

COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

*Irene Hames on behalf of COPE Council
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Peer review in all its forms plays an important role in ensuring the integrity of the scholarly record. The process depends to a large extent on trust, and requires that everyone involved behaves responsibly and ethically. Peer reviewers play a central and critical part in the peer-review process, but too often come to the role without any guidance and may be unaware of their ethical obligations. The COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers set out the basic principles and standards to which all peer reviewers should adhere during the peer-review process. It is hoped they will provide helpful guidance to researchers, be a reference for journals and editors in guiding their reviewers, and act as an educational resource for institutions in training their students and researchers.

Basic principles to which peer reviewers should adhere

Peer reviewers should:

- only agree to review manuscripts for which they have the subject expertise required to carry out a proper assessment and which they can assess in a timely manner
- respect the confidentiality of peer review and not reveal any details of a manuscript or its review, during or after the peer-review process, beyond those that are released by the journal
- not use information obtained during the peer-review process for their own or any other person's or organization's advantage, or to disadvantage or discredit others
- declare all potential conflicting interests, seeking advice from the journal if they are unsure whether something constitutes a relevant interest
- not allow their reviews to be influenced by the origins of a manuscript, by the nationality, religious or political beliefs, gender or other characteristics of the authors, or by commercial considerations
- be objective and constructive in their reviews, refraining from being hostile or inflammatory and from making libellous or derogatory personal comments
- acknowledge that peer review is largely a reciprocal endeavour and undertake to carry out their fair share of reviewing and in a timely manner
- provide journals with personal and professional information that is accurate and a true representation of their expertise
- recognize that impersonation of another individual during the review process is considered serious misconduct

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Expectations during the peer-review process

On being approached to review

Peer reviewers should:

- respond in a reasonable time-frame, especially if they cannot do the review, and without intentional delay.
- declare if they do not have the subject expertise required to carry out the review or if they are able to assess only part of the manuscript, outlining clearly the areas for which they have the relevant expertise.
- only agree to review a manuscript if they are fairly confident they can return a review within the proposed or mutually agreed time-frame, informing the journal promptly if they require an extension.
- declare any potentially conflicting or competing interests (which may, for example, be personal, financial, intellectual, professional, political or religious), seeking advice from the journal if they are unsure whether something constitutes a relevant interest.
- follow journals' policies on situations they consider to represent a conflict to reviewing. If no guidance is provided, they should inform the journal if: they work at the same institution as any of the authors (or will be joining that institution or are applying for a job there); they are or have been recent (e.g. within the past 3 years) mentors, mentees, close collaborators or joint grant holders; they have a close personal relationship with any of the authors.
- review afresh any manuscript they have previously reviewed for another journal as it may have changed between the two submissions and the journals' criteria for evaluation and acceptance may be different.
- ensure suggestions for alternative reviewers are based on suitability and not influenced by personal considerations or made with the intention of the manuscript receiving a specific outcome (either positive or negative).
- not agree to review a manuscript just to gain sight of it with no intention of submitting a review.
- decline to review if they feel unable to provide a fair and unbiased review.
- decline to review if they have been involved with any of the work in the manuscript or its reporting.
- decline to review if asked to review a manuscript that is very similar to one they have in preparation or under consideration at another journal.
- decline to review if they have issues with the peer-review model used by a journal (e.g. it uses open review and releases the reviewers' names to the authors) that would either affect their review or cause it to be invalidated because of their inability to comply with the journal's review policies.

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During review

Peer reviewers should:

- **notify the journal immediately and seek advice if they discover either a conflicting interest that wasn't apparent when they agreed to the review or anything that might prevent them providing a fair and unbiased review.**
- **refrain from looking at the manuscript and associated material while awaiting instructions from a journal on issues that might cause the request to review to be rescinded.**
- **read the manuscript, ancillary material (e.g. reviewer instructions, required ethics and policy statements, supplemental data files) and journal instructions thoroughly, getting back to the journal if anything is not clear and requesting any missing or incomplete items they need to carry out a full review.**
- **notify the journal as soon as possible if they find they do not have the expertise to assess all aspects of the manuscript; they shouldn't wait until submitting their review as this will unduly delay the review process.**
- **not involve anyone else in the review of a manuscript, including junior researchers they are mentoring, without first obtaining permission from the journal; the names of any individuals who have helped them with the review should be included with the returned review so that they are associated with the manuscript in the journal's records and can also receive due credit for their efforts.**
- **keep all manuscript and review details confidential.**
- **contact the journal if circumstances arise that will prevent them from submitting a timely review, providing an accurate estimate of the time they will need to do a review if still asked to do so.**
- **in the case of double-blind review, if they suspect the identity of the author(s) notify the journal if this knowledge raises any potential conflict of interest.**
- **notify the journal immediately if they come across any irregularities, have concerns about ethical aspects of the work, are aware of substantial similarity between the manuscript and a concurrent submission to another journal or a published article, or suspect that misconduct may have occurred during either the research or the writing and submission of the manuscript; reviewers should, however, keep their concerns confidential and not personally investigate further unless the journal asks for further information or advice.**
- **not intentionally prolong the review process, either by delaying the submission of their review or by requesting unnecessary additional information from the journal or author.**

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- ensure their review is based on the merits of the work and not influenced, either positively or negatively, by any personal, financial, or other conflicting considerations or by intellectual biases.
- not contact the authors directly without the permission of the journal.

When preparing the report

Peer reviewers should:

- bear in mind that the editor is looking to them for subject knowledge, good judgement, and an honest and fair assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the work and the manuscript.
- make clear at the start of their review if they have been asked to address only specific parts or aspects of a manuscript and indicate which these are.
- follow journals' instructions on the specific feedback that is required of them and, unless there are good reasons not to, the way this should be organized.
- be objective and constructive in their reviews and provide feedback that will help the authors to improve their manuscript.
- not make derogatory personal comments or unfounded accusations.
- be specific in their criticisms, and provide evidence with appropriate references to substantiate general statements such as, 'this work has been done before', to help editors in their evaluation and decision and in fairness to the authors.
- remember it is the authors' paper and not attempt to rewrite it to their own preferred style if it is basically sound and clear; suggestions for changes that improve clarity are, however, important.
- be aware of the sensitivities surrounding language issues that are due to the authors writing in a language that is not their own, and phrase the feedback appropriately and with due respect.
- make clear which suggested additional investigations are essential to support claims made in the manuscript under consideration and which will just strengthen or extend the work.
- not prepare their report in such a way or include comments that suggest the review has been done by another person.
- not prepare their report in a way that reflects badly or unfairly on another person.

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- **not make unfair negative comments or include unjustified criticisms of any competitors' work that is mentioned in the manuscript.**
- **ensure their comments and recommendations for the editor are consistent with their report for the authors; most feedback should be put in the report for the authors.**
- **confidential comments to the editor should not be a place for denigration or false accusation, done in the knowledge that the authors will not see these comments.**
- **not suggest that authors include citations to the reviewer's (or their associates') work merely to increase the reviewer's (or their associates') citation count or to enhance the visibility of their or their associates' work; suggestions must be based on valid academic or technological reasons.**
- **determine whether the journal allows them to sign their reviews and, if it does, decide as they feel comfortable doing.**
- **if they are the editor handling a manuscript and decide themselves to provide a review of that manuscript, do this transparently and not under the guise of an anonymous review if the journal operates blind review; providing a review for a manuscript being handled by another editor at the journal can be treated as any other review.**

Expectations post review

Peer reviewers should:

- **continue to keep details of the manuscript and its review confidential.**
- **respond promptly if contacted by a journal about matters related to their review of a manuscript and provide the information required.**
- **contact the journal if anything relevant comes to light after they have submitted their review that might affect their original feedback and recommendations.**
- **read the reviews from the other reviewers, if these are provided by the journal, to improve their own understanding of the topic or the decision reached.**
- **try to accommodate requests from journals to review revisions or resubmissions of manuscripts they have reviewed.**