

A SHORT GUIDE TO ETHICAL EDITING FOR NEW EDITORS

Background/structure

Becoming an editor of a journal is an exciting but daunting task especially if you are working alone without day to day contact with editorial colleagues. This short guide aims to summarize key issues and to provide links to relevant pages of the COPE website as well as those of other organisations.

1. Initial assessment of journal when you take over

After getting to grips with the mechanics of the journal such as the submission system and timelines for manuscripts, preferably in conjunction with the previous editor, we recommend assessing current practice using the COPE Audit. This tool is designed to help editors identify areas of their journal's policy, processes or practice that require attention and may need to be revised so that they adhere to the COPE Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines on publication ethics. Journals vary in the ways they prevent or handle ethical issues depending on the size of the journal staff, the resources available and the discipline they cover. We therefore recommend using the audit in conjunction with the publisher and journal manager. It may take a considerable time to alter practice.

2. Relations with the outgoing editor

Ideally there should be a handover period with the new and old editor working together. The duration should be agreed with the publisher. This should allow the outgoing editor to complete submissions they started dealing with. New editors should not overturn the previous editor's acceptance decisions unless serious problems are identified such as plagiarism or data fabrication.

3. Relations with the other editors/ editorial board

In some journals, the editor-in-chief will be expected to work with a team of co-editors. When a new editor is appointed, it is a good opportunity to review and confirm the roles and responsibilities of all editors and editorial staff so that everybody is clear about who does what.

Most journals also have an editorial board, although their levels of activity and involvement vary. New editors should contact board members and discuss their expectations of them (eg if they are expected to review a certain number of manuscripts each year). Based on the response you may wish to appoint new editors. Ask existing editors to step down and restructure the editorial board. Some journals have a policy of appointing editors for a fixed time period and you will need to consult the publisher.

You may wish to change the direction of the journal. This must be undertaken in agreement with the other editors and the publisher. Otherwise editorial decisions may be inconsistent. New aims and scope need to be agreed and clearly published in whatever medium the journal uses.

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4. Relations with authors

The instructions to authors will need reviewing to ensure they are up to date with current guidelines. They should clearly state what is expected of authors and what the editor will do in cases of suspected misconduct such as plagiarism or data fabrication. You may wish to provide a link to the COPE flowcharts and retraction guidelines. Writing clear instructions is not easy. You should consider consulting with colleagues, the publisher or a language editor to ensure journal instructions are not ambiguous. In the submission system you may wish to provide a check list of what is expected from authors to maintain standards of manuscripts.

Editors are responsible for everything they publish and should therefore take all reasonable steps to ensure the quality of this material, recognising that journals and sections within journals will have different aims and standards.

Editors' decisions to accept or reject a paper for publication should be based only on the paper's importance, originality, and clarity, and the study's relevance to the remit of the journal (see also section 9 on editorial independence).

5. Transparency

Editors should work with the journal publisher/editorial office to agree processes for handling submissions that are the most efficient and appropriate for the journal. Electronic submission systems can be designed to ensure authors provide all required information (eg authorship declarations, funding information), but this should be balanced against the need to avoid over-complex submission systems which may be off putting. It may be helpful to require all elements are complete before a manuscript will be sent for peer review (since chasing details at a later stage can delay publication and upset schedules). You might consider checking for the following elements (as appropriate):

- Confirmation that the authors have read and understood the Instructions to Authors
- Authorship statement explaining who did what (see below)
- Funding information
- Competing interest declaration
- Permission obtained for use of copyrighted material from other sources (including the Web)
- Documentation for any citations to unpublished work (eg articles in press/ personal communications)
- Information about previous submissions to other journals (eg name of journal, reviewer comments)
- Confirmation that the manuscript has been submitted solely to your journal and is not published, in press, or submitted elsewhere.

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Journals should adopt and promote an authorship policy that is appropriate to the field of research. Editors should adopt systems to encourage appropriate authorship and discourage guest and ghost authors. This will vary from journal to journal but might include:

- requiring statements of each individual's contribution to the research and publication
- use of checklists to prevent ghost authorship (see PLoS: <http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000023#s4>)
- requiring all authors to sign an authorship declaration
- including all authors in communications (eg acknowledging receipt of a submission) not just the corresponding author
- clearly specifying authorship criteria in the Instructions to Authors

For biomedical journals you might consider in addition:

- Details of ethical approval and informed consent for studies in humans
- For randomised controlled trials registration number of the trial and the name of the trial registry
- Details of approval for animal experimentation

For studies in humans, regulations regarding what type of study requires ethical approval vary worldwide. In some countries all studies require ethical approval but in others not. This may lead to submission to journals of manuscripts relating to such studies that do not satisfy the journal's normal requirement for independent ethical approval, and rejection of the manuscript because of misunderstanding of local regulations. Guidance is available from COPE (Guidance for Editors: Research, Audit and Service Evaluations).

6. The submission system

Electronic submissions usually include standard communications to authors, reviewers and other editors. If these are specific to your journal (rather than used throughout the publisher) you should review them to ensure that they reflect current practices, are consistent with the Instructions to Authors, and are clear. Getting standard letters reviewed by other editors, editorial staff or a language editor may also help improve them and ensure they are clear.

7. Relationship with reviewers

Editors should provide guidance to reviewers on everything that is expected of them. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer or link to the COPE Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines. You should consider including the following points:

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- **Reviews should be conducted objectively.**
- **Personal criticism of the author is inappropriate.**
- **Reviewers should express their views clearly with supporting arguments and references as necessary and not be defamatory or libellous.**
- **Reviewers should declare any competing interests.**
- **Reviewers should decline to review manuscripts in which they have conflicts of interest resulting from competitive, collaborative, or other relationships or connections with any of the authors, companies, or institutions connected to the papers.**
- **Reviewers should respect the confidentiality of material supplied to them and should not discuss unpublished manuscripts with colleagues or use the information in their own work.**
- **If a reviewer wants to pass a review request onto a colleague, they should get the editor's permission beforehand.**

Journals should have systems for assessing the performance of reviewers and removing from the database those whose performance is not acceptable.

Editors should have systems to ensure that peer reviewers' identities are protected — unless they have an open review system that is declared to authors and reviewers.

Reviewers should be asked to address ethical aspects of the submission such as:

Has the author published this research before?

- **Has the author plagiarised another publication?**
- **Is the research ethical and have the appropriate approvals/consent been obtained?**
- **Is there any indication that the data has been fabricated or inappropriately manipulated?**
- **Have the authors declared all relevant competing interests?**

8. The peer-review process

Editors should adopt a peer-review process that is appropriate for their journal / field of work and resources / systems available. You should think about the number of reviewers used, whether review is anonymous or signed, whether author names and affiliations are masked, and whether reviewers complete checklists / forms.

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Editors should have systems to ensure that material submitted to their journal remains confidential while under review.

They should also ensure that peer review is undertaken in a timely fashion so that authors do not experience undue delays. This will usually involve monitoring the process regularly and trying to increase efficiency and prevent delays.

9. Can editors publish in their own journal?

Editors should not be denied the ability to publish in their own journal, but they must not exploit their position. The journal must have a procedure for handling submissions from the editor or members of the editorial board that ensures that peer review is handled independently of the author/editor. This process should be detailed once the paper is published (see: <http://www.wame.org/wame-listserve-discussions/should-editors-publish-in-their-own-journal>)

10. Editorial independence / relation with publisher / journal owner (eg academic/professional society)

The relationship of editors to publishers and journal owners is often complex but should always be based on the principle of editorial independence. Notwithstanding the economic and political realities of their journals, editors should select submissions on the basis of their quality and suitability for readers rather than for immediate financial, political or personal gain. (see COPE's Guidelines for the Board of Directors of Learned Society Journals).

Given the complexity of the relationship, all editors should have a written contract, setting out the terms of their appointment. Be prepared to negotiate with the publisher / journal owner to ensure the contract is in line with the COPE Code of Conduct and acceptable to you. Make sure you understand the procedures for handling grievances or disagreements (even though you will hope never to have to use them). If there are no written procedures, try to develop these in conjunction with the publisher/owner.

11. Commercial issues (eg advertising, commercial supplements, tendering process)

If your journal carries advertising or publishes sponsored supplements you should ensure there are declared policies and accessible guidance on these to maintain the quality of the journal and to ensure commercial considerations do not affect editorial decisions.

Editors may be involved in tendering for commercial services (such as printing or selecting a publisher). Journals should have fair and transparent processes for handling such decisions. Individuals involved with such decisions should declare any competing interests and, if these are major, should withdraw from the process.

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12. Responding to possible misconduct / inappropriate behaviour and dealing with complaints

The COPE Code of Conduct states that editors have a responsibility for pursuing cases of suspected misconduct even in submissions they do not intend to publish. It is important that editors act politely, fairly but firmly at all times. The COPE flowcharts show recommended actions and this usually starts with contacting the author or reviewer to ask for an explanation. Such letters can be difficult to write: they should not accuse authors or reviewers, but rather should state the facts clearly, giving any evidence, and allow authors or reviewers a chance to explain their actions before coming to a decision. COPE has prepared sample letters to help editors and these can be adapted as required.

If you have concerns about plagiarism, data fabrication, or an authorship dispute you should (if possible) involve other editors (preferably the one who was involved directly in dealing with the manuscript) and inform the publisher. You may wish to consult the cases discussed at the COPE forum as well as the flowcharts. It is essential to handle serious cases appropriately because they may have important implications for the individuals involved and may even have legal and financial implications for your journal. (See: Further Reading and Resources)

Editors should always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed. COPE has produced guidance on retractions. Prompt retraction of a seriously flawed article should not be viewed as an admission of failure on the part of the journal but as a responsible action to safeguard the academic record.

Journals should have a published mechanism about how complaints and appeals are handled.

Journals should have a process for considering authors' appeals against editorial decisions. They should also have a published process for handling complaints (eg about journal processes). It can be helpful to appoint an independent ombudsman to advise on complaints that cannot be resolved internally [See: <http://publicationethics.org/annualreport/ombudsmansreports>]

Further Reading

UK Government Office of Research Integrity: <http://www.ukrio.org/home/>

US Government Office of Research Integrity: <http://ori.dhhs.gov/>

European Association for Chemical and Molecular Sciences, Ethical Guidelines for Publication in Journals and Reviews: http://www.euchems.org/binaries/Ethicalguidelines_tcm23-54057.pdf

American Physical Society: <http://www.aps.org/programs/education/ethics/resources.cfm>

Royal Society of Chemistry Ethical guidelines:
<http://www.rsc.org/Publishing/Journals/guidelines/EthicalGuidelines/EthicalGuidelinesandConflictofInterest/index.asp>

American Society of Plant Biologists: <http://www.aspb.org/publications/ethics.cfm>

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International Academy of Nursing Editors: <http://www.nursingeditors-inane.org/resources.html>

Author guidelines:

How to handle authorship disputes: a guide for new researchers: <http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/2003pdf12.pdf>

An “author” is generally considered to be someone who has made substantive intellectual contributions to a published study, and biomedical authorship continues to have important academic, social, and financial implications. http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html

The World Association of Medical Editors has provided a statement on conflict of interest. <http://www.wame.org/conflict-of-interest-in-peer-reviewed-medical-journals>

The American Chemical Society has provided the following guidance for authors: http://pubs.acs.org/userimages/ContentEditor/1285231362937/jpa_user_guide.pdf

American Society of Plant Biologists: <http://www.aspb.org/publications/coi.cfm>

Royal Society Publishing: <http://royalsocietypublishing.org/site/authors/policy.xhtml#>

Best practice for journals:

International Mathematical Union’s Statement on Best Practices for Journals: <http://www.mathunion.org/fileadmin/CEIC/bestpractice/bpfinal.pdf>

CEIC Best Current Practices: http://www.mathunion.org/ceic/Publications/Recommendations/3_best_practices.shtml

Legal and financial implications:

Sox HC, Rennie D. Research misconduct, retraction, and cleansing the medical literature: lessons from the Poehlman case. *Ann Intern Med.* 2006 Apr 18;144(8):609-13. Epub 2006 Mar 6. PubMed PMID: 16522625. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16522625>

Kennedy D. Editorial expression of concern. *Science.* 2006 Jan 6;311(5757):36. Epub 2005 Dec 22. PubMed PMID: 16373531: <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/311/5757/36.2.long>

Blog post: Liz Wager on 21 January 2011:

Researcher banned for 10 years The American Society for Microbiology, having retracted several papers by a Japanese researcher because of image manipulation, has issued a 10-year ban on the author from publishing in any of its journals, according to Retraction Watch and Science

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Feedback

Comments are welcomed and the guide's content will be reviewed every six months. Please send comments to the COPE Operations Manager via <http://publicationethics.org/contact-us>

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on behalf of COPE Council