SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

Steve Mirsky is off this month (more than usual). This column about copying previously published material originally ran in April 2002. He also hosts the *Scientific American* podcast Science Talk.

Copy That

Technology is making it harder for word thieves to earn outrageous fortunes

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,[1] it was the *New York Times*. Specifically, it was a *Times* article that discussed computer programs and other techniques designed to root out plagiarism.[2] The article revealed that there is now software that can look for a lengthy passage, like a string of pearls,[3] in a new document that is identical to a passage in a previously published work. In another method, every fifth word from sample passages is removed, and the author has to fill in the blanks[4] to reveal his or her familiarity with the work. These high-tech ways to spot literary theft will surely rob copycats of the sleep that knits up the raveled sleave of care.[5]

When I first read the *Times* article, I remember thinking, it's a good thing[6] and attention must be paid.[7] After all, as a writer, I find plagiarism to be a constant concern. (Although from time to time, I have to admit, I shall consider it.[8]) Of course, it can be hard to define. When you steal from one author, it's plagiarism; if you steal from many, it's research.[9] One might say that a writer should neither a borrower nor a lender be.[10] On the other hand, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.[11]

I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world.[12]

Therefore, the plagiarized passages that programs pinpoint are probably purposeful and potentially punishable.[13] There is grandeur in this view of life.[14] I think.[15]

Plagiarism is a central issue of science[16] as well. Relying on the work of others is the lifeblood of scientific research. Indeed, if I (who had the chance to learn physics that Newton never dreamed of) have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.[17] One might even say that I have always depended on the kindness of strangers[18] in this regard.

But employing the findings of other researchers is one thing; claiming such findings as one's own is intellectual murder most foul.[19] So when in the course of human events,[20] a case of plagiarism is revealed, it represents a clear and present danger[21] to intellectual liberty. And naturally, eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.[22] It is thus incumbent on all researchers to say, "Let me make this perfectly clear[23]: I am not a crook.[24]" 🅂🄰

1. Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*, opening lines.

2. Eakin, Emily. "Stop, Historians! Don't Copy That Passage! Computers Are Watching!" in the *New York Times*, January 26, 2002.

3. Miller, Glenn. Song title.

4. Rayburn, Gene. *The Match Game*, television program (1962–1969, 1973–1984).

5. Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, Act 2, Scene 2.

6. Stewart, Martha.

7. Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*, end of Act 1.

8. Spock, Mr. (with beard), to Captain Kirk on the transporter pad. *Star Trek*, episode 39, "Mirror, Mirror."

9. Mizner, Wilson.

10. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3.

11. Colton, Charles Caleb.

12. Einstein, Albert, according to *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*.

13. After "Peter Piper."

14. Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*, closing paragraph.

15. Descartes, René. "*Cogito, ergo sum*."

16. "Science" refers to the enterprise by which human beings attempt to discover basic truths about the universe. It is, however, also the name of a journal published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

17. Attributed to Isaac Newton but probably existed in some form earlier.

18. Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Scene 11.

19. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.

20. Declaration of Independence, opening paragraph.

21. Holmes, Oliver Wendell, Supreme Court justice. *Schenck v. United States*, 1919.

22. Phillips, Wendell. 1852 speech to the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, paraphrasing John Philpot Curran, who in 1790 said, "The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance."

23. Nixon, Richard M., 37th U.S. president. On numerous occasions.

24. Ibid., about the Watergate scandal.

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