintain professional integrity and support appropriate ethical conduct, as delineated in the Code of Ethics.

References


This Ethics Advisory Opinion combines two previous published Ethics Advisory Opinions, one on plagiarism and the second on plagiarism in the electronic age, to consolidate the ethical concepts related to this topic. The original advisory on plagiarism was written by Barbara Kornblau, JD, OT/L, FAOTA, AAPM, ABDA, CCM, CDMS, Chairperson, Commission on Standards and Ethics (1998–2000), and was first published in the Reference Guide to the Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics in 2000. The advisory on plagiarism in the electronic age was written by Ann Moodey Ashe, MHS, OTR/L, Practice Representative, Ethics Commission (2008–2011, 2011–2014), and was published in the Reference Guide to the Occupational
Therapy Code of Ethics in 2010. Both were revised and combined to reflect updated AOTA Official Documents and resources, AOTA style, and the literature for subsequent Reference Guides to the Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics. In December 2018, the content of this ethics advisory opinion was reviewed and updated by Brenda Kennell, MA, OTR/L, FAOTA, Education Representative, Ethics Commission (2015–2018, 2018–2021); Brenda Howard, DHSc, OTR, Member-at-Large, Ethics Commission (2015–2018, 2018–2021); and Roger Ritvo, PhD, MBA, Public Member, Ethics Commission (2018–2021).


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