



Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers: background, issues and evolution

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Why are guidelines needed?

- Peer reviewers are central to peer review
- Peer review *is* important
- Very few researchers receive (any) training in peer review and how to be a peer reviewer
- Many feel there is a lack of guidance on how to review papers
- Many feel formal training of reviewers would improve the quality of reviews

Sense about Science Peer Review Survey, 2009

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/87/peer-review-survey-2009>

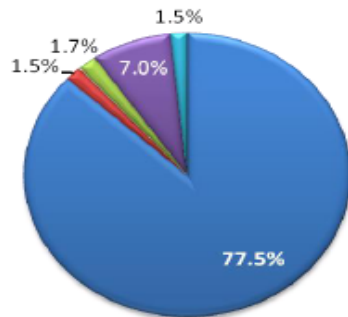


Improving peer review

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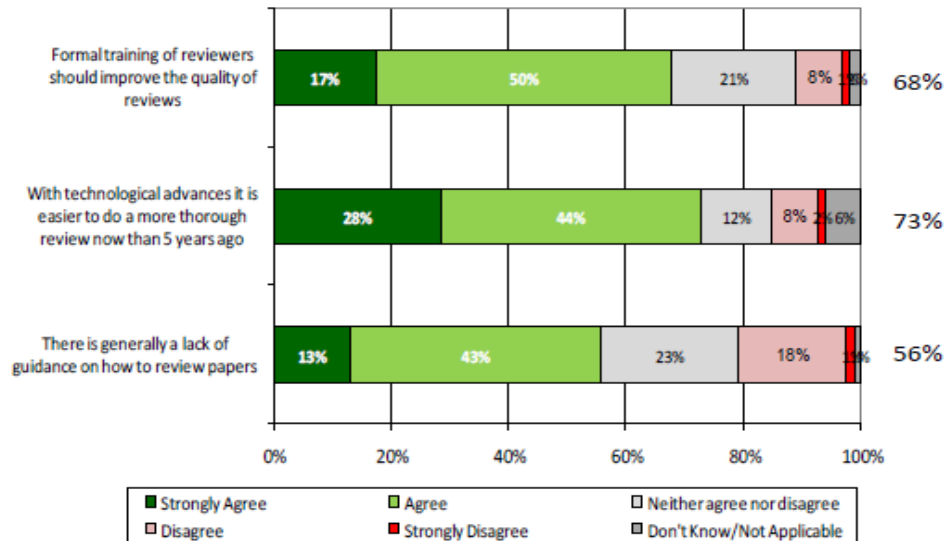
There is a perceived general lack of guidance on how to review papers, and most believe that reviewers would benefit from formal training. However, surprisingly few reviewers actually train younger colleagues as part of the review process itself, just 3.2%. Peer review is normally confidential, but editors often will allow others to review when permission is sought.

Question: The last paper you agreed to review was:



- Reviewed just by myself
- Reviewed by a junior member(s) of research group
- Reviewed by a junior member(s) of group but under my supervision
- Reviewed mostly by me, but colleagues contributed
- Other

Question: Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following:



n=3,597

Three recent cases of 'fake reviewers'

- For 'suggested reviewers', authors provided:
 - false identities (and emails), which were them or colleagues
 - names of real people but created email accounts for them which they or associates had access to
- Reviews were done very quickly and were positive
- *“The peer-review process for the above article was found to have been compromised and inappropriately influenced by the corresponding author”*
- <http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com/>, 'faked emails' category
- Involves different disciplines, different countries and different publishers ... and often many published papers ...

Just one of the cases in 2012 ...

Retraction Watch

Tracing retractions as a window into the scientific process

Retraction count grows to 35 for scientist who faked emails to do his own peer review

with 8 comments

[Hyung-In Moon](#), the South Korean plant compound researcher who [made up email addresses so he could do his own peer reviews](#), is now up to 35 retractions.

The four new retractions are of the papers in the *Journal of Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry* that initially led to suspicions when all the reviews came back within 24 hours. Here's the [notice](#), which includes the same language as Moon's 24 other retractions of studies published in Informa Healthcare journals:



Hyung-In Moon

“ The corresponding author and publisher hereby retract the following articles from publication in *Journal of Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry*:

Effect of betaine on the hepatic damage from orotic acid-induced fatty liver development in rats
Jae-Young Cha, Hyeon-Soo Kim, Hyung-In Moon, and Young-Su Cho
Journal of Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry [pub ahead of print], 2012, doi: 10.3109/14756366.2011.641014

Antioesity activity of fermented *Angelica gigantis* by high fat diet-induced obese rats
Jae-Young Cha, Jae-Jun Jeung, Chang-Su Park, Hee-Young Ahn, Hyung-In Moon, and Young-Su Cho
Journal of Enzyme Inhibition and Medicinal Chemistry [pub ahead of print], 2012, doi: 10.3109/14756366.2011.615746

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‘For his part, Moon acknowledged suggesting his friends and colleagues as reviewers, telling Retraction Watch that the results “can be mistaken for fake reviews.” But he said it wasn’t only his mistake: The editors, Moon said, invited those reviews without confirming the identity of the reviewers.’

RCUK Policy & Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct, Feb 2013

Unacceptable research practice:

“Improper conduct in peer review of research proposals or results (including manuscripts submitted for publication); this includes failure to disclose conflicts of interest; inadequate disclosure of clearly limited competence; misappropriation of the content of material; and breach of confidentiality or abuse of material provided in confidence for peer review purposes”

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/Publications/researchers/Pages/grc.aspx>

Our aims

To:

- set out basic principles and standards
- be generic
- be comprehensive but easily understood
- provide guidance to researchers
- be a reference/resource for journals and editors in guiding/educating their reviewers
- be an educational resource for institutions in training their students and researchers

The timeline

- Draft ready late January 2013
- Period of community feedback (3 weeks, till 18 February)
- Comments from 36 individuals/groups (thank you!)
- Period of revision and Council discussion
- Final version published today (22 March 2013)

COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

*Irene Hames on behalf of COPE Council
March 2013, v.1*

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

What's in the guidelines?

- Basic principles to which peer reviewers should adhere
- Expectations during the peer-review process
 - On being approached to review
 - During review
 - When preparing the report
- Expectations post review

Feedback period: responses

“many thanks for undertaking this important task”

“will be a good resource for a workshop I’m doing on how to review”

“a great initiative ... clear and practical guidelines”

“very sound, comprehensive and timely ... long overdue”

“we will want to have as a resource for peer reviewers and remind them of in invite letters”

“should be widely circulated”

“missing an opportunity to be of more general benefit ... beyond journal articles to include research proposals, book proposals, all ‘publications’”

“rather too long, can see them not being read by many researchers”

What were the main issues?

1. Involving junior researchers

Feedback on: *‘Peer reviewers should not involve anyone else in the review of a manuscript without first obtaining permission from the journal’*

- The ideal versus reality – far removed from best practice ... journals tolerate it
- But concerns: lack of transparency and appropriate credit and accountability; ‘power’ issues; “if you can delegate to someone in your lab, why not delegate to anyone?”

After Council discussion: *‘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.’*

2. Reviewing work from authors not writing in their native language

Feedback: Authors sometimes feel there are issues of bias and hostility

Added:

‘Peer reviewers should 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.’

3. Questions asked

- What is 'timely'?
- Should all reviewers be required to have an institutional email address?
- Should reviewers have to declare they've reviewed a manuscript for another journal?
- Should reviewers need to declare if they become aware of the identity of the authors in double-blind review?
- Should reviewers be encouraged to sign reviews?

The most controversial issue?

4. Editors acting as reviewers for manuscripts they are handling

... should do this transparently, not via an anonymous review

- Reasons given why editors *should* be able to do it anonymously:
 - cases where it's difficult to find reviewers will take even longer
 - if editors can't do it anonymously they may be constrained in their review and not be as rigorous as they would otherwise be
 - taking away anonymity will discourage such reviews and result in delayed or even no decisions for some manuscripts
 - why shouldn't an editor be allowed the same anonymity as the other reviewers?

Is it ethical?

- ... I don't think so
- Editors should tell authors when they've 'reviewed' their manuscript
- Review/comments in letter or as a submitted, named review
- Editors oversee reviewers and make sure their reviews are fair/appropriate; they moderate and evaluate
- Who oversees an editor's review and comments?
- What if there are no other reviewers?
- The roles of reviewers and editors have to be kept separate
- It's misleading the authors ... it's a deception

Others don't think it's ethical

- The Scholarly Kitchen, 31 July 2012, Tim Vines: *'The referee who wasn't there: the ghostly tale of reviewer 3'*
- 'ghostwritten' reviews ... by the editor
- Researchers: "this is an appalling practice"; "it is alarming to think people feel the practice is acceptable"
- Editor: "I would regard it as fraud to give such comments the status of an anonymous peer reviewer"

<http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2012/07/31/the-referee-that-wasnt-there-the-ghostly-tale-of-reviewer-3-3/>

After Council discussion

‘Peer reviewers should:

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.’

What next?

- Publication and dissemination
- Publishers, journals, editors
- Research institutions
- Universities and colleges
- For courses and workshops
- Guidelines are a 'living' document ... feedback ... revision

Thank you ... questions?

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