

# Handling Editor Guidelines

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# Editor's role and responsibilities

The role of an editor includes:

- Assessing manuscripts for their suitability for peer review, selecting suitable reviewers who meet your journal's requirements, and making editorial decisions on the basis of the peer-reviewers' reports and your own assessment.
- Providing assistance and advice on journal manuscript queries where appropriate.
- Advocating the journal to colleagues/peers and encouraging high quality submissions and highlighting the ethos, scope and aims of your journal.
- Writing occasional reviews or commentaries for your journal upon invitation.
- Providing feedback and suggesting improvements for your journal.
- Highlighting promotion- or discussion-worthy content in your journal.
- Adhering to standards of editorial good practice, as per your journal and publisher's editorial policies, and guidelines and best practice recommendations issued by organizations such as the [Committee of Publication Ethics](#) (COPE) and the [World Association of Medical Editors](#) (WAME).

## Handling peer-review

How to assess a new manuscript

**Is the manuscript within your area of expertise?**

If a manuscript does not fall within your area of expertise, you may need to ask for it to be reassigned to another editor if possible.

**Do you have a competing interest that prevents you from handling the manuscript?**

It is not just authors who may have competing interests. Editors and reviewers may also have competing interests. For an editor, a competing interest exists if their handling of a manuscript could be influenced by their relationship with the authors (e.g. if they have collaborated or competed with the authors) or by a personal or financial relationship with other people or organizations. If you have a competing interest with the manuscript or an author, ensure to declare this when first assigned as the manuscript may need to be reassigned to another editor.

**Is the manuscript within your journal's scope and of sufficient interest?**

If a manuscript is deemed as out of scope for your journal, or of not sufficient interest, you should reject it. If your publisher offers a transfer service, consider suggesting another journal as a service to authors.

**Is the manuscript sufficiently scientifically sound?**

- In your initial assessment, does it appear that the conclusions are supported by the data, appropriate methods and controls have been used, and any limitations are clearly stated?
- If not, please provide comments to the authors to support your decision to reject without peer review.
- If you feel that the manuscript could be revised to address your concerns then you can request that the authors revise before sending the manuscript for peer-review.

### **Does the manuscript adhere to the journal's editorial policies?**

All journals should have clearly stated editorial policies and aim to comply with the codes of conduct and policies laid down by [COPE](#) (Committee on Publication Ethics).

### **Do you perceive any ethical problems with the manuscript?**

- All manuscripts reporting research involving human subjects, human material, or human data must have an ethics statement stating that the study was performed in accordance with the [Declaration of Helsinki](#) and that it was approved by an appropriate ethics committee. The statement should include the name of the ethics committee and the reference number where appropriate.

In some cases, a study may be exempt, in which case the manuscript must state that they have been declared exempt and name the board that approved this.

NB Ethical review boards should be the local board for the study, existing in the country in which the study was held (i.e. not the institution/country of the author, if this is different).

### **Does the manuscript include consent if any data relating to individual patients is included?**

- It is not suitable to proceed to peer-review if any individual data is included and consent to publish has not been obtained. For research articles, if authors cannot obtain consent to publish individual data then they should be asked to provide summary results. Informed patient consent for participation in a study is required for any prospective study, including observational studies. There may be cases where the ethics committee has waived the need for consent. In such cases you may wish to ask for proof of the waiver from the ethics committee.
- Written informed consent is required for publication of potentially identifiable patient details, images or videos. We recommend that consent to publish is obtained for all manuscripts where three or more indirect identifiers are included for a specific participant and for all photos and videos. Covering the eyes or blurring faces does not remove the need for consent to publish. In the case of children under 16, parental consent to publish is required. In cases where the patient has died, consent for publication should be from the next of kin.

### **Does the manuscript adhere to relevant standards for deposition of data and reporting?**

- If the manuscript reports results of a clinical trial, has the trial been registered and does the manuscript include a Trial Registration Number? All clinical trials require trial registration. Trials must be registered prior to submission in a suitable publicly accessible registry. The trial registration number should be included as the last line of the abstract of the manuscript.

### **Is article type correct for the content?**

It is important for indexing of the journal that articles are designated as the correct type. Occasionally, a submission will not fall into one of the article types available on the journal, but may be of sufficient interest to consider for peer review.



## Are there any obvious concerns with plagiarism or duplicate publication?

If yes, it is recommended to use plagiarism detection software.

### Language concerns

If you receive a new manuscript that requires English copyediting before you are able to sufficiently assess the scientific content, you can request this from the authors as a pre-review revision.

We do not encourage rejection of a manuscript on the basis of the standard of English alone, unless it is of very poor quality or the authors have had an opportunity to improve the manuscript but have not met the required standard. At the same time, editors and reviewers are not being expected to copyedit the language themselves. Instead, authors should be asked to seek help from a native English speaker or a professional language editing service as part of their revisions or before sending for review, if necessary.

## Selecting peer-reviewers

### Criteria for a suitable reviewer

- Active in a relevant field and/or methodology as judged by their publication record.
- Ideally published more than 10 articles in the last 10 years.
- Not too senior as they are likely to be very busy.
- Free of potential bias, i.e.
  - No co-publication with an author of the submitted manuscript in the last 5 years
  - Not currently or recently affiliated at the same institution (i.e. within the past year)
  - Not excluded by the authors (we allow authors to exclude up to 3 reviewers)
- Reviewers should be 'independent' of one another i.e. not both work at the same lab/institution.
- Be cautious when checking the suitability of a reviewer suggested by an author. In a small number of cases, the email address provided may not be genuine or the reviewer may be poorly qualified. We recommend inviting reviewers by their institutional email address.
- Some manuscripts may require the specialized skills of a statistician, whom you may need to invite if the other reviewers cannot judge the statistics.

### Where it makes sense to be flexible

- Where a reviewer has co-published with an author once or twice as a small proportion of a prolific publishing history.
- Where a reviewer has co-published with an author once or twice in articles with an extensive author list, e.g. a multi-centre trial.
- Where a reviewer is junior, but exactly on topic, especially if their supervisor agrees to look at the report before it is submitted and includes their name.

- Where it would make valid peer review impossible if requests for exclusion were honored.

### Finding potential reviewers

We advise that you invite six reviewers at a time in order to get at least two reviewers to agree to review a manuscript. However, in some cases you may need to invite more, particularly if it is a busy time of year.

You may wish to use the following methods and tools to supplement your own knowledge of researchers in the field:

#### Journal contact search

Search the journals' database of Editorial Board members, previous authors and reviewers.

#### Related articles

You can search PubMed or Google Scholar for keywords and titles similar to the title of the manuscript under consideration.

#### Reference list of the manuscript

This is useful for finding active authors in the field or reviewers with specific methodological expertise.

See the section below "What to do if..." for more tips on how to find reviewers.

### Making a decision

Recommendations (reject, revise or accept) should be made on the basis of at least 2 reviewer reports and your own reading of the manuscript.

You should be aware that a reviewer may flag an issue not raised by the other reviewer because they have more expertise in a particular aspect. If there are any issues that you think the authors should focus on, which have not been raised by the reviewers, you can include these in the comments to the authors or in the decision email.

If your journal operates a closed peer review process, please ensure that the reviewer has not included their name in the 'comments to authors' section before sending the decision to the authors.

- **Rejecting a manuscript:** When rejecting a manuscript, whether before or after peer-review, it is important to provide authors with reasons for rejection and feedback that they can work on in future. We therefore recommend you always provide comments explaining your reasoning to the authors when rejecting manuscripts. For manuscripts that are scientifically sound, but do not fall within the scope or threshold of your journal, you may wish to consider suggesting transfer to another journal if your publisher offers such service. This provides a useful and fast service to authors, whose reviewer reports and manuscript files are passed on to the new journal on their behalf.
- **Requesting revisions:** Authors are given a fixed period of time to submit revisions and should return a highlighted manuscript and response to the reviewers. If the revisions needed are extensive or only slight, you can suggest a longer/shorter deadline.

- **Accept:** Once you are happy that the authors have satisfactorily responded to all of your and the reviewers concerns and is acceptable for publication.

## What to do if...

...You can't find enough reviewers

### Decision on one report

If you still struggle to find sufficient reviewers, you may be able to provide a brief report on a manuscript yourself or make a considered decision based on one detailed report from a senior peer reviewer, although this should be a last resort. We would advise that you assess the experience and expertise of the reviewer, as well as the level of detail and thoroughness of their report before you reach a decision. We would also encourage you to provide your own comments to the author, you can also act as a second reviewer and provide a report yourself.

For cases where the one report is not sufficiently detailed, or the reviewer is very junior, or you are not familiar with the topic, you should seek further reviewers or the opinion of an Editorial Board Member.

### Additional tools to help you search for reviewers

[Google Scholar](#) - This searches the full text of each article, not just the abstract, and covers all topics across scholarly literature. Using the [advanced search](#) you can restrict the search to certain journals, dates and authors.

Tips:

You can see which articles cited an article. This is especially useful to follow up "seminal" papers, or to look for those who have cited similar recent work from the same authors, as they will already be familiar with the authors' work. More help is [here](#).

In the advanced search, if you type two authors into the author box, it will bring up articles they have written together, e.g. "Joe Bloggs" "John Doe" will find articles by both of those authors.

[PubMed](#) - Conduct a search of biomedical literature from MEDLINE, life science journals, and online books using relevant keywords.

[PubReMiner](#) - This runs an analysis on the abstracts returned in the PubMed results to return the most frequently appearing authors, words, journals, MeSH terms and institutions.

[Anne O'Tate](#) - This is similar to PubReMiner and returns frequency statistics from the results of PubMed searches.

[Jane](#) - Jane (Journal/Author Name Estimator) suggests journals (indexed in Medline) and experts who have published similar articles that are related to a sample of text (e.g. the title and abstract of a manuscript, or the methods section).

[Scopus](#) - Requires a subscription, but covers more areas than PubMed, and returns results in a similar way to PubReMiner. It has author disambiguation and citation information.

**...Reviewers disagree/you disagree with the reviewers**

When reviewers disagree in their assessment of the work, you may be able to reach a decision by taking into account your own knowledge of the subject area and interpretation of the manuscript together with the expertise of the reviewers.

If you are unsure you can seek the advice of an independent third reviewer or request that the Editor-in-Chief or a member of the Editorial Board help adjudicate the conflicting reports. If the authors have already revised in response to initial reviews, it is preferable to seek further advice on specific points of disagreement only (an adjudication) rather than seeking a whole new report.

**...One round of revision isn't enough**

If you or the reviewers still have concerns after the authors have revised the manuscript you can send it back for further revision. Some journals allow authors to make only two rounds of revision to avoid lengthy peer review, which can become frustrating for authors and reviewers alike. If the work is not suitable for publication after the authors have made two revisions then it is often better to close the file (although this should be assessed on a case-by-case basis). If further revision wouldn't make the manuscript acceptable it should be rejected without an offer to resubmit i.e. 'close reject' rather than 'open reject'.

**...You think there might be an ethical concern**

**If the manuscript is missing information regarding ethical approval and/or consent**

Ask the authors to add it into the manuscript before sending for review. If they did not receive ethical approval, author consent or did not register the clinical trial, do not reject the manuscript as further investigation may be necessary. If you are not sure how to investigate, you may wish to consult other editors, your publisher, or COPE resources (see an example [COPE flowchart](#) here).

**Authorship changes**

If the authors would like to add, remove or alter the order of authors on the manuscript, confirmation must be received from all authors (including those unaffected by the change). If the authors are unable to agree, this matter should be referred to the institution where the research was carried out, as editors are not in a position to investigate and resolve authorship issues. COPE also provides resources and useful [flowcharts](#) that help to resolve this and other ethical issues.