

Ethical Guidelines for Journal Publication

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Introduction

The formal component of the scholarly communication system, that is to say the publication of an article in a peer reviewed learned journal, serves many purposes outside of simple communication. It is a building block in the development of a coherent and respected network of knowledge. It is prima facie evidence for the quality and impact of the research work of its authors and by extension the institutions that support them. It supports, and is itself an example, of the scientific method. For all these reasons and more, it is important to lay down standards of expected ethical behaviour by all parties involved in the act of publishing: the author, the journal editor, the peer reviewer, the publisher and the society for society-owned or sponsored journals.

These guidelines are designed specifically for primary research journals, but may also be relevant for review and other professional publications as well. Individual journals will often have more elaborate or more distinct ethical procedures, generally reflected in their Guide for Authors, and many journals also accept and are in many cases founding participants with respect to discipline-specific standards or standard-setting bodies, such as the International Council of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) [1] and Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) [2].

Duties of the Publisher

These guidelines have been written with all these requirements in mind but especially recognising that it is an important role of the publisher to support the huge efforts made by journal editors, and the often unsung volunteer work undertaken by peer reviewers, in maintaining the integrity of the scholarly record. Although ethical codes inevitably concentrate on the infractions that sometimes occur, it is a tribute to scholarly practice that the system works so well and that problems are comparatively rare. The publisher has a supporting, investing and nurturing role in the scholarly communication process but is also ultimately responsible for ensuring that best practice is followed in its publications [3,4].

Elsevier, as the world's leading journal publisher, takes its duties of guardianship over the scholarly record extremely seriously. Our journals record "the minutes of science" and we recognise our responsibilities as the keeper of those "minutes" in all our policies [5], not least the ethical guidelines that we have adopted here.

Elsevier is adopting these policies and procedures to support editors, reviewers and authors in performing their ethical duties under these guidelines. We work with other publishers and industry associations to set standards for best practices on ethical matters, errors and retractions. We are committed to ensuring that the potential for advertising, reprint or other commercial revenue has no impact or influence on editorial decisions [6].

We promote best practice by offering editors membership of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and providing editors with Crossref Similarity Check reports for all submissions to our editorial systems. We support editors in communications with other journals and/or publishers where this is useful to editors and are prepared to provide specialised legal review and counsel if necessary. We also provide extensive education and advice on publishing ethics standards, particularly for early career researchers [7].

Duties of Editors

Publication Decisions

The editor of a learned journal is solely and independently responsible for deciding which of the articles submitted to the journal should be published, often working in conjunction with the relevant society (for society-owned or sponsored journals) [4,6]. The validation of the work in question and its importance to researchers and readers must always underwrite such decisions. The editor may be guided by the policies of the journal's editorial board and constrained by such legal requirements as shall then be in force regarding issues such as libel, copyright infringement and plagiarism. The editor may confer with other editors or reviewers (or society officers) in making these decisions.

Peer Review

The editor shall ensure that the peer review process is fair, unbiased, and timely. Research articles must typically be reviewed by at least two external and independent reviewers, and where necessary the editor should seek additional opinions.

The editor shall select reviewers who have suitable expertise in the relevant field and shall follow best practice in avoiding the selection of fraudulent peer reviewers [8]. The editor shall review all disclosures of potential conflicts of interest and suggestions for self-citation made by reviewers in order to determine whether there is any potential for bias.

Fair Play

The editor should evaluate manuscripts for their intellectual content without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, ethnic origin, citizenship, or political philosophy of the authors.

The editorial policies of the journal should encourage transparency and complete, honest reporting, and the editor should ensure that peer reviewers and authors have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. The editor shall use the journal's standard electronic submission system for all journal communications.

The editor shall establish, along with the publisher, a transparent mechanism for appeal against editorial decisions.

Journal Metrics

The editor must not attempt to influence the journal's ranking by artificially increasing any journal metric. In particular, the editor shall not require that references to that (or any other) journal's articles be included except for genuine scholarly reasons and authors should not be required to include references to the editor's own articles or products and services in which the editor has an interest.

Confidentiality

The editor must protect the confidentiality of all material submitted to the journal and all communications with reviewers, unless otherwise agreed with the relevant authors and reviewers. In exceptional circumstances and in consultation with the publisher, the editor may share limited information with editors of other journals where deemed necessary to investigate suspected research misconduct [9].

Unless the journal is operating an open peer-review system and/or reviewers have agreed to disclose their names, the editor must protect reviewers' identities.

Unpublished materials disclosed in a submitted manuscript must not be used in an editor's own research without the express written consent of the author. Privileged information or ideas obtained through peer review must be kept confidential and not used for personal advantage.

Competing Interests

Any potential editorial conflicts of interest should be declared to the publisher in writing prior to the appointment of the editor, and then updated if and when new conflicts arise. The publisher may publish such declarations in the journal.

The editor must not be involved in decisions about papers which s/he has written him/herself or have been written by family members or colleagues or which relate to products or services in which the editor has an interest. Further, any such submission must be subject to all of the journal's usual procedures, peer review must be handled independently of the relevant author/editor and their research groups, and there must be a clear statement to this effect on any such paper that is published [10].

The editor shall apply Elsevier's policy relating to the disclosure of potential conflicts of interest by authors and reviewers, e.g. the ICMJE guidelines [1].

Vigilance over Published Record

The editor should work to safeguard the integrity of the published record by reviewing and assessing reported or suspected misconduct (research, publication, reviewer and editorial), in conjunction with the publisher (or society).

Such measures will generally include contacting the author of the manuscript or paper and giving due consideration to the respective complaint or claims made, but may also include further communications to the relevant institutions and research bodies. The editor shall further make appropriate use of the publisher's systems for the detection of misconduct, such as plagiarism.

An editor presented with convincing evidence of misconduct should coordinate with the publisher (and/or society) to arrange the prompt publication of a correction, retraction, expression of concern, or other correction to the record, as may be relevant [10].

Duties of Reviewers

Contribution to Editorial Decisions

Peer review assists the editor in making editorial decisions and through the editorial communications with the author may also assist the author in improving the paper. Peer review is an essential component of formal scholarly communication, and lies at the heart of the scientific method. In addition to the specific ethics-related duties described below, reviewers are asked generally to treat authors and their work as they would like to be treated themselves and to observe good reviewing etiquette.

Any selected referee who feels unqualified to review the research reported in a manuscript or knows that its prompt review will be impossible should notify the editor and decline to participate in the review process.

Confidentiality

Any manuscripts received for review must be treated as confidential documents. Reviewers must not share the review or information about the paper with anyone or contact the authors directly without permission from the editor.

Some editors encourage discussion with colleagues or co-reviewing exercises, but reviewers should first discuss this with the editor in order to ensure that confidentiality is observed and that participants receive suitable credit.

Unpublished materials disclosed in a submitted manuscript must not be used in a reviewer's own research without the express written consent of the author. Privileged information or ideas obtained through peer review must be kept confidential and not used for personal advantage.

Ethical Issues

A reviewer should be alert to potential ethical issues in the paper and should bring these to the attention of the editor, including any substantial similarity or overlap between the manuscript under consideration and any other published paper of which the reviewer has personal knowledge. Any statement that an observation, derivation, or argument had been previously reported should be accompanied by the relevant citation.

Standards of Objectivity and Conflict of Interest

Reviews should be conducted objectively. Reviewers should be aware of any personal bias they may have and take this into account when reviewing a paper. Personal criticism of the author is inappropriate. Referees should express their views clearly with supporting arguments.

Reviewers should consult the Editor before agreeing to review a paper where they have potential conflicts of interest resulting from competitive, collaborative, or other relationships or connections with any of the authors, companies, or institutions connected to the papers.

If a reviewer suggests that an author includes citations to the reviewer's (or their associates') work, this must be for genuine scientific reasons and not with the intention of increasing the reviewer's citation count or enhancing the visibility of their work (or that of their associates).

Duties of Authors

Reporting Standards

Authors of reports of original research should present an accurate account of the work performed as well as an objective discussion of its significance. Underlying data should be represented accurately in the paper. A paper should contain sufficient detail and references to permit others to replicate the work. Fraudulent or knowingly inaccurate statements constitute unethical behaviour and are unacceptable.

Review and professional publication articles should also be accurate and objective, and editorial 'opinion' works should be clearly identified as such.

Data Access and Retention

Authors may be asked to provide the research data supporting their paper for editorial review and/or to comply with the open data requirements of the journal. Authors should be prepared to provide public access to such data, if practicable, and should be prepared to retain such data for a reasonable number of years after publication. Authors may refer to their journal's Guide for Authors for further details.

Originality and Acknowledgement of Sources

The authors should ensure that they have written entirely original works, and if the authors have used the work and/or words of others, that this has been appropriately cited or quoted and permission has been obtained where necessary.

Proper acknowledgment of the work of others must always be given. Authors should cite publications that have influenced the reported work and that give the work appropriate context within the larger scholarly record. Information obtained privately, as in conversation, correspondence, or discussion with third parties, must not be used or reported without explicit, written permission from the source.

Plagiarism takes many forms, from 'passing off' another's paper as the author's own paper, to copying or paraphrasing substantial parts of another's paper (without attribution), to claiming results from research conducted by others. Plagiarism in all its forms constitutes unethical behaviour and is unacceptable.

Multiple, Redundant or Concurrent Publication

An author should not in general publish manuscripts describing essentially the same research in more than one journal of primary publication. Submitting the same manuscript to more than one journal concurrently constitutes unethical behaviour and is unacceptable.

In general, an author should not submit for consideration in another journal a paper that has been published previously, except in the form of an abstract or as part of a published lecture or academic thesis or as an electronic preprint.

Publication of some kinds of articles (e.g. clinical guidelines, translations) in more than one journal is sometimes justifiable, provided certain conditions are met. The authors and editors of the journals concerned must agree to the secondary publication, which must reflect the same data and interpretation of the primary document. The primary reference must be cited in the secondary publication. Further detail on acceptable forms of secondary publication can be found from the ICMJE [1].

Confidentiality

Information obtained in the course of confidential services, such as refereeing manuscripts or grant applications, must not be used without the explicit written permission of the author of the work involved in these services.

Authorship of the Paper

Authorship should be limited to those who have made a significant contribution to the conception, design, execution, or interpretation of the reported study. All those who have made substantial contributions should be listed as co-authors.

Where there are others who have participated in certain substantive aspects of the paper (e.g. language editing or medical writing), they should be recognised in the acknowledgements section.

The corresponding author should ensure that all appropriate co-authors and no inappropriate co-authors are included on the paper, and that all co-authors have seen and approved the final version of the paper and have agreed to its submission for publication.

Authors are expected to consider carefully the list and order of authors before submitting their manuscript and provide the definitive list of authors at the time of the original submission. Only in exceptional circumstances will the Editor consider (at their discretion) the addition, deletion or rearrangement of authors after the manuscript has been submitted and the author must clearly flag any such request to the Editor. All authors must agree with any such addition, removal or rearrangement.

Authors take collective responsibility for the work. Each individual author is accountable for ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Individual journals may have particular definitions of authorship (e.g. medical journals may follow the ICMJE definition of authorship [1]), and authors should ensure that they comply with the policies of the relevant journal.

Hazards and Human/Animal Subjects

If the work involves chemicals, procedures or equipment that have any unusual hazards inherent in their use, the author must clearly identify these in the manuscript.

If the work involves the use of animal or human subjects, the author should ensure that the manuscript contains a statement that all procedures were performed in compliance with relevant laws and institutional guidelines and that the appropriate institutional committee(s) have approved them. Authors should include a statement in the manuscript that informed consent was obtained for experimentation with human subjects. The privacy rights of human subjects must always be observed.

For human subjects, the author should ensure that the work described has been carried out in accordance with The Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki) for experiments involving humans [11]. All animal experiments should comply with the ARRIVE guidelines [12] and should be carried out in accordance with the U.K. Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 and associated guidelines [13], or EU Directive 2010/63/EU on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes [14], or the U.S. Public Health Service Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals and, as applicable, the Animal Welfare Act [15].

Appropriate consents, permissions and releases must be obtained where an author wishes to include case details or other personal information or images of patients and any other individuals in an Elsevier publication. Written consents must be retained by the author and copies of the consents or evidence that such consents have been obtained must be provided to Elsevier on request [16].

Competing Interests

WAME define conflict of interest as “a divergence between an individual’s private interests (competing interests) and his or her responsibilities to scientific and publishing activities, such that a reasonable observer might wonder if the individual’s behavior or judgment was motivated by considerations of his or her competing interests” [17]. All authors should disclose in their manuscript any financial and personal relationships with other people or organisations that could be viewed as inappropriately influencing (bias) their work.

All sources of financial support for the conduct of the research and/or preparation of the article should be disclosed, as should the role of the sponsor(s), if any, in study design; in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data; in the writing of the report; and in the decision to submit the article for publication. If the funding source(s) had no such involvement then this should be stated.

Examples of potential conflicts of interest which should be disclosed include employment, consultancies, stock ownership, honoraria, paid expert testimony, patent applications/registrations, and grants or other funding. Potential conflicts of interest should be disclosed at the earliest possible stage [17].

Fundamental Errors in Published Works

When an author discovers a significant error or inaccuracy in their own published work, it is the author's obligation to promptly notify the journal editor or publisher and cooperate with the editor to retract or correct the paper if deemed necessary by the editor. If the editor or the publisher learn from a third party that a published work contains an error, it is the obligation of the author to cooperate with the editor, including providing evidence to the editor where requested.

Image Integrity

It is not acceptable to enhance, obscure, move, remove, or introduce a specific feature within an image [18]. Adjustments of brightness, contrast, or color balance are acceptable if and as long as they do not obscure or eliminate any information present in the original. Manipulating images for improved clarity is accepted, but manipulation for other purposes could be seen as scientific ethical abuse and will be dealt with accordingly [18].

Authors should comply with any specific policy for graphical images applied by the relevant journal, e.g. providing the original images as supplementary material with the article, or depositing these in a suitable repository.

Clinical Trial Transparency

Elsevier supports clinical trial transparency. For relevant journals, authors are expected to conform to industry best standards in clinical trial registration and presentation, for example the CONSORT guidelines, as further set out in the policies of the relevant journal [1,2].

References

- [1] ICMJE Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals
<http://www.icmje.org/>
- [2] CONSORT standards for randomized trials <http://www.consort-statement.org/>
- [3] The STM trade Association International Ethical Principles for Scholarly Publication
http://www.stm-assoc.org/2013_05_21_STM_Ethical_Principles_for_Scholarly_Publication.pdf
- [4] COPE Codes of Conduct <https://publicationethics.org/resources/code-conduct>
- [5] Elsevier policy on the permanence of the scientific record:
<https://www.elsevier.com/about/our-business/policies/article-withdrawal>
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- [8] World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) Best Practice <http://www.wame.org/about/policy-statements#Best Practices for Peer Reviewer Selection>
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http://publicationethics.org/files/Sharing%20of_Information_Among_EiCs_guidelines_web_version_o.pdf
- [10] Elsevier's Publishing Ethics Resource Kit for Editors <https://www.elsevier.com/editors/perk>
- [11] World Medical Association (WMA) Helsinki Declaration for Medical Research in Human Subject
<https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects>
- [12] Animal Research: Reporting of *In Vivo* Experiments (ARRIVE) Guidelines
<https://www.nc3rs.org.uk/arrive-guidelines>

[13] the U.K. Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/308593/ConsolidatedASPA1an2013.pdf

[14] EU Directive 2010/63/EU for animal experiments
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[15] U.S. Public Health Service Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals
<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/olaw/references/phspolicylabanimals.pdf>

[16] Elsevier policy on patient consent: <https://www.elsevier.com/about/company-information/policies/patient-consent>

[17] WAME Editorial statement on COI <http://www.wame.org/about/conflict-of-interest-in-peer-reviewed-medical>

[18] Rossner and Yamada, 2004. *The Journal of Cell Biology*, 166, 11-15.
<http://jcb.rupress.org/content/166/1/11.full>