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Play It Again, Sam

From the movie, "Casablanca."

The repeat performance and the sequel are both time tested concepts. They offer an already eager audience the opportunity to experience the same warm and fuzzy feelings once again. They are, however, different in critical ways. The repeat performance is just that: to the last detail the words, music, and action are the same. The audience knows what to expect, and can sing along because they have memorized the lyrics. Sequels, however, are supposed to extend the familiar, adding to what is known. To be successful they must deliver on that promise.

Scientific articles have much in common with sequels—and nothing with the repeat performance. As investigators concentrate their work in a particular area, they are likely to publish on the same subject. Each new report, however, must deliver on the promise of new observations, extending the frontier in the author's area of expertise. In fact, each report should be new from head to toe: new experiments, new observations, new results and, to set the work apart from that which preceded it, new words.

Unfortunately some authors prefer to emulate the repeat performance in their work. Once they have an article published, they assume it is acceptable to incorporate the same structure, even the same words, into succeeding manuscripts. After all, they rationalize, their research is a natural outgrowth of prior work, why not the descriptions? Here, however, science and entertainment part company. Using someone else's words is plagiarism, while less offensive, is also among the proscribed precepts of our profession. Aside from being unethical, re-using your previously used words can have a dulling effect on readers who, sensing they have read the work sometime before (*deja vu*), will skip on to the next article before coming to any of the 'new' observations.

Cost is another difference between repeat performance and sequels. Sequels cost more. To completely rewrite abstracts, introductory passages and elements of the discussion sections requires a serious effort on the part of the author. But new work deserves new words. Readers recognize the effort and appreciate the fresh look that comes from rethinking and restating concepts.

The hallmark of the authors of great literature is their choice of words and the uniqueness of each contribution. Why should we tolerate anything less in science?

H. William Strauss
Editor, The Journal of Nuclear Medicine