

Professional Standards Advisory PS-16 (September, 2010)

PLAGIARISM

All PRSA members pledge adherence to the Society's Member Code of Ethics. As issues arise relating to the practice of public relations, the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) is charged with providing guidance on such issues within the framework of the Code provisions. The PRSA Board of Directors then announces these guidelines through this series of professional standards advisories. The PRSA Member Code of Ethics can be found [online](#).

ISSUE: Plagiarism is an all too frequent practice that involves the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work.¹ The user fails to make any attempt to attribute the work. Plagiarism can be treated as fraud or theft of intellectual property.² Plagiarism is different than copyright infringement, although both are violations of another's intellectual property rights.

Copyright infringement is the expropriation of another's words, images or other creative works without approval or compensation. It is a legal construct, and there are copyright laws that provide for fair use of limited amounts of this material for criticism, personal use, educational purposes or research. According to AP Stylebook, 42nd edition, 2007, page 376, "Fair use is more likely to be found if the copyrighted work is informational rather than fictional." "The greater the amount of the copyrighted work used, the less likely that a court will characterize the use as fair. The use of an entire copyrighted work is almost never fair. Size alone, however, is not decisive; courts have found uses not to be fair when the portion used was small but so important that it went to the heart of the copyrighted work." As one can see, copyright laws can be very complex and one should obtain legal counsel when serious questions of copyright infringement arise.

Plagiarism, on the other hand, deals with falsely representing another's ideas or words as your own. It is possible to be guilty of plagiarism even when copyright permission has been granted or waived or if the material is not copyrighted. This PSA addresses only the issue of plagiarism and its ethical implications within the practice of public relations.

BACKGROUND: The opportunity for using the work of others but failing to acknowledge or get authorization is ever-present. The Internet provides limitless opportunities for individuals to find useful information and, perhaps carelessly or simply as a matter of course or entitlement, appropriate that information into feature stories, newsletters, news releases, presentations, white papers and all of the other kinds of different written materials that we as public relations professionals produce. The increasing ability of web-based analysis, search and text comparison programs means that more and more individuals, organizations and media outlets find themselves to be the subjects of plagiarism inquiries. As Web 3.0 emerges as a dominant factor in information delivery, advanced interrelational data analyses can quickly identify materials using language created by someone who should have been acknowledged by a current user.

There also seems to be an emerging generational resistance to the acceptance of private ownership of content, particularly in academia. The issue carries the title of "open sourcing" and is of enormous concern to individuals who create content, own or manage intellectual property or design communications materials. One often erroneously hears, "If it's on the web, anyone can use it." Students openly acknowledge copying content from a wide variety of sources and using it as their own.

Public relations professionals may be similarly challenged when facing a deadline, an assignment in a new area or even the lack of a good idea and the easy solution may be to use someone else's words or ideas. However, an ethical practitioner respects and protects information that comes into his or her possession and makes an effort to preserve the integrity of that information. An ethical practitioner also uses the works of others appropriately, with proper author/creator attribution. There are many ways to do this and several have been employed in this PSA, including footnotes, parenthetical references to the original author or a reference to the original work within the text. When words are used verbatim, it is important that they be enclosed in quotation marks and the exact source of the quote be provided either within the text or in a reference section.

¹ From www.dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.0.1). Based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2006.

² Source: Dennis L. Wilcox. Public Relations Writing and Media Techniques, 8th ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon ©2007, 2005 Pearson Education, Inc. p. 304.

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE: At least four Code provisions and three professional values relate to this issue. They are:

Code Provisions

Free Flow of Information. Preserve the integrity of the process of communication. Be honest and accurate in all communications.

Competition. Preserve intellectual property rights in the marketplace.

Disclosure of Information. Be honest and accurate in all communications. Avoid deceptive practices.

Conflicts of Interest. Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests.

Professional Values

Honesty. We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

Expertise. We acquire and responsibly use specialized knowledge and experience. We advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education. We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

Fairness. We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER PRACTICES (Hypothetical examples provided to help you recognize plagiarism):

- You find a document with 10 elements of an important process you've been struggling to explain that fit your use perfectly. You take three of the points, change the titles, edit the language slightly and include them in the material you're writing or publishing.
- You're struggling with a graphic to show a complicated concept and stumble across an illustration in an old text book that is exactly what you want. You give the illustration to one of your graphics people and ask him to "come up with something different that tells the same story."
- You're writing an op-ed for the CEO and find an exceptionally thoughtful and well-written piece on the same subject in an obscure trade journal that has limited circulation. You edit it in a few places so that it meets your objectives and present it to the CEO who loves it.

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES³:

1. Don't copy content, a sentence, paragraph, document or anything else from any source, even if you edit the material to fit your needs, and present it as your own work.
2. Use your own words and paraphrase instead of copying directly wherever possible.
3. If you paraphrase another's work, give credit to the original author.
4. Use quotation marks and credit the source or author when you copy exact wording.
5. "For anything that you 'borrow' from the Internet, including material from Web pages, E-mail, and news groups, these materials are the words and ideas of people who deserve to be given specific credit."⁴
6. Disclose all sources used for your work product.

PRINCIPAL BEPS AUTHORS: Mary Graybill, APR, Fellow PRSA, Patricia T. Whalen, Ph.D., APR, Tom Eppes, APR, Fellow PRSA

³ This is a modified list from the original source: Indiana University Bloomington, School of Education, "How to Recognize Plagiarism," <http://www.indiana.edu/~istd/>.

⁴ Bemidji State University Writing Resource Center, "Avoiding Plagiarism," 429 2005.