What to do if you suspect redundant (duplicate) publication

(a) Suspected redundant publication in a submitted manuscript

Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate. Get full documentary evidence if not already provided.

Check extent and nature of overlap/redundancy

Major overlap/redundancy (i.e. based on same data with identical or very similar findings and/or evidence that authors have sought to hide redundancy e.g. by changing title or author order or not citing previous papers)

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work has not been published elsewhere and documentary evidence of duplication

Author responds

No response

Unsatisfactory explanation/admission of fault

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/legitimate republication)

Write to author (all authors if possible) rejecting submission, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Consider informing author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance

Inform author(s) of your action

Inform reviewer of outcome/action

Minor overlap with some element of redundancy or legitimate overlap (e.g. methods) or re-analysis (e.g. sub-group/extended follow-up/discussion aimed at different audience)

Contact author in neutral terms/expressing concern/explaining journal’s position

Explain that secondary papers must refer to original Request missing reference to original and/or remove overlapping material Proceed with review/decision

No response

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance Try to obtain acknowledgement of your letter

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months

No significant overlap

Inform reviewers of decision and proceed with review

Notes

• The instructions to authors should state the journal’s policy on redundant publication.
• It may be helpful to request the institution’s policy.
• Ask authors to verify that their manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.
• International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) advises that translations are acceptable but MUST reference the original.

Further reading

COPE Cases on redundant/duplicate publication: http://publicationethics.org/cases/?f[0]=im_field_classifications%3A829

Duplicate publication guidelines (nb. the definitions only apply to BMC and may not be accepted by other publishers).

Links to other sites are provided for your convenience but COPE accepts no responsibility or liability for the content of those sites

Version one
Published 2006
http://bit.ly/2flm6g0

Current version
November 2015


Notes

• The instructions to authors should state the journal’s policy on redundant publication.
• It may be helpful to request the institution’s policy.
• Ask authors to verify that their manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.
• International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) advises that translations are acceptable but MUST reference the original.

Further reading

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Duplicate publication guidelines (nb. the definitions only apply to BMC and may not be accepted by other publishers).

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Version one
Published 2006
http://bit.ly/2flm6g0

Current version
November 2015

What to do if you suspect redundant (duplicate) publication

(b) Suspected redundant publication in a published manuscript

Notes
• The instructions to authors should state the journal’s policy on redundant publication.
• Asking authors to sign a statement or tick a box may be helpful in subsequent investigations.
• ICMJE advises that translations are acceptable but MUST reference the original. Editors may consider publishing a correction (i.e. the link to the original article) rather than a retraction/notice of duplicate publication in such cases.

Version one
Published 2006

Current version
November 2015

ARCHIVED
What to do if you suspect plagiarism

(a) Suspected plagiarism in a submitted manuscript

Reviewer informs editor about suspected plagiarism

Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of copying

Clear plagiarism (unattributed use of large portions of text and/or data, presented as if they were by the plagiarist)

Minor copying of short phrases only (e.g. in discussion of research paper from non-native language speaker)
No misattribution of data

Redundancy (i.e. copying from author's own work) - see flowcharts on redundancy

No problem

Discuss with reviewer

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work is original/the author's own and documentary evidence of plagiarism

Author responds

No response

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

No response

Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal's position
Ask author to rephrase copied phrases or include all direct quotations with references
Proceed with review

Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

Write to author (all authors if possible) rejecting submission, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Consider informing author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance and/or potential victim

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
If no resolution, consider contacting other authorities, e.g. ORI in US, GMC in UK

Inform author(s) of your action

Inform reviewer of outcome/action

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What to do if you suspect plagiarism

(b) Suspected plagiarism in a published manuscript

Reader informs editor about suspected plagiarism

Thank reader and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of copying

Clear plagiarism (unattributed use of large portions of text and/or data, presented as if they were by the plagiarist)

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that work is original/the author’s own and documentary evidence of plagiarism

Minor copying of short phrases only (e.g. in discussion of research paper)
No misattribution of data

Contact author in neutral terms expressing disappointment/explaining journal’s position
Discuss publishing correction giving reference to original paper if this has been omitted

Author responds

No response

Unsatisfactory explanation/ admits guilt

Contact all authors and tell them what you plan to do

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

Try to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for current affiliations/emails)

No response

Inform reader (and plagiarized author[s] if different) of journal’s actions

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
If no resolution, consider contacting other authorities, e.g. ORI in US, GMC in UK

Inform author(s) of your action

Inform readers and victim(s) of outcome/action

Contact all authors and tell them what you plan to do

Consider publishing retraction
Inform editor of other journal(s) involved or publisher of plagiarized books

Consider informing author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance at author’s institution

Thank reader and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Note
The instructions to authors should include a definition of plagiarism and state the journal’s policy on it.

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What to do if you suspect fabricated data

(a) Suspected fabricated data in a submitted manuscript

Reviewer expresses suspicion of fabricated data

Thank reviewer, ask for evidence (if not already provided) and state your plans to investigate

Consider getting a 2nd opinion from another reviewer

Contact author to explain concerns but do not make direct accusation

Author replies

Unsatisfactory answer/ admits guilt

Inform all authors that you intend to contact institution/ regulatory body

Contact author’s institution(s) requesting an investigation

Apologise to author, inform reviewer(s) of outcome. Proceed with peer-review if appropriate

No or unsatisfactory response

Author cleared

Author found guilty

Apologise to author, proceed with peer-review if appropriate

Reject

No response

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No response

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors’ institutions

Satisfactory explanation

Author replies

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)
What to do if you suspect fabricated data

(b) Suspected fabricated data in a published manuscript

Reader expresses suspicion of fabricated data

Thank reader and state your plans to investigate

Consider getting a 2nd opinion from another reviewer

Contact author to explain your concerns but do not make direct accusations

Author replies

No response

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

Author replies

No response

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors’ institutions

Author replies

No response

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No or unsatisfactory response

Author(s) guilty of fabrication

Publish retraction

Author(s) found not guilty

Apologise to author(s)

Public expression of concern

Inform reader of outcome

Author(s) found not guilty

Inform all authors you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Contact author’s institution requesting an investigation

Author replies

Satisfactory explanation

Apologise to author

Publish correction if necessary (e.g. if an honest error has been detected). Inform reader of outcome

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors’ institutions

No response

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No or unsatisfactory response

Author(s) guilty of fabrication

Publish retraction

Author(s) found not guilty

Apologise to author(s)

Inform reader of outcome

Contact author to explain your concerns but do not make direct accusations

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Changes in authorship

(a) Corresponding author requests addition of extra author before publication

- Clarify reason for change in authorship
- Check that all authors consent to addition of extra author
  - All authors agree
    - Get new author to complete journal’s authorship declaration (if used)
    - Amend contributor details (role of each contributor/author) if included
    - Proceed with review/publication
  - Authors do not agree
    - Suspend review/publication of paper until authorship has been agreed by all authors, if necessary, via institution(s)

Note
Major changes in response to reviewer comments, e.g. adding new data might justify the inclusion of a new author.
Changes in authorship

(b) Corresponding author requests removal of author before publication

- Clarify reason for change in authorship
- Check that all authors consent to removal of author

- All authors agree
  - Amend author list and contributor details (role of each author/contributor/acknowledgments as required)
  - Proceed with review/publication

- Authors do not agree
  - Suspend review/publication of paper until authorship has been agreed
  - Inform excluded author(s) that if they wish to pursue the matter they should do this with their co-authors or institutions rather than the editor

Note
Most important to check with the author(s) whose name(s) is/are being removed from the paper and get their agreement in writing.
Changes in authorship
(c) Request for addition of extra author after publication

To prevent future problems:

1. **Before publication,** get authors to sign statement that all listed authors meet authorship criteria and that no others meeting the criteria have been omitted.

2. **Publish details of each person’s contribution to their search and publication.**

---

**Clarify reason for change in authorship**

- **Check that all authors consent to addition of extra author.**
  - **All authors agree**
    - Publish correction
  - **Authors do not agree**
    - **Authors still cannot agree**
      - Refer case to authors’ institution(s) and ask it/them to adjudicate
      - Publish correction if required by institution(s)
    - **Authors do agree**
      - Explain that you will not change the authorship until you have written agreement from all authors. Provide authorship guidelines but do not enter into dispute
      - **All authors agree**
        - Publish correction if needed
      - **Authors still cannot agree**
        - Refer case to authors’ institution(s) and ask it/them to adjudicate
        - Publish correction if required by institution(s)

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publicationethics.org
Changes in authorship
(d) Request for removal of author after publication

Clarify reason for change in authorship

Author(s) gives acceptable reason for change

Check that all authors agree to change (including excluded author)

Publish correction

Author(s) alleges fraud/misconduct

See flowchart for fabricated data

Author(s) has difference in interpretation of data

Suggest author(s) put views in a letter and explain you will give other authors a chance to respond and will publish both letters if suitable (i.e. correct length, not libellous)

Author(s) writes a letter

Contact other authors explaining what is happening

Other authors submit response

Other authors do not wish to respond

Publish both letters

Author(s) does not agree to write letter (or writes something unpublishable)

If author insists on removal of name and other authors agree, then consider publishing correction

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publicationethics.org
What to do if you suspect ghost, guest or gift authorship
(see also flowcharts on Changes in authorship, as such requests may indicate the presence of a ghost or gift author)

* Note
Initial action will depend on journal’s normal method of collecting author/contributor info

** Note
Including clear guidance/criteria for authorship in journal instructions makes it easier to handle such issues

*** Note
Marusic et al. have shown that the method of collecting such data (e.g. free text or check boxes) can influence the response.

Letting authors describe their own contributions probably results in the most truthful and informative answers.

Reference
Editors cannot police author or contributor listing for every submission but may sometimes have suspicions that an author list is incomplete or includes undeserving (guest or gift) authors. The COPE flowchart on ‘What to do if you suspect ghost, guest or gift authorship’ suggests actions for these situations. The following points are designed to help editors be alert for inappropriate authorship and spot warning signs which may indicate problems.

Type of authorship problems

A ghost author is someone who is omitted from an authorship list despite qualifying for authorship. This is not necessarily the same as a ghost writer, since omitted authors often perform other roles, in particular data analysis. (Gotzsche et al. have shown that statisticians involved with study design are frequently omitted from papers reporting industry-funded trials.) If a professional writer has been involved with a publication it will depend on the authorship criteria being used whether s/he fulfils the criteria to be listed as an author. Using the ICMJE criteria for research papers, medical writers usually do not qualify as authors, but their involvement and funding source should be acknowledged.

A guest or gift author is someone who is listed as an author despite not qualifying for authorship. Guests are generally people brought in to make the list look more impressive (despite having little or no involvement with the research or publication). Gift authorship often involves mutual CV enhancement (i.e. including colleagues on papers in return for being listed on theirs).

Signs that might indicate authorship problems

- Corresponding author seems unable to respond to reviewers’ comments
- Changes are made by somebody not on the author list (check Word document properties to see who made the changes but bear in mind there may be an innocent explanation for this, e.g. using a shared computer, or a secretary making changes)
- Document properties show the manuscript was drafted by someone not on the author list or properly acknowledged (but see above)
- Impossibly prolific author e.g. of review articles/opinion pieces (check also for redundant/overlapping publication) (this may be detected by a Medline or Google search using the author’s name)
- Several similar review articles/editorials/opinion pieces have been published under different author names (this may be detected by a Medline or Google search using the article title or key words)
- Role missing from list of contributors (e.g. it appears that none of the named authors were responsible for analysing the data or drafting the paper)
- Unfeasibly long or short author list (e.g. a simple case report with a dozen authors or a randomised trial with a single author)
- Industry-funded study with no authors from sponsor company (this may be legitimate, but may also mean deserving authors have been omitted; reviewing the protocol may help determine the role of employees – see Gotzsche et al. and commentary by Wager)
What to do if a reviewer suspects undisclosed conflict of interest (Col) in a submitted manuscript

1. Reviewer informs editor of author's undisclosed Col
2. Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate
3. Contact author(s) and express concern

   - Author(s) supplies relevant details
     - Thank author but point out seriousness of omission
     - Amend competing interest statement as required
     - Proceed with review/publication
     - Inform reviewer of outcome
   - Author(s) denies Col
     - Explain journal policy/Col definition clearly and obtain signed statement from author(s) about all relevant Cols
     - Thank author but point out seriousness of omission
     - Amend competing interest statement as required
     - Proceed with review/publication
     - Inform reviewer of outcome
What to do if a reader suspects undisclosed conflict of interest (Col) in a published article

1. Reader informs editor of author’s undisclosed Col
2. Thank reader and say you plan to investigate
3. Contact author(s) and express concern
   - Author(s) supplies relevant details
   - Thank author but point out seriousness of omission
   - Author(s) denies Col
     - Explain journal policy/Col definition clearly and obtain signed statement from author(s) about all relevant Cols (if not obtained previously)
     - Publish correction to competing interest statement as required
   - Inform reader of outcome

Notes:
To avoid future problems:
Always get signed statement of Cols from all authors and reviewers before publication.
Ensure journal guidelines include clear definition of Col.
What to do if you suspect an ethical problem with a submitted manuscript

Reviewer (or editor) raises ethical concern about manuscript

- Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate

Author(s) supplies relevant details

- Satisfactory answer
  - Apologise and continue review process
  - Inform reviewer about outcome of case

- Unsatisfactory answer/no response
  - Inform author that review process is suspended until case is resolved
  - Forward concerns to author’s employer or person responsible for research governance at institution

  - Issue resolved satisfactory
    - Contact institution at 3–6 monthly intervals, seeking conclusion of investigation
    - No/unsatisfactory response
      - Refer to other authorities (e.g., medical registration body, UKPPI, ORI)

  - No/unsatisfactory response
    - Consider submitting case to COPE if it raises novel ethical issues

- e.g. lack of ethical approval/concern re: patient consent or protection/concern re: animal experimentation

- e.g. request evidence of ethical committee/IRB approval/copy of informed consent documents

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publicationethics.org
What to do if you suspect a reviewer has appropriated an author’s ideas or data

Author alleges reviewer misconduct
  Thank author and say you will investigate
  Retrieve files (submitted MS and reviews)

Open review (reviewer’s identity is disclosed to author)
  Author accuses actual reviewer of misconduct
    Get as much documentary evidence as possible from author and other sources, e.g. publication*, abstract, report of meeting, copy of slides, grant application: do not contact reviewer until you have assessed this
    Review evidence (or get suitably qualified person to do this) and decide whether author’s allegations are well-founded
    Not well-founded
      Discuss with author/request further evidence
    Appear well-founded
      Write to reviewer explaining concerns and requesting an explanation
      Satisfactory explanation
        Discuss with author
      No reply/un satisfactory explanation
        Contact reviewer’s institution requesting an investigation
        If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
        Reviewer exonerated
          Discuss with author
        Reviewer found guilty
          Keep author informed of progress
          Consider removing reviewer from review database during investigation and inform reviewer of you action
          Reviewer removed permanently from database and consider reporting case in journal

Anonymous review (reviewer’s identity is NOT disclosed to author)
  Author accuses somebody who was not asked to review the article for your journal
    Check for links between accused person and named reviewer, e.g. same department, personal relationships
    Consider contacting actual reviewer(s) to comment on allegation and check they performed the review themselves/did not discuss the paper with others
    Explain situation to author (decide whether you wish to reveal actual reviewer(s) name(s); this is up to you, however if your journal uses anonymous review you must get the reviewer’s permission before disclosing their identity to the author)
    No reply/unsatisfactory explanation
      Contact reviewer’s institution requesting an investigation
      If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
      Reviewer exonerated
        Discuss with author
      Reviewer found guilty
        Keep author informed of progress
        Consider removing reviewer from review database during investigation and inform reviewer of your action
        Reviewer removed permanently from database and consider reporting case in journal

Author accuses actual reviewer of misconduct
  Get as much documentary evidence as possible from author and other sources, e.g. publication*, abstract, report of meeting, copy of slides, grant application: do not contact reviewer until you have assessed this
  Review evidence (or get suitably qualified person to do this) and decide whether author’s allegations are well-founded
  Not well-founded
    Discuss with author/request further evidence
  Appear well-founded
    Write to reviewer explaining concerns and requesting an explanation
    Satisfactory explanation
      Discuss with author
    No reply/un satisfactory explanation
      Consider removing reviewer from review database during investigation and inform reviewer of you action
      Reviewer removed permanently from database and consider reporting case in journal

Author accuses somebody who was not asked to review the article for your journal
  Check for links between accused person and named reviewer, e.g. same department, personal relationships
  Consider contacting actual reviewer(s) to comment on allegation and check they performed the review themselves/did not discuss the paper with others
  Explain situation to author (decide whether you wish to reveal actual reviewer(s) name(s); this is up to you, however if your journal uses anonymous review you must get the reviewer’s permission before disclosing their identity to the author)
  No reply/unsatisfactory explanation
    Contact reviewer’s institution requesting an investigation
    If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
    Reviewer exonerated
      Discuss with author
    Reviewer found guilty
      Keep author informed of progress
      Consider removing reviewer from review database during investigation and inform reviewer of your action
      Reviewer removed permanently from database and consider reporting case in journal

Author alleges reviewer misconduct
  Thank author and say you will investigate
  Retrieve files (submitted MS and reviews)

If files are no longer available at journal, request copy from author

*Note
If author produces published paper this may be handled as plagiarism (see plagiarism flow chart)
How to respond to whistle blowers when concerns are raised directly

A published article is criticised via direct email to the editor or publisher. This could include anonymous or not anonymous concerns about scientific soundness or allegations of plagiarism, figure manipulation or other forms of misconduct.

Let the publisher and the communications team know about any allegations. It is useful to establish an escalation procedure and agree a process for responding ahead of time.

Do the allegations contain specific and detailed evidence to support the claim?

- **Yes**
  - Respond to the person who raised concerns saying that you are going to investigate and will let them know the outcome but will not necessarily be in contact regularly before then.

- **No**
  - Request more detail saying that otherwise you are unable to investigate.

If they persist with vague claims, politely say you cannot pursue this further.

If there is an outcome to your investigation, such as a correction or retraction, inform the person who originally raised the concern.

Developed in collaboration with BioMed Central

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**Version one**
Published November 2015

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How to respond to whistle blowers when concerns are raised via social media

A published article is criticised on social media or a post-publication peer review site(s). This could include anonymous or not anonymous concerns about scientific soundness or allegations of plagiarism, figure manipulation or other forms of misconduct.

Let the publisher and the communications team know about any allegations. It is useful to establish an escalation procedure and agree a process for responding ahead of time.

Do the allegations contain specific and detailed evidence to support the claim?

Yes

Treat in the same way as concerns raised directly

Respond via the same social media, ideally within 24 hours, saying that you are going to investigate

Let the authors know via email that concerns were raised and ask them for an explanation. You should not generally add them to an exchange, e.g. in a Twitter response. If the concerns were raised only about the research findings, in some instances the authors may wish to respond themselves.

Investigate according to the appropriate COPE flowchart or guidance and also follow own publisher’s guidance

Are the comments targeted directly at the author, editor, publisher or the journal?

Yes

Respond via the same social media to say thank you, if you would like to raise a complaint please contact [xyz]. Provide a generic contact, e.g. customer services, who will be able to forward the complaint to the appropriate person.

It is appropriate to respond from a journal/publisher account rather than a personal Twitter account for legal and ethical reasons.

If they persist with vague claims, politely say you cannot pursue this further and do not respond to any further comments

No

Don’t respond, but flag to the publisher so they can decide on their approach. Consider letting the authors know and explain why you are not responding at the moment. Make sure the authors will be able to access the comments (e.g. some authors are not able to access Twitter or Google)

Developed in collaboration with BioMed Central

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Version one
Published November 2015

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