

DRAFT

COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

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 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.

Basic principles to which peer reviewers should adhere

Peer reviewers should:

- 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
- only agree to review manuscripts for which they have the subject expertise required to carry out a proper assessment and which they can assess within a reasonable time-frame
- declare all potential conflicting interests, seeking advice from the journal if they are unsure whether something constitutes a relevant conflict
- not allow their reviews to be influenced by the origins of a manuscript, by the nationality, religion, 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, in a timely manner
- provide personal and professional information that is accurate and a true representation of their expertise when creating or updating journal accounts

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Expectations during the peer-review process

On being approached to review

Peer reviewers should:

- respond without unnecessary or intentional delay
- decline to review if they feel unable to provide a fair and unbiased review
- 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 time-frame
- 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)
- 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 conflict
- follow journals' policies on exclusions to review
- if no guidance on exclusions is provided, generally not agree to review if any of the authors work in the same department as the reviewer, are at the same institution (or if the reviewer is expecting to go or applying for a job there), or are or have been recent mentors, mentees, close collaborators or joint grant holders
- declare if they have been involved with the work in the manuscript or its reporting and provide details of their input
- declare if they have already reviewed the manuscript for another journal; if the editor would still like them to review it, and they feel comfortable doing this, they should review the manuscript afresh as it may have changed between the two submissions
- not agree to review a manuscript just to gain sight of it with no intention of submitting a review
- excuse themselves if asked to review a manuscript that is very similar to one they have in preparation or under consideration at another journal
- excuse themselves if they have issues with the peer-review model used by a journal that would either affect their review or cause it to be invalidated because of their inability to comply with the journal's review policies

During review

Peer reviewers should:

- notify the journal immediately and seek advice if they discover a conflict that wasn't apparent when they agreed to the review, or anything that might prevent them providing a fair and unbiased review
- not look 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 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
- not involve anyone else in the review of a manuscript without first obtaining permission from the journal

- keep all manuscript and review details confidential
- contact the journal if circumstances arise that will prevent them from submitting a timely review, and provide an accurate estimate of the time they will need to do a review if still asked to do so
- notify the journal if they become aware of the identity of the author(s) during double-blind review
- notify the journal immediately if they come across any irregularities, have concerns about ethical aspects of the work, 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 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
- 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
- ensure the names of any individuals who have (with the permission of the journal) helped them with the review are included with the returned review so that they are associated with manuscript in the journal's records and can also receive due credit for their efforts
- not contact the authors directly without the explicit 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 the way this should be organised; different journals require different things from their reviewers
- be objective and constructive in their reviews and 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
- 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
- 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; 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
- suggest that authors include citations to the reviewer's (or their associates') work only for legitimate reasons, not merely to increase the reviewer's (or their associates') citation count and to enhance the visibility of their or their associates' work

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- if they are the editor handling a manuscript and decide themselves to provide a review of that manuscript, do this transparently and not hide behind an anonymous review

Expectations post review

Peer reviewers should:

- 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 and the decision reached
- try to accommodate requests from journals to review revisions or resubmissions of manuscripts they have reviewed
