Google Search: A Simple and Free Tool to Detect Plagiarism

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Abstract

Context: A manuscript should be devoid of plagiarism to get it published in a journal. Hence, checking plagiarism is an essential part of the publication. There are paid and free service providers who help in checking plagiarism of articles. Free service providers allow a user to search limited number of words per day. Aim: The aim of the study was to describe a method of checking plagiarism which is free, and there is no limit on the words that can be searched for plagiarism. Methods: A manuscript can be checked for text plagiarism with the help of Google “exact word or phrase” search. To do this, the user (i.e., author, reviewer, and editor) has to copy the portion of text and search it on Google with the text in quotes. This commands Google to search for the exact words and phrases in exact order. If search results are shown by Google with the exact sentence, it may be copied, unintentionally plagiarized, or a very common sentence. Conclusion: The method of searching plagiarism with the help of Google “exact word or phrase” search can be used by authors, reviewers, and editors to check duplicate content present in the manuscript. However, this method has limitations. It may not be capable of detecting an inadequately paraphrased sentence. Hence, its usage should be adapted with caution.

Keywords: Advanced search, exact word or phrase, manuscript, publications, scientific misconduct

Introduction

Plagiarism is defined as “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own” in Oxford living dictionaries, and it is pronounced as “ˈpleɪərɪz(ə)m.”[1] Plagiarism may be a serious issue in defining the fate of an article in a journal.[2]

There are several online tools for checking plagiarism of an article. Some of the tools are paid and some are free to use. A popular plagiarism checking online tool – iThenticate (Turnitin, LLC, USA) charges 100 USD (6853 INR approximately) for checking a manuscript containing words <2500.[3] This much financial capability may not be present among authors conducting nonsponsored research work. However, making a manuscript plagiarism free is a must for publication. This forces authors to search free services. Available free tools can be used for checking plagiarism of an article with some limitations of usage.[4] These websites commonly limit the number of searches which can be conducted in a day. Hence, authors, reviewers, or editors need to wait days to weeks for checking the whole manuscript. However, waiting a week for checking plagiarism may cause unnecessary delay in the journey of a manuscript on the road of publication.

This was the context to describe the process of searching plagiarism in a platform which does not limit the number of searches. After searching available literature, Google search was found to be a potential resource to search plagiarism. Hence, in this short technical note, the process of searching plagiarism with the help of Google was described.

Methods

During preparation of this article, a personal computer (Sony VAIO VGN-CS22GH) with Windows 7 operating system was used with Mozilla Firefox (version 61.0.1) browser. All the screenshots were captured by Greenshot 1.2.7 Build 2.

Google “exact word or phrase” search

Google is one of the popular search engines and used worldwide with restriction in some areas of the world. When a new webpage is created, Google crawlers analyze the content and index it in its database. Open access journals publish its

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content on a webpage, and it is crawled by Google like other websites. This is then indexed in the Google database. When a user searches a word or phrase, Google searches its indexed database and provide relevant search results within fraction of seconds.[5] In an usual search, Google first segregates all the words and search contents having those words. However, Google provides an option to search “exact word or phrase” in “advanced search” option. To use this feature, users can adapt two methods as follows:

1. Write the words or phrase to be searched in the search box and search as usual. Then, click on the “settings” and select “advanced search.” After that, cut the word or phrase and paste those on the box adjacent to the option “this exact word or phrase” and click on the “advanced search” button. This would search the contents indexed with that particular word and phrase in exact order. The “advanced search” can also help to narrow the search result according to language, geographical area, update time, etc.

2. Those who do not need to use additional criteria to narrow the search result can use the “exact word or phrase” search feature by putting the text within quotation marks (also known as quotes, quote marks, and inverted commas). Any word or phrase in quotes would search indexed database with those word or phrase in exact order. Due to ease of searching, this method is better for quick “exact word or phrase” search. In this article, this method has been described.

An example of “exact word or phrase” search
Suppose we have a sentence and we want to know if anyone else has already used the sentence in any article which is available on the Internet. To know this, first, we need to copy the sentence and paste it in the search box on Google in quotes and then, we need to search it as we normally do. A sentence from a previously published article in “Indian Dermatology Online Journal” was copied from the journal website[6] and was searched in quotes. Only two results were found, and the result is shown in Figure 1. As Google was searching database which exactly contains the word and phrase in the exact order, hence, the search result was limited.

For a comparison, if we use the same sentence and search it on Google without quotes, the result would be different. In that case, Google searched database which contains those words and phrases, not necessarily in exact order. The search without quotes for the same sentence showed 181,000 results as shown in Figure 2.

How Google may help in the detection of text plagiarism
After preparation of manuscript, an author can search her/his manuscript for any unintentional plagiarism with this simple Google search strategy. A reviewer can be suspicious of plagiarism when pattern of presentation is suddenly changed in the manuscript. Then, the reviewer can take help of Google to check if her/his suspicion is true or not. If search result of an “exact or phrase search” shows results, the portion may be copied, unintentionally plagiarized, or be a very common sentence. If it is a common sentence, it should not be flagged as plagiarized. However, if the copy and paste is not a common one, then it may be a case of plagiarism, intentional, or unintentional. Hence, subjective evaluation should be added with the result shown by machine. Furthermore, copying a portion of text verbatim is not always plagiarism. Some situations arise where the author needs to use the exact sentence within quotes with properly crediting the author and citing the literature.

An example of checking level of plagiarism
Suppose, we have a portion of manuscript containing five sentences as shown in Figure 3a, and we would like to check text plagiarism. This paragraph was made purposefully plagiarized by copying two sentences from previously published article and writing three unique sentences.[7] We need to search each sentence with the help of Google. Each sentence was copied and pasted in the search box in quotes and searched. The first sentence and fifth sentence showed search results. Rest of the sentences did not show any exact search results. Hence, these sentences can be considered unique. Search results of five sentences are shown serially in Figure 3b. If we calculate percentage of plagiarism according to the number of sentence, it gives a 40% ([2/5] ×100) plagiarism.

Discussion
Common types of text plagiarism
There are several types of text and content plagiarism.[8,9] Among the types of text plagiarism, direct copy and paste is the most severe type of plagiarism. In this case, authors copy and paste the text from a previously published article without quotes and without citing the literature. In some instances, authors change some of the words of a sentence and keep structures and meaning of the sentence same as it is in published literature and uses it as their own. This is known as inadequate paraphrasing. It is also a common type
of plagiarism. Other forms of plagiarism were beyond the scope of this article.

What can be and what cannot be detected by Google?

Among copy and paste and inadequately paraphrased plagiarism, Google can easily detect the direct copy and paste work. In the example shown in Figure 3, we have seen how a user can detect the “copy and paste” type of plagiarism. However, there is difficulty in the detection of inadequately paraphrased plagiarism by Google search. For example, a sentence from an “editorial” of this journal was copied word to word and searched to find exact match. Result showed only one source which was of this journal [Figure 4a]. Then, a single abbreviation (-IJVES) was added and searched for exact match. This was done to create an inadequately paraphrased sentence. Result showed that there is no exact match, but there were some relevant results (nine results). The first result of the list was that of this journal [Figure 4b]. Hence, only observing the exact search result may not be adequate to detect inadequately paraphrased text. The sentence was further modified, and the word “uncharted” was replaced by “seven.” The search result also showed that there was no exact match. The 48 results shown by Google was unable to include the link of this journal [Figure 4c]! Hence, a minor change in words in sentences may make Google to be unable to trace the potential

Figure 2: Searching the same sentence shown in Figure 1 without quotes on Google

Figure 3: (a) A paragraph of text to be searched for plagiarism. (b) Screenshots of “exact word or phrase” search result from Google, arranged serially for sentences of the above paragraph

Figure 4: (a) A sentence was searched for exact match. (b) One abbreviation was added to the sentence and searched for exact match. (c) A word was replaced by another and searched for exact match

Figure 5: (a) Searching on Google Scholar with a sentence in quotes. (b) Searching the same sentence without quotes
sources. This is a major limitation of the Google “exact word or phrase” search in the detection of plagiarism.

**Testing “Yahoo” and “Bing” search engine**
The sentence from the “editorial” was searched in Yahoo (https://in.search.yahoo.com/) in quotes and without quotes. Sentence in quotes showed no result. When searched without quotes, among the results, the journal link was not found. For Bing search engine (https://www.bing.com/), both for sentence in quotes and without quotes, 50 search results were checked. None of them was the link of this journal. Hence, at this moment, the use of Yahoo and Bing may not be a good choice for searching duplicate content for checking plagiarism. However, new strategies should be explored to search plagiarism by Yahoo and Bing.

**“Google Scholar” search**
Google scholar (https://scholar.google.co.in), a bibliographic database is a dedicated website which indexes journal articles of scholars all over the world. Searching sentence in quotes also works for this website. To show an example, a sentence was copied from a published article in the “International Journal of Health and Allied Sciences” and was searched in quotes and without quotes.[12] The search result with sentence in quotes is shown in Figure 5a and without quotes is shown in Figure 5b. Those who want to check similarity of text in journal articles, Google scholar is the choice.

**Time needed to search plagiarism**
Abstract of this article is composed of 13 sentences. Search was conducted by copying individual sentences from the word document where it was typed. It took 4 min 48 s to complete the search. Among 13 sentences, one sentence – “However, this method has limitations” – was found to be similar with many other articles on the Internet. When a similarity is found, there must be subjective analysis of the sentence and search results found to decide if it is plagiarized or not. Hence, more similarity would take some added minutes for this subjective analysis.

**Conclusion**
Searching duplicate content of a manuscript by Google “exact word or phrase” search can be used by authors, reviewers, and editors. There are both advantages and disadvantages of this method. Those who can buy credits for professional checking services may not adapt this. However, whenever buying credit is not possible, the user can seek help from Google. It is free, quick, and easy to use. Whatever may be the situation, no manuscript should be presented with plagiarism.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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