

## When is it permissible to reuse my own academic work?

### *A brief guide to text recycling*<sup>1</sup>

Text recycling or ‘self-plagiarism’<sup>2</sup> refers to the reuse of one's own previously published texts or sections of texts, illustrations or ideas in a scientific context for a new publication. The question of when text recycling is in line with good research practice (grp) or even constitutes misconduct causes uncertainty among many scholars. This is especially true since the assessment is highly dependent on context and discipline. This guide aims to address this uncertainty by providing specific recommendations for grp-compliant text recycling based on relevant regulations.

### **Transparency and Parsimony Principle**

The Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice published by the DFG in 2019 contain both the obligation to be strictly honest with regard to one's own contributions and those of third parties (Guideline 1) and the obligation to disclose all relevant preliminary work, including one's own, in a complete and correct manner (Guideline 13). The FU Berlin's 2024 Statutes on Safeguarding Good Research Practice also require all researchers to avoid ‘inappropriate multiple use [...] and [to limit] self-citations [...] to the necessary minimum’ (§13, 6).

Two principles for dealing with text recycling can be derived from these two sets of rules:

- a) The reuse of one's own previously published texts, text passages, ideas or illustrations must always be clearly indicated so that readers are not misled regarding the novelty of the passages in question or one's own productivity (*principle of transparency*).
- b) Reuse is only permissible if it is necessary in the respective context (*principle of parsimony*)  
The necessity may arise from the need to repeat exactly what has already been published – e.g. because a publication draws on what has already been published – or because reformulation would not be appropriate or because findings are deliberately intended to be made accessible to a different audience (Meinel 2013).

A number of concrete conclusions can already be drawn from these two principles:

- It is generally permissible to republish a text or parts thereof if the target audience differs significantly from that of the first publication (translation, commemorative publication, popular scientific work) and the reproduction has been sufficiently indicated. How this is indicated depends on discipline-specific criteria.<sup>3</sup> In your own CV or list of publications, the article in question should be included under the original article and not listed as a separate publication.

---

<sup>1</sup> Published by FU Berlin's Coordination Office of Research Integrity. Translation supported by DeepL.

<sup>2</sup> The alternative term “self-plagiarism” is misleading for several reasons: Firstly, it implies that any reuse constitutes plagiarism and therefore misconduct, which is not the case. Secondly, it does not adequately describe the issue under consideration here, as it is not a matter of appropriating someone else's intellectual property, but rather of concealing the novelty of the work. See Hagenström 2022.

<sup>3</sup> One option is to include an introductory footnote such as: “The following article is an abridged/expanded/translated version of my article [source reference].”

- In the case of partial adoptions, the corresponding text passages or illustrations should be marked in a similar manner.<sup>4</sup> Phrases consisting of only a few words do not need to be referenced.
- Text adoption in technical descriptions or methodology chapters in the natural, life, or social sciences is generally permissible, provided that rephrasing is not appropriate or would jeopardize the reproducibility of the experiments. Here, too, the transfer must of course be identified in accordance with subject-specific conventions.<sup>5</sup> However, more and more publishers now insist on rephrasing in such cases to prevent anti-plagiarism software from detecting text matches.
- Unpublished texts or texts that have not yet been submitted as qualification theses or coursework (manuscripts, lectures, applications, etc.) may be used for publications without further reference, provided that the rights of third parties are not affected (contract research, expert opinions).
- The unmarked (partial) adoption of previously published texts in a new publication is not permitted, e.g., the publication of the same article in different journals.

### Special case 1: Reuse of published articles for a dissertation

In the case of a *cumulative dissertation*, the issue of text recycling does not apply in most cases: articles that have already been published or accepted for publication are part of the dissertation, thus satisfying the principle of transparency. Only copyright issues need to be considered: since the usage rights for the articles usually lie with the publishers, permission must be obtained before republishing them as part of the dissertation. Further details are governed by the publishing contract.<sup>6</sup>

The situation is more complicated when articles that have already been published or accepted for publication are to be reused for a *monographic*, i.e., non-cumulative *dissertation*. In this case, transparency must first be established, as it is not immediately apparent to readers or reviewers that the dissertation contains previously published results. In addition to the copyright issues mentioned above (approval by the publisher), it must therefore be indicated at the appropriate place and in accordance with subject-specific conventions when content has been reused—by referencing the already published work.<sup>7</sup> If the reused contributions were published with co-authors, it must also be made clear what your own contribution to the original publication was. In the case of joint publications, it is therefore advisable to agree on a suitable labeling of the respective contributions (so-called “author's contributions”) at an early stage.

### Special case 2: Reuse of your own coursework and theses

As Meinel (2013) points out, it is common practice in many academic cultures to use one's own unpublished qualification theses – e.g., bachelor's, master's, or state examination theses – as

---

<sup>4</sup> Suggested wording: “The following table/figure/description was previously published in [source reference].”

<sup>5</sup> Suggested wording: “The measurements/tests were carried out as described in [source reference].”

<sup>6</sup> Only if the publications have been published open access under an open content license, no permission is required.

<sup>7</sup> See footnotes 2 and 3. A more detailed clarification in the preface would also be advisable.

preliminary work for a dissertation, which must, of course, represent an independent academic achievement. Currently, the doctoral regulations at FU Berlin do not regulate such reuse in most cases, which means that reuse is permissible in principle. However, this does not release doctoral candidates from the obligation to indicate reuse in accordance with the principle of transparency. Almost all doctoral regulations at FU Berlin also stipulate as part of the admission requirements that the dissertation must not have been submitted to another university, which also applies to translations of theses submitted abroad.

If you want to reuse your own coursework or qualification theses for another qualification thesis (except for dissertations and habilitation), you need to consider the relevant regulations for examinations. The Framework Regulations for Degree Programs and Examinations at FU Berlin consider the reuse of one's own coursework for a bachelor's or master's thesis without disclosure to be a deception. Accordingly, the declaration of authenticity must state that all passages taken from other works have been indicated with a source reference.<sup>8</sup>

## References

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (2019): *Leitlinien zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis. Kodex*, zenodo.14281892

Freie Universität Berlin (2024): *Statutes for Safeguarding Good Research Practice*, [https://www.fu-berlin.de/sites/gwp/informationen/dokumente/GWP\\_Satzung\\_FUB\\_2024\\_EN.pdf](https://www.fu-berlin.de/sites/gwp/informationen/dokumente/GWP_Satzung_FUB_2024_EN.pdf)

Hagenström, Felix (2022): *Wiederverwertung eigener Texte in der Wissenschaft*, <https://zenodo.org/records/7409616>

Meinel, Christoph (2013): *„Selbstplagiat“ und gute wissenschaftliche Praxis*, <https://www.uni-regensburg.de/assets/universitaet/ombudspersonen/selbstplagiat-memo.pdf>

---

<sup>8</sup> This does not rule out the possibility of a *referenced* adoption. However, since unpublished theses and seminar papers do not constitute citable sources and the question of originality remains open, any reuse should always be discussed with the supervisor of the thesis.