

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 organizations.

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 to assess current practice using the **COPE Audit** (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/audit>). This tool is designed to help editors identify areas of their journal's policy, processes or practice that may require attention or may need to be revised so that they adhere to **COPE's Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines** (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/code-conduct>). 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 consultation with those who are most familiar with the journal's abilities and constraints; i.e., the publisher and journal manager. If you identify any substantive issues in need of change, be aware that it may take a considerable time to alter the journal's practices.

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2. Relations with the outgoing editor

Ideally there should be a handover period with the new and old editor working together. The duration of this period should be established in agreement with the publisher. This should allow the outgoing editor to complete submissions they started dealing with. You 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. Your appointment as a new editor offers 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. We recommend that you contact your board members and discuss your expectations of them (e.g., reviewing a certain number of manuscripts each year). Based on their response you may find that you wish to add new editorial board members, ask existing editorial board members to step down, and/or 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 on these changes.

You may also wish to change the direction of the journal or redefine its scope. 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 on and clearly published in whatever medium the journal uses to communicate with authors, reviewers, and editors.

4. Relations with authors

We also recommend that you review the journal's instructions to authors to ensure they are up to date with current guidelines. These instructions should clearly state what is expected of authors and what the journal will do in cases of suspected misconduct such as plagiarism or data fabrication. You may wish to provide a link to the **COPE flowcharts** (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts>) and **Retraction Guidelines** (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/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.

As the editor, you are responsible for everything published in your journal, and you should therefore take all reasonable steps to ensure the quality of this material, recognizing that journals and sections within journals will have different aims and standards.

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

Work with the journal publisher/editorial office to determine 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 (e.g., 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 that all elements are complete before a manuscript will be sent for peer review (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 what each author contributed to the paper (see below)
- Funding information
- Competing interests declaration
- Permission obtained for use of copyrighted material from other sources (including the Web)
- Documentation for any citations to unpublished work (e.g., articles in press/personal communications)
- Information about previous submissions to other journals (e.g., 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.

Journals should adopt and promote an authorship policy that is appropriate to the field of research. Your procedures should encourage appropriate authorship attribution and discourage guest and ghost authorships. These 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 (e.g., 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 randomized controlled trials registration number of the trial and the name of the trial registry
- Details of approval and ethical conduct 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. You should determine a process for handling submitted manuscripts relating to such studies that do not satisfy your journal's normal requirement for independent ethical approval. Guidance is available from COPE (***Guidance for Editors: Research, Audit and Service Evaluations***: <http://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines>).

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

Be sure to provide guidance to reviewers on everything that is expected of them. Guidelines are available from COPE (***COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers***. <http://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines>). This guidance should be regularly updated and as applicable, should refer or link to the ***COPE Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines*** (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/code-conduct>). You should consider including the following points:

- 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 a competing 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 may not discuss unpublished manuscripts with colleagues or use the information in their own work
- Any reviewer that wants to pass a review request onto a colleague must 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.

You should also have systems in place to ensure that peer reviewers' identities are protected — unless your journal has 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 plagiarized another publication?
- Is the research ethical and have the appropriate approvals/consent been obtained?
- Is there any indication that the data have been fabricated or inappropriately manipulated?
- Have the authors declared all relevant competing interests?

8. The peer-review process

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

You should have systems to ensure that material submitted to your journal remain confidential while under review.

Additionally, you should 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?

While you should not be denied the ability to publish in your own journal, you must take extra precautions not to exploit your position or to create an impression of impropriety. Your journal must have a procedure for handling submissions from editors or members of the editorial board that will ensure that the peer review is handled independently of the author/editor. We also recommend that you describe the process in a commentary or similar note once the paper is published (see: <http://publicationethics.org/case/editor-author-own-journal>).

10. Editorial independence/relation with publisher/journal owner (e.g., 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 your journals, you 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**: <http://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines>).

Given the complexity of the relationship, we recommend that you make sure that the terms of your appointment are spelled out in a signed, written agreement. 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 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 (e.g., advertizing, commercial supplements, tendering process)

If your journal carries advertizing 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 that commercial considerations do not affect editorial decisions.

As editor, you may also be involved in tendering for commercial services (such as printing or selecting a publisher). Your journal 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.

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 you act politely, fairly but firmly at all times. Ensure that you have procedures in place for addressing and responding to complaints, including anonymous complaints. In addressing such issues, you may want to look to COPE's discussion documents for guidance (e.g., <http://publicationethics.org/resources/discussion-documents>)

COPE's flowcharts (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts>) on handling complaints offer 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** (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/sample-letters>) to help you, 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 and other guidance:

<http://publicationethics.org/cases>
<http://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts>
<http://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines>

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).

You should always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions, and apologies when needed. COPE has produced **guidance on retractions** (<http://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines>). 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.

Be sure that your journal adopts and publishes its procedures for considering authors' appeals against editorial decisions and for handling complaints (e.g., about journal processes). It can be helpful to appoint an independent ombudsman to advise on complaints that cannot be resolved internally.

12. Closing remarks

Enjoy being an editor! It is a lot of work but tremendously exciting. Make sure you keep up to date with new developments—come to the COPE forum if you are a member, sign up for conferences in editing, join editorial associations such as European Association for Science Editors (EASE), Council of Science Editors (CSE), or as appropriate to your speciality, and make contact with fellow editors. Make sure you follow discussions on new publishing models, new models of peer review, and changing practices, and be continuously thinking about ways your journal might develop.

Further reading

1. UK Government Office of Research Integrity: <http://www.ukrio.org/home/>
2. US Government Office of Research Integrity: <http://ori.dhhs.gov/>
3. European Association for Chemical and Molecular Sciences, Ethical Guidelines for Publication in Journals and Reviews:
http://www.euchems.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Ethicalguidelines_tcm23-54057.pdf
4. American Physical Society:
<http://www.aps.org/programs/education/ethics/resources.cfm>
5. Royal Society of Chemistry Ethical guidelines:
<http://www.rsc.org/Publishing/Journals/guidelines/EthicalGuidelines/EthicalGuidelinesandConflictofInterest/index.asp>
6. American Society of Plant Biologists: <http://www.aspb.org/publications/ethics.cfm>
7. International Academy of Nursing Editors:
<http://www.nursingeditors-inane.org/resources.html>
8. Council of Science Editors:
<http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/white-paper-on-publication-ethics/>
9. European Association for Science Editors: <http://www.ease.org.uk/>

Author guidelines:

1. How to handle authorship disputes: a guide for new researchers:
<http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/2003pdf12.pdf>
2. 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/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html> <http://www.wame.org/about/wame-editorial-on-coi>
3. The World Association of Medical Editors has provided a statement on conflict of interest: <http://www.wame.org/about/wame-editorial-on-coi>
4. The American Chemical Society has provided the following guidance for authors:
http://pubs.acs.org/userimages/ContentEditor/1285231362937/jpa_user_guide.pdf

5. American Society of Plant Biologists: <http://www.aspb.org/publications/coi.cfm>
6. Royal Society Publishing: <http://royalsocietypublishing.org/site/authors/policy.xhtml#>

Best practice for journals:

7. International Mathematical Union's Statement on Best Practices for Journals: <http://www.mathunion.org/fileadmin/CEIC/bestpractice/bpfinal.pdf>
8. CEIC Best Current Practices: http://www.mathunion.org/ceic/Publications/Recommendations/3_best_practices.shtml
9. 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>
10. 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>
11. 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 <http://publicationethics.org/blogs/researcher-banned-10-years>

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