ISMTE International Society of Managing and Technical Editors

# Publishing Ethics 101

A Guide for the Editorial Office

Welcome to the ISMTE educational guide to ethical violations that can arise during the peer-review management of scholarly journals. Cases of publishing misconduct are often confusing and challenging to handle—this guide will guarantee that you are familiar with the general landscape of ethical publishing. It will cover:

- Different types of publishing misconduct;
- Players who may be involved in cases of unethical behavior;
- Basics of a solid ethics policy; and
- Steps for correcting literature associated with verified misconduct.

This guide is intended to act as an introduction. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) provides expert advice on how to deal with cases of misconduct and we recommend that you refer to their guidelines for further advice. Links to their resources are included where relevant below.

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## Definitions of Common Ethical Violations

The following list represents the most common ethical violations that arise during the peer-review process or after an article has been published.

### Plagiarism

To steal and pass off the ideas or words of another as one's own without crediting the source. In many cases, plagiarism is obvious, as when an author uses—verbatim—whole paragraphs or even entire sections from another published work without attribution through quotation marks and/or reference to the original sources. However, in other situations, plagiarism may not be readily apparent to either expert reviewers or those less familiar with a paper's content.

COPE Suspected Plagiarism in Submitted Manuscript Flowchart
COPE Suspected Plagiarism in Published Manuscript Flowchart

### Self-Plagiarism

To reuse significant, identical, or nearly identical portions of one's own previously published works without citing the earlier publications or without citing the original papers. While "fair use" doctrine of U.S. copyright law legally allows authors to reuse portions of earlier publications on a limited basis, there is no quantifiable definition of "limited". Consequently, authors may exceed such limitations and, in doing so, may violate the copyrights on their previous papers. Irrespective of the legal matters related to copyright infringement, some experts argue that self-plagiarism cannot—under the classic definition of plagiarism (as noted above)—exist, as one is not using the work of "others".

COPE Text Recycling Guidelines

### Duplicate Submission

To simultaneously submit the same paper to two or more journals to increase the probability that it will be accepted for publication and/or to decrease the time required for the editorial processing of the manuscript. Prohibition of such activity was initially instituted to ensure that only original material, not previously available elsewhere, would appear in a given journal. In addition, it was considered to be more efficient and cost-effective if only one scientific publication expends the time and effort necessary for the peer-review and publication processes. Many journals have statements that require authors to testify that their paper has not been submitted elsewhere. An example statement is: "This submission is not, either in part or whole, currently under consideration by any other scientific journal and has not been previously published in any other journal in either hard-copy or electronic format."[1]

COPE Suspected Redundant Publication in a Submitted Manuscript Flowchart
COPE Suspected Redundancy in a Published Manuscript Flowchart

## Falsification/Fabrication of Data

To selectively revise the results of scientific studies to fit preconceived expectations of the outcomes of investigations. For example, falsification may result from elimination of critical data, using biased statistical analyses, and including only those references which support the falsified data. Fabrication involves, as the name implies, the creation of results, use of fraudulent citations, description of methods and procedures never employed in the studies, and the manufacturing of other portions of submitted or published papers. Falsification/fabrication is far more difficult to prove than plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and duplicate submission (all of which can be detected through software or the peer-review process), as it involves questioning the data and conclusions by the scientific community. Instances of falsification/fabrication call into question the validity of the data, which in turn raises serious issues as to the integrity of scientific ethics as a whole.

COPE Suspected Fabricated Data in Submitted Manuscript Flowchart
COPE Suspected Fabricated Data in Published Manuscript Flowchart

## Image Manipulation

To falsify images employed in papers such that they no longer accurately reflect the authors' observations. Image manipulation has a long history and actually first began more than 160 years ago with the use of glass plates followed by photographic film. Today, authors can easily manipulate images digitally using software packages such as Photoshop®. Most digital images are manipulated in minor ways to allow readers to better observe their contents, as, for example, altering the contrast of photomicrographs. However, it is ethically unacceptable if these modifications are intentionally employed to deceive readers through the removal, relocation, and/or introduction of components after the capture of the original image. Because changes to images can be virtually undetectable, it follows that image manipulation is the most difficult ethical challenge to detect and address.

ISMTE resources on dealing with image manipulation

## Other Types of Ethical Violations

Much less common are ethical violations committed by editors or reviewers. These violations are beyond the scope of this guide but readers should be aware that they exist. For example, an author or editor might not honor the confidentiality expected during the peer-review process. Another example is when a reviewer delays submission of his or her comments on a manuscript to gain an advantage over a competitor who is an author on the paper being reviewed. Finally, failure of an editor, reviewer, or author to disclose a potential

conflict of interest—financial, personal, or otherwise—is another type of ethical violation.

COPE What to do if you Suspect an Ethical Violation Flowchart

## Roles of Stakeholders

The following list defines the roles of the various stakeholders who are typically involved in the investigation of publishing ethics violations.

### Publisher or Society

The publisher or society, being the legal entity behind a journal, must have clear publishing conduct policies (definitions, procedures, and sanctions) to ensure fair and swift handling of ethical issues. Having a strong policy in place will also help editors navigate tough ethical issues that have legal implications. Additionally, a policy standardizes the process so that all authors receive similar treatment and sanctions. The publisher or society must communicate the policy to the editors and editorial staff for proper implementation.

COPE Guidelines for Managing the Relationships Between Society-Owned Journals, Their Society, and Publishers

COPE Guidelines for the Board of Directors of Learned Society Journals

### Editor-in-Chief

The Editor-in-Chief (EIC) is the most visible representative of a journal and as such, is the primary person to enforce the policies that direct the review of an ethical violation. As with other editorial office functions, however, the EIC must be guided by the editorial staff and cannot address ethical violations without first consulting the publisher's or society's guidelines. In some offices, the EIC may take a hands-off approach and expect the journal's editorial staff to initiate the policy when a violation has been alleged. In these cases, the staff must be very familiar with the policy and should apprise the EIC of developments in each case as they occur.

COPE Guide to Ethical Editing for New Editors
ISMTE resource: Journal Editor's Handbook

### Editorial Office

The editorial office is responsible for general oversight of a journal's policies and procedures, including:

- Providing them to the EIC
- Ensuring that they reflect the current publishing environment
- Publicizing them to authors, reviewers, and readers

- Reviewing, updating, and having them approved on a regular basis

Additionally, the editorial office is responsible for assisting the EIC with all aspects of the investigative process, striving to make it timely, confidential, well-documented, and appropriately archived for each case.

As mentioned, sometimes the editorial office staff might be expected to initiate a journal's ethics policy and shepherd a case through the process from start to finish, acting on behalf of the EIC.

### Author's Institution

Almost all authors who submit work to academic journals will be affiliated with an institution as an employee or contractor. In many cases, the institution will be in a better position than the publisher or society to investigate an ethical violation charge, especially in cases that are not clear-cut.

For example: plagiarism is typically easy to identify; however, cases of data manipulation or fraud are often not simple to characterize or confirm. Proper investigation of these cases may require use of proprietary materials such as lab notebooks or computer access logs—items that are not available to a publisher or society. Thus, the institution is much better positioned to investigate a concern thoroughly and fairly; a publisher or society might therefore choose to contact the institution as soon as the evidence suggests that deeper investigation is needed.

The publisher or society must stay in close contact with the institution until a conclusion is reached to guarantee that the investigation proceeds swiftly. This point is especially important with cases involving medicine—corrections must be issued quickly to ensure patient safety.

The Office of Research Integrity in the United States has a number of resources for institutions in regard to investigating research misconduct.

## The Basics of a Publishing Ethics Policy

### Developing the Policy

Before developing a policy, the publisher or society must first answer the following questions:

- Do we want to both police and enforce the policy (look for violations and then pursue them)? Or do we want to just enforce the policy (pursue violations only when discovered)?
- To what extent should the journal apply sanctions? What will the journal's relationship with the accused author's institution be, considering that the institution is in a stronger position to investigate possible misconduct and to apply sanctions?
- Are there guidelines and procedures from other journals or organizations that we

wish to adopt or adapt?
- Do we have an adequate media policy that addresses outside interest in ethical violation cases?
- Does our staff have a clear understanding of the serious legal and professional implications of ethical violation cases and the need to exhibit extraordinary discretion?
- Are we able to manage cases from the point of identifying the potential violation to making certain that all corrections or retractions have been made?

After considering these questions, the publisher or society should then develop a policy comprised of two documents:

- Ethical Guidelines: This document provides definitions of ethical violations and describes the ethical behavior expected of researchers submitting work to the journal. Ideally, the guidelines will encompass universally accepted statements regarding appropriate ethical behavior in research and publication and not attempt to define new areas.
- Ethical Violation Procedures: This document contains procedures and sanctions to be followed when a potential ethical violation is discovered, describing the process by which the violation is identified, examined, judged, and resolved.

The two documents should not be mixed into one unless they are separated into two distinct sections. When it is time to address a potential ethical violation, having quick access to a succinct list of procedures will enable editors and staff to act quickly.

All documents related to a publishing ethics policy should be examined and approved by the appropriate governing bodies and their adoption publicized to the journal's community.
See Appendix A for examples of ethics policies.

## Reviewing the Policy

It is important that the policy is reviewed, and subsequently approved if changes are made, at least every two years to update sections that might change due to technological advances, insight gleaned from handling specific cases, or new standards and procedures accepted by the scholarly publishing community.

## Publicizing the Policy and Working with the Press

Transparency is the best measure to ensure that your authors understand your expectations for ethical publishing behavior. Final, approved ethics policies should be clear and easily accessible to authors, reviewers, and readers via the journal's information for authors in print and online, and should be provided upon request. It is particularly useful to make authors and reviewers aware of the policies at the start of the peer-review process by

linking to them in the journal's online manuscript tracking system.

Periodically, certain ethical violations will gain the attention of the news media. If the publisher or society has a media relations department, the editorial office should learn their policies for addressing calls from the press. The EIC and the editorial office staff are encouraged to adopt a policy of "no comment". Discretion is critical to the successful execution of an ethical violation investigation and an innocuous comment to the press can be misrepresented and quickly disseminated.

# Policy Implementation

## Creating a Procedures Document

The ideal procedures document is brief and published in an easily accessible location. A single published version, preferably online, will enable regular updates. The procedures should give step-by-step instructions on responding to, investigating, and concluding an ethical violation charge and should address the following:

- How to respond to the initial discovery or charge of an ethical violation
- Who handles the initial investigation of the charge and how
- The interaction between the institution and the publisher or society if the charge is found to have substance
- What happens when the institution reports its findings, if asked to be involved by the publisher or society

See Appendix for examples of procedures documents.

## Email and File Management

Documents should be stored electronically in a folder designated for each particular case and each file named to identify the contents and date. It is essential to maintain a log that gives brief descriptions of each action and the dates they occur in chronological order. This log becomes especially important during an institution's investigation, which must be monitored carefully to ensure that the decision is provided to the journal in a timely manner.

Email correspondence should be carefully reviewed to make certain that only the most pertinent information is conveyed using conservative language, that previous correspondence has been appropriately expunged, and that the email is being sent to only those people who should receive it.

Any paper documentation that can be scanned and discarded should be shredded instead of being thrown out in the trash or recycled.

## The Importance of Discretion

An ethical violation charge is an extraordinarily serious situation that can damage or ruin a scholar's career. The editorial office staff must be aware of this and do everything possible to protect the identities of the people involved as well as the details of the case. Staff should refrain from sharing specific ethical violation cases with anyone outside the investigation process.

It is also important, and a professional obligation, to not draw conclusions based on the initial charge. It is not unheard of for one person charging another with an ethical violation to be the same person responsible for the misbehavior. Disgruntled former employees have been known to sabotage data and charge the senior investigator with data manipulation. Staff should remain unbiased as they collect, store, and convey the information to the EIC.

## Template Letters

It is important to have a stock of template letters on hand that can be used during the various stages of an ethical violation investigation. Having letters ready will ensure a swift initiation of the investigative process and will also enable each case to be handled in a similar fashion. COPE provides example template letters here.

## Literature Correction

### Corrections (or Errata) and Retractions

When ethical misconduct is identified and resolved after an article has been published, acknowledgment of the violation must be made in the form of a correction (also known as an erratum), or in the most serious cases, a retraction. Corrections are published so that readers can accurately interpret the content of an article and they often represent less serious author infractions. The retraction mechanism is used when serious misconduct—such as the inclusion of fraudulent data, plagiarism, or duplicate publication—have been identified. Retractions must be handled very carefully and should be employed only in exceptional circumstances, as they often have legal implications. Detailed information on when retraction is appropriate and the process for deploying this measure can be found in Irene Hames' guide to peer review.[2]

For most journals in the biomedical sciences, any changes to the literature must go through PubMed (a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) that includes more than 19 million citations from MEDLINE and other life science journals), so it's essential to consult the NLM website for the most up-to-date information on corrections and retractions. Note that PubMed Central (PMC)—the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) free digital archive of biomedical and life sciences journal literature—must be notified separately for retractions.

Sample wording for literature correction can be found in the Council of Science Editors' (CSE) "White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications" available here.

Scholarly journals outside the biomedical sciences should identify the main databases that

track the literature and learn their procedures for corrections and retractions.

COPE Retraction Guidelines

### Online Correction and Retraction Using Supplemental Data Function

If your journal is online and has a supplemental data function, consider using it to publish corrections. Although you'll still need to use the established procedure determined by your field's main index producer, the use of the supplemental data function will allow a publisher or society to make this important information available much sooner.

### Institutional Repositories and Corrected/Retracted Papers

While a publisher or society can publish a correction or retraction and place a notice online as a way to notify readers of the change to the literature, how are users of institutional repositories notified? Currently, there is no single mechanism for correcting or retracting articles housed on such repositories. For now, it is best to pass along the information to the person in charge of the institutional repository at the author's institution.

## Resources

- Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) in particular, their 10 Core Practices and Journal Audit, a self-assessment tool to help COPE members apply the core practices to their journals.
- CSE's "White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications"
- International Committee of Medical and Journal Editors (ICMJE)
- Office of Research Integrity

## References


1. From the instructions for authors of Medical Mycology at https://academic.oup.com/mmy/pages/Policies
2. Hames I. Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals. Guidelines for Good Practice. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd; 2007.

# Appendix: Examples of Policies and Procedures

American Statistical Association

Gastroenterology

The Endocrine Society Ethical Guidelines

The Journal of Biological Chemistry

The New England Journal of Medicine