

**THANK YOU, TEACHER. IN 'OTHER PEOPLES' WORDS!  
A STUDY OF THESIS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SECTIONS**

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**ALL THE AUTHORS WORK AT THE SKIMS MC BEMINA  
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# **THANK YOU, TEACHER. IN 'OTHER PEOPLES' WORDS!**

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### **ABSTRACT**

#### Background

Thesis work is an integral part of medical postgraduate education in India. However, despite producing a large number of theses every year, only a tiny percentage of this research makes its way to standard medical journals around the world. One reason for this is the relative lack of novelty, innovation, and imagination in this research.

#### Methods

We looked at the acknowledgement sections of 63 medical thesis manuscripts from 4 different colleges. By comparing the acknowledgement passages penned by the researchers, we assessed the extent of plagiarism/ paraphrasing in the sentences and phrases used.

#### Results

The extent of plagiarism and paraphrasing was surprisingly high. The extent of reproduction ranged from 12% to 63%.

#### Conclusion

The lack of inventiveness and originality in framing individual-specific thank-you notes often leads students to plagiarize or paraphrase sentences from previous manuscripts. However, this might also reflect the fact that the number of reasonable ways to thank one's thesis supervisor is far smaller than the number of theses.

## INTRODUCTION

It is clear that a large amount of thesis and dissertation work is completed and published every year in India. However, a significant portion of this work is not published in reputable/indexed journals.

Multiple reasons can be enumerated for the low conversion rate of research into publication. For the young researcher, the research process requires dedication, hard work and honesty. Scientific writing is a language that undergoes development over time. The most essential tool to gain this skill is excessive reading of literature and practice of scientific writing. Over time, writing research articles becomes a relatively enjoyable experience. [1]

To increase the quality of our thesis work and to make it publishable, it is worthwhile to look retrospectively and assess the thesis material holistically. Plagiarism in thesis work has always presented challenges in higher education establishments, but there is evidence that it is on the increase, possibly due to the ever-increasing availability of online material [1]. Estimates of the frequency of plagiarism vary widely, from less than 5% to over 80%, with variation according to academic discipline, level of study and nationality. [2,3]

Whilst the word 'plagiarism' is not itself ambiguous, a number of complications arise as soon as it is applied to an academic setting because 'between imitation and theft, between borrowing and plagiarism, lies a wide, murky borderland.' [4,5]

Habibzadeh et al. described it beautifully by writing that plagiarism is among the prevalent misconducts reported in scientific writing and common causes of article retraction in scholarly journals. Plagiarism of ideas is not acceptable by any means. However, plagiarism of text is a matter of debate from culture to culture. [6]

We conducted this relatively unusual study to assess the extent of plagiarism, paraphrasing, and borrowing in the thesis acknowledgement sections. The results suggest that even while thanking our teachers, there is a distinct lack of originality and an element of plagiarism.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

We studied the acknowledgement sections of 63 theses, which had been accepted by the academic sections of 4 different colleges. These included SKIMS MC Bemina, Gmc Srinagar, ASCOMS Jammu and GMC Jammu. We tabulated sentences and phrases appearing more than once.

A phrase was defined as a group of words that is part of, rather than the whole of, a sentence. [7]

A sentence was defined as 'a group of words, usually containing a verb, that expresses a thought in the form of a statement, question, instruction, or exclamation and starts with a capital letter when written'. [7]

The number of times a particular phrase appeared was calculated as a percentage.

## RESULTS

The average length of an acknowledgement section was 1 ¾ pages. The average number of words used was 543, and the average number of sentences per thesis was 48.

Recognisable phrases per thesis numbered 38.

The most typical phrases that appeared in multiple theses in exactly the same pattern are shown in Table 1 below. That is, the replications used the exact same words in the exact same order.

Table 1. Phrases repeated in the acknowledgement section

PHRASE	NUMBER OF TIMES	PERCENTAGE
Generosity, relentless guidance, valuable suggestions, incessant encouragement	15	23.8
Work with such a great personality	21	33
The completion of this work has been possible with the grace and help of the almighty lord. I praise, glorify and thank my almighty lord for everything bestowed upon me and for showering his mercy on me	40	63
Continuous guidance, timely advice, and inspiration throughout	9	14.2
Including academics, clinical, surgical skills, work ethics, discipline, religion	10	15.8
He is an extraordinary clinician, dedicated teacher, and leader in his field	18	28.5
Deep impact on me, and I aspire to become like him	6	9.5
It would not have been possible	20	31.7
It gives me immense pleasure	8	12.6
Convey my sincerest thanks	16	25.3
He was the driving force	14	22.2
I offer my sincere gratitude	18	28.5
His valuable help and support	14	22.2
Words wouldn't suffice for me	11	17.4
He is a source of inspiration	14	22.2

PHRASE	NUMBER OF TIMES	PERCENTAGE
Always amazed me	12	19.04
His zeal /quest for perfection always amazed me	14	22.2
In pursuit of excellence	10	15.8
He has been a constant support	24	38.09
His friendly advice and immense enthusiasm	20	31.7
Thank you for your love, blessings and encouragement	12	19.04
Where I am today is because of you	10	15.8
Kind and soft-spoken	12	19.04
Uncompromising and scrupulous attitude	9	14.2
Down-to-earth attitude	12	19.04
He is a role model for me	8	12.6
Indebted to him	18	28.5
His painstaking efforts	16	25.3
A constant source of inspiration and encouragement	22	34.9
His able guidance and constant supervision	18	28.5
How proud and excited I have always been	9	14.2
Whatever little I know is because of him	9	14.2
Guided me at each step throughout the course of the study	10	15.8
All praise is to Almighty ALLAH, the creator and lord of the whole universe, who has graced my life with endless opportunities and without whose blessings nothing would have been possible	20	31.7
Their support and selfless love have always abolished my fears, boosted my confidence and raised me up each time life tried to push me down	10	15.8

PHRASE	NUMBER OF TIMES	PERCENTAGE
The saying "I am the slave of the person who has taught me a single word depicts the great reality	8	14.2
Illuminating suggestions	14	22.2
Extraordinary clinician	10	15.8
It gives me a palpable sense of satisfaction to acknowledge and appreciate the tireless guidance bestowed on me	4	6.3
Innumerable sacrifices	8	12.6
Would not have seen the light of the day	14	22.2
Unequivocal cooperation	14	22.2

The extent of plagiarism of sentences and phrases ranged from 12- 63 percent in the acknowledgement section. The most commonly copied sentence was used to thank God: 'The completion of this work has been possible with the grace and help of the almighty Lord. I praise, glorify, and thank my almighty Lord for everything bestowed upon me and for showering his mercy on me.'

The extent of plagiarism was more common in sentences used to thank the thesis supervisor with quite a liberal use of sentences like, 'An extraordinary clinician, dedicated teacher, the leader in his field' and 'His able guidance and constant supervision' and, 'He has been a constant support' being used 28-38 per cent times.

Similar phrases were used to thank colleagues, co-guides and other teachers.

The least plagiarised sentences were the ones used by the students to thank their spouses. Some of these sentences or phrases were, 'Thank you for your love, blessings and encouragement' and 'Innumerable sacrifices' being most commonly used.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study do show that students tend to use similar words and phrases while building the acknowledgement section of their thesis. Even though the subject matter of this paper lies just beyond the routine assessment of science, it is in some way very closely related to the quality of the research process.

Science is built on original thoughts building on prior knowledge. However, developing original material is difficult. It requires time and dedication. [8]

The word "plagiarism" was first described in English in the year 1601 by the dramatist Ben Jonson to tell someone guilty of literary theft [9]. Direct plagiarism represents word-for-word transactions of selections of text without appropriate attribution and quotations. In comparison, paraphrasing results when taking the original text and restating it using new vocabulary; the ideas described by the paraphrased text should still be appropriately attributed to the original author. Mosaic

plagiarism occurs when different forms of plagiarism or original and borrowed ideas are mixed together. [8]

According to Guraya et al., multiple causes contribute to plagiarism. Factors such as lack of awareness, inadequate writing skills, pressure to publish (e.g. as a requirement for promotion), unfavourable personal character, and poor team culture play a role. [10] Streefkerk mentions patchwork plagiarism, also called mosaic plagiarism. It involves copying phrases, passages, and ideas from different sources and putting them together to create a new text. [11]

Various types of plagiarism have been mentioned in literature. See Table 2. [12]

Table 2: Forms of plagiarism

Form	Description
Plagiarism of ideas	Theft of a new idea or a theory presented anywhere. The plagiarist then conducts the research based on this idea/theory and presents it as if it is his/her own without acknowledgement of the source.
Plagiarism of text	This form is also known as 'copy-cut-paste' or 'word-to-word' writing. This occurs when a researcher takes an entire paragraph from another source and includes it in his research writing.
Self-plagiarism	This occurs when a researcher uses substantial parts of his research in two different publications using the same findings or illustrations without referring to them.
Collusion	Asking someone else to write a piece of work for the plagiarist, who then presents it as his own.
Patch-writing	Copying parts of another work and changing a few words or the order of words to make it appear as if it is original.

Plagiarism by students is a moral maze because it raises important ethical and moral questions about good/bad or right/wrong behaviour and about acceptable/unacceptable practices. Who decides it is wrong, on what basis and for what reasons? Who is responsible for determining behavioural norms in the context of plagiarism? [13]

Habibzadeh et al. wrote that text similarity score as a signal of text plagiarism is not an appropriate index, and an expert should examine the similarity with enough scrutiny. Text recycling, in certain instances, might be acceptable in scientific writing provided that the authors could correctly construe the text piece they borrowed. With the introduction of artificial intelligence-based units, which help authors write their manuscripts, the incidence of text plagiarism might increase. [6]

The rhetoric of plagiarism is quite colourful. It has been described in moralistic tones as 'the unoriginal sin', 'sin ... against originality', and 'a writer's worst sin'. It has also been criticised as 'an attack on ... nothing less than a basic human right, to property, to identity' and a 'cancer that erodes the rich legacy of scholarship'. [14]

Some writers prefer more legalistic language. The US Office of Research Integrity (ORI), for example, views plagiarism as ‘the theft or misappropriation of intellectual property.’ The plagiarist has been described as a ‘thought thief’ or ‘intellectual shoplifter’, charged with having committed ‘forgery’, ‘theft of ideas’ and a ‘crime’. [15,16,17]

It is perhaps better to view it as poor practice. Pertinently, Leatherman dismisses it as a ‘slip in scholarship’ and Fialkoff as a ‘poor scholarship’. Gray labelled it as a question of ‘academic etiquette and polite behaviour rather than a crime’. [18,19,20,21]

While discussing thesis acknowledgements, it might be better to view them as ‘a disease of inarticulateness,’ as Bowers mentioned in 1994. [22]

Scientific writing is a language that develops over time. The most essential tool for gaining this skill is excessive reading of literature and practice of scientific writing. Over time, writing research articles can become an enjoyable experience. [2]

While not entirely a part of science, thesis acknowledgement is meant to be a public and lasting statement about someone else. Even though thesis acknowledgement is not afforded the same importance as the scientific text, it can distort the intended impression of the person referred to in this section. This sometimes forces the author to stay within the confines of the tried and tested previously formulated words.

Habibzadeh et al. again mention that an acceptable technique is to borrow a piece of text, usually from an eminent erudite scholar, and use it exactly — as it is (technically text plagiarism) — directly in your own text without clearly distinguishing the borrowed text from the rest of the text (e.g., by inserting it in double quotes or indenting it) or even exclusively mentioning the original source or that who the original author is. It is presumed that the borrowed text is so famous that [hopefully most] readers will figure out where the borrowed piece is taken from. [6]

This necessitates the other side of the argument. It seems that the number of reasonable ways to thank one’s thesis supervisor is far smaller than the number of theses. So, it is perhaps understandable that many of these contain the same formulation of thanks. [23]

Literary aspects of scientific writing are sometimes closely mirrored in English literature. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton writes that it is a greater offence to steal other men’s labours than their clothes. He, however, went on to admit that he himself was guilty of a similar ‘felony’. [24]

Ferguson et al. alluded to a contemporary culture where sharing files—and sharing everything—is normal and facilitated by the internet. According to them in many resulting conversations with learners, they share that they feel overwhelmed by the many responsibilities and deadlines they face as adult learners. [25]

Eaton points to the internally experienced emotions regarding these cases, such as surprise, frustration, indignation, and feeling personally attacked, all of which occur when detecting plagiarism. [26]

Rokni et al. mentioned that text recycling is particularly more likely in those who come from an Eastern culture where text recycling of erudite scholars is generally not discouraged. In such instances, the authors are commonly young researchers with no formal training in Western institutes. [27]

They also believe that this act of such authors who just used the text for want of linguistic expertise should not be considered a deadly sin.

Donker et al. wrote that some authors whose mother tongue is not English, although aware of the fact that plagiarism is not acceptable, commit it intentionally not to deceive anyone but for want of linguistic proficiency and unwillingness to sacrifice accuracy and quality of the original English statement they copied. [28]

There is an interpersonal aspect to the whole picture. For the student's guide, the discovery that the student has cut corners and compromised some academic integrity just to get out of thanking him in his own words. This could get in the way of developing a warm teacher-student relationship. It could also be an opportunity wasted for the student.

## CONCLUSION

It is worthwhile to examine the lack of originality to such a large extent as part of the broader 'copy-paste' culture. If appropriately understood and discussed openly, it could improve our thesis quality and make the transition from research to publication possible on a larger scale.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ORI. Office of Research Integrity

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Citation: Dar, T.A., Farooq, S., Akhter, Z., Malik, S., Shah, N.A., Maajid, A., & Dhar, S.A. (2025). Thank You, Teacher. In 'Other Peoples' Words! A Study of Thesis Acknowledgement Sections, *Nonpartisan Education Review / Articles*, 12(1). Retrieved [date] from <https://nonpartisaneducation.org/Review/Articles/v21n1.pdf>

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## DECLARATIONS

The authors have no financial declarations to make.

There is no conflict of interest.

All authors contributed to collecting the data and preparing the references. Shabir A Dhar wrote and revised the manuscript.

The data can be made available on request.