These flowcharts and infographics are designed to help editors follow COPE's Core practices and implement its advice when faced with cases of suspected misconduct. For more information visit: [https://cope.onl/core](https://cope.onl/core)
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.

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

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3-6 months.

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.

Consider removing reviewer from review database during investigation and inform reviewer of your action.

Author exonerated

Reviewer informed of progress

REVIEWER SUSPECTED TO HAVE APPROPRIATED AN AUTHOR’S IDEAS OR DATA

Notes
- Reviewers' instructions should state that submitted material is confidential and may not be used in any way until after publication.
- *Cases with published papers may be handled as plagiarism (see flowchart 'Plagiarism in a published article', page 19).
RESPONDING TO WHISTLEBLOWERS WHEN CONCERNS ARE RAISED DIRECTLY

- The tone of the allegations may be aggressive or personal. Respond politely; don't get drawn into personal exchanges.
- Sometimes the whistleblower may prefer to remain anonymous. It is important not to try to 'out' people who wish to be anonymous.

A PUBLISHED ARTICLE IS CRITICISED VIA DIRECT EMAIL TO THE EDITOR OR PUBLISHER. THIS COULD INCLUDE ANONYMOUS OR NOT ANONYMOUS CONCERNS ABOUT SOUNDNESS OF THE DATA 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

Investigate according to the appropriate COPE Flowchart or guidance, and also follow own publisher's guidance

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

No

Request more detail saying that otherwise you are unable to investigate

When more detail is provided, investigate

No more details provided

IF THEY PERSIST WITH VAGUE CLAIMS, POLITELY SAY YOU CANNOT PURSUE THIS FURTHER

Notes

- The tone of the allegations may be aggressive or personal. Respond politely; don't get drawn into personal exchanges.
- Sometimes the whistleblower may prefer to remain anonymous. It is important not to try to 'out' people who wish to be anonymous.

A Published Article is Criticised Via Direct Email to the Editor or Publisher. This could include anonymous or not anonymous concerns about soundness of the data 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.

Investigate according to the appropriate COPE Flowchart or guidance, and also follow own publisher's guidance.

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

No

Request more detail saying that otherwise you are unable to investigate.

When more detail is provided, investigate.

No more details provided.

If they persist with vague claims, politely say you cannot pursue this further.
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 SOUNDNESS OF THE DATA 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

No

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

Yes

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

No

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

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 THERE IS AN OUTCOME TO YOUR INVESTIGATION, SUCH AS A CORRECTION OR RETRACTION, CONSIDER PUTTING INFORMATION ABOUT IT ON THE SAME SOCIAL MEDIA/SITE(S) WHERE THE CONCERNS WERE ORIGINALLY RAISED

It may not be appropriate for Twitter but useful on other sites. Post a link to the resolution on the journal site

IF THEY PERSIST WITH VAGUE CLAIMS, POLITELY SAY YOU CANNOT PURSUE THIS FURTHER AND DO NOT RESPOND TO ANY FURTHER COMMENTS

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)

Notes
- The tone of the allegations may be aggressive or personal. Respond politely; don’t get drawn into personal exchanges.
- Sometimes the whistleblower may prefer to remain anonymous. It is important not to try to ‘out’ people who wish to be anonymous.
- It is important to take the discussion away from the public domain; don’t engage in specific discussions on social media.

Treat in the same way as concerns raised directly

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

Make sure the authors will be able to access the comments.

**Developed in collaboration with:**

- 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 soundness of the data or allegations of plagiarism, figure manipulation, or other forms of misconduct.

Cite this as:
©2021 Committee on Publication Ethics (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
Addition of extra author — before publication

CHANGES IN AUTHORSHIP

Check that all authors consent in writing to addition of extra author

Yes

Request new author to complete journal’s authorship declaration, if used

Amend author list and contributor details (role of each contributor/author), as needed

PROCEED WITH REVIEW/PUBLICATION

No

SUSPEND REVIEW/PUBLICATION OF PAPER

Authorship needs to be agreed by all author(s), if necessary, via institution(s)

Notes
- See also flowchart on ‘Ghost, guest, or gift authorship in a submitted manuscript’ (page 9) as requests for authorship changes may indicate presence of a ghost, guest, or gift author.
- Major changes in response to reviewer comments (eg, adding new data) might justify the inclusion of a new author.

- Ask why author was omitted from original list – ideally, refer to journal guidelines or authorship declaration, which should state that all authors meet appropriate criteria and that no deserving authors have been omitted.

Cite this as:
Version 2: March 2021. ©2021 Committee on Publication Ethics (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) publicationethics.org
CHANGES IN AUTHORSHIP

REMOVAL OF AUTHOR — BEFORE PUBLICATION

Check that all authors consent in writing to removal of author (including excluded author)

Ask why author should be (or wishes to be) removed from list — refer to journal guidelines or authorship declaration, which should state that all authors meet appropriate criteria. Ask if excluded author suspects fraud/misconduct

Amend author list and contributor details (role of each author/contributor and acknowledgements), as needed

Notes
- See also flowchart on ‘Ghost, guest, or gift authorship in a submitted manuscript’ (page 9) as requests for authorship changes may indicate presence of a ghost, guest, or gift author.
- Most important to check with the author(s) whose name(s) is/are being removed from the paper and get their agreement in writing.

PROCEED WITH REVIEW/PUBLICATION

SUSPEND REVIEW/PUBLICATION OF PAPER

Authorship needs to be agreed by all authors. 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
Ask why author was omitted from original list – ideally, refer to journal guidelines or authorship declaration, which should state that all authors meet appropriate criteria and that no deserving authors have been omitted.

Check that all authors consent in writing to addition of extra author.

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.

Check that all authors agree.

Refer case to authors’ institution(s) and ask it/them to adjudicate.

Publish correction if required by institution(s).

Publish correction if needed.
Ask why author should be (or wishes to be) removed from list – refer to journal guidelines or authorship declaration, which should state that all authors meet appropriate criteria. Ask if excluded author suspects fraud/misconduct.

**Clarify reason for removing author**

- Requester/author(s) gives acceptable reason
  - Check that all authors agree in writing to the change (including excluded author)
    - Yes: Publish correction
    - No: Refer case to authors’ institution(s) and ask it/them to adjudicate
  - No: 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

**See appropriate flowchart (e.g., for fabricated data)**

- Author(s) alleged fraud/misconduct
  - Suggest author(s) put views in a letter. 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 publishable letter
      - Yes: Publish correction
      - No: Author(s) does not agree to write letter (or writes something unpublishable)
    - No: Contact other authors explaining the situation
      - Yes: Invite others to respond
        - Yes, other authors submit response: Publish both letters
        - No, other authors do not wish to respond: Publish minority view letter
      - No: Other authors do not wish to respond

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

**Review reasons for removal of author(s)**

- Author(s) has different interpretation of data
  - Yes: Publish correction if required by institution(s)
  - No: Publish correction if needed
GHOST, GUEST, OR GIFT AUTHORSHIP IN A SUBMITTED MANUSCRIPT

SUSPEND PEER REVIEW IF SUSPICION IS RAISED ABOUT AUTHORSHIP

Review acknowledgement section and authorship declaration (if supplied)

Send copy of journal’s authorship policy** to corresponding author and request declaration that all qualify and no authors have been omitted (if not obtained previously)

Request information (or further details) of individuals’ contributions***

Authorship role missing (eg, contributor list does not include anybody who analysed data or prepared first draft)

‘Ghost’ author(s) identified

Suggest missing author(s) should be added to list

Listed author(s) does not meet authorship criteria

‘Guest’ or ‘gift’ author(s) identified

Suggest guest/gift author(s) should be removed/moved to acknowledgements section

Satisfactory explanation of author list

Doubts remain/need more information

Try to contact authors (Check Medline/Google for current affiliations/emails) and ask about their role, whether any authors have been omitted, and whether they have any concerns about authorship

Get agreement for authorship change (in writing) from all authors.

Letter should also clearly state the journal’s authorship policy and/or refer to published criteria (eg, ICMJE) and may express concern/disappointment that these were not followed.

For senior authors, consider copying this letter to their head of department/person responsible for research governance

PROCEED WITH REVIEW/PUBLICATION

Review your journal’s instructions to contributors and submission forms to ensure clear guidance and prevent future problem

Reference


Links to other sites are provided for your convenience but COPE accepts no responsibility or liability for the content of those sites.
Editors cannot police author or contributor listings for every submission but may sometimes have suspicions that an author list is incomplete or includes undeserving (guest or gift) authors. The COPE Flowchart ‘Ghost, guest, or gift authorship in a submitted manuscript’ (page 9) 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. Gøtzsche et al.1 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 they fulfil 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 professional enhancement (ie, 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, eg, 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 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 (eg, it appears that none of the named authors were responsible for analysing the data or drafting the paper).
- Unfeasibly long or short author list (eg, 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.1,2

References


Links to other sites are provided for your convenience but COPE accepts no responsibility or liability for the content of those sites.
Signs that might indicate authorship problems

- **Industry funded study with no authors from sponsor company**
  This may be legitimate, but may also mean deserving authors have been omitted; reviewing the original protocol may help determine the role of employees.

- **Language quality in the manuscript does not match that of the cover letter**
  Bear in mind this may be legitimate if author has used language editing services.

- **Corresponding author seems unable to respond to reviewers’ comments**
  Check Word document properties or tracking or comment functions, but bear in mind that there may be an innocent explanation for this.

- **Manuscript was drafted or revised by someone not on the author list or acknowledged**
  This may be an innocent explanation for this.

- **Tracking in manuscript shows that authors have been added or removed**
  For example, a head of department as senior author.

- **Authorship changes without notification during revision stages**
  For example, a head of department as senior author.

- **Several similar articles have been published under different author names or aliases**
  This may be detected by an online search or plagiarism check.

Best practice to minimise authorship problems

1. **SUBMIT**
   - Adopt policies that allow for transparency around who contributed to the submitted work and in what capacity.

2. **ENCOURAGE**
   - Facilitate awareness of emerging standards eg, ORCID and CRediT.

3. **BEHAVIOUR**
   - Check for unusual patterns of behaviour which may suggest authorship problems.

**Authorship policies:**
Clear policies (that allow for transparency around who contributed to the work and in what capacity) should be in place for requirements for authorship and contributorship as well as processes for managing potential disputes.

For further details see: [publicationethics.org/authorship](https://publicationethics.org/authorship)

**Relevant COPE Flowcharts and cases:**
- Flowchart: How to recognise potential authorship problems. [https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.22](https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.22)
- Flowchart: Suspected ghost, guest, or gift authorship. [https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.18](https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.18)
- Flowchart: Request for removal of author after publication. [https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.11](https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.11)
- Flowchart: Systematic manipulation of the publication process. [https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.23](https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.23)
- Case 17-15: Stolen article. [https://cope.onl/case-stolen](https://cope.onl/case-stolen)
- Case 17-16: Authorship issues from disbanded consortium. [https://cope.onl/case-authorship](https://cope.onl/case-authorship)
- Case 17-14: Withdrawal request by an author. [https://cope.onl/case-withdraw](https://cope.onl/case-withdraw)

**Further reading**
- COPE Discussion document on best practice in theses publishing. [https://doi.org/10.24318/LOU1h9US](https://doi.org/10.24318/LOU1h9US)
- COPE webinar 2017: Standards in authorship. [https://cope.onl/issues](https://cope.onl/issues)
- eLearning module on authorship (members only). [https://cope.onl/elearn-author](https://cope.onl/elearn-author)
- Master Z, Bryn Williams-Jones B. Publication practices in multidisciplinary teams: a closer look at authorship assignment and ranking. [https://cope.onl/author-assign](https://cope.onl/author-assign)
- McNutt MK, Bradford M, Drazen JM, et al. Transparency in authors’ contributions and responsibilities to promote integrity in scientific publication. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 2018;115:2557-60. [https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1715374115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1715374115)
- Wager E. Authors, ghosts, damned lies, and statisticians. *PLoS Med* 2007;4:e34. [https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0040034](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0040034)

Links to other sites are provided for your convenience but COPE accepts no responsibility or liability for the content of those sites.
UNDISCLOSED CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN A SUBMITTED MANUSCRIPT

REVIEWER INFORMS EDITOR OF AUTHOR’S UNDISCLOSED CONFLICT OF INTEREST (CoI)

Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate

Contact author(s) and express concern

Author(s) supplies relevant details

Author(s) denies CoI

Thank author(s) but point out seriousness of omission

Explain journal policy/CoI definition clearly and obtain signed statement from author(s) about all relevant CoIs

Amend competing interest statement as required

PROCEED WITH REVIEW

INFORM REVIEWER OF OUTCOME/ACTION

It may be helpful to provide a copy of the journal’s policy/definition of CoI

Note
To avoid future problems, always get signed statement of CoIs from all authors and reviewers before publication. Ensure journal guidelines include clear definition of CoI.
Note
To avoid future problems, always get signed statement of CoIs from all authors and reviewers before publication. Ensure journal guidelines include clear definition of CoI.

UNDISCLOSED CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN A PUBLISHED ARTICLE

READER INFORMS EDITOR OF AUTHOR’S UNDISCLOSED CONFLICT OF INTEREST (CoI)

Thank reader and say you plan to investigate

Contact author(s) and express concern

Author(s) supplies relevant details

Author(s) denies Col

Thank author(s) but point out seriousness of omission

Explain journal policy/Col definition clearly and obtain signed statement from author(s) about all relevant CoIs (if not obtained previously)

PUBLISH CORRECTION TO COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT AS REQUIRED

INFORM READER OF OUTCOME/ACTION

It may be helpful to provide a copy of the journal’s policy/definition of CoI

To avoid future problems, always get signed statement of CoIs from all authors and reviewers before publication. Ensure journal guidelines include clear definition of CoI.

It may be helpful to provide a copy of the journal’s policy/definition of CoI.
REVIEWER EXPRESS SUSPICION OF FABRICATED DATA

Thank reviewer, ask for evidence (if not already provided) and state your plans to investigate. Consider getting a second opinion from another reviewer.

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

Author responds

- Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt
  - Contact author's institution requesting an investigation
  - Author(s) found not guilty
  - Author(s) found guilty
  - No or unsatisfactory response

- Satisfactory explanation
  - Inform all authors that you intend to contact institution/regulatory body
  - APOLOGISE TO AUTHOR(S) AND PROCEED WITH REVIEW
  - APOLOGISE TO AUTHOR, INFORM REVIEWER OF OUTCOME AND PROCEED WITH REVIEW
  - INFORM REVIEWER OF OUTCOME/ACTION

No response

- Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for current affiliations/emails)
  - Contact author's institution requesting an investigation
  - Contact regulatory body (e.g., GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No response

- Attempt to contact all other authors
  - Author(s) found not guilty
  - Author(s) found guilty
  - No or unsatisfactory response

- Contact author's institution requesting an investigation
  - Contact regulatory body requesting an enquiry
  - REJECT MANUSCRIPT
Note
This flowchart relates only to cases where concerns related to digital photographic images are raised (e.g., duplication of parts within an image, or use of identical images to show different things). For wider concerns about potential data fabrication, please consult the flowchart ‘Fabricated data in a published article’ (page 14).

References

Butler D. Researchers have finally created a tool to spot duplicated images across thousands of papers. Nature 2018;555:18 https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-02421-3

Goodchild van Hilten L. At Harvard, developing software to spot misused images in science. http://b.link/elsevier-img

Links to other sites are provided for your convenience but COPE accepts no responsibility or liability for the content of those sites.
**Suspected Ethical Problem in a Submitted Manuscript**

- **Reviewer (or Editor) Raises Ethical Concern About Manuscript**
  - Thank reviewer (or editor) and say you plan to investigate.

- **Request Author to Supply Relevant Details**
  - **Satisfactory Response**
    - **Apologise to Author, Inform Reviewer of Outcome and Proceed with Review**
    - 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.
    - **Case Resolved Satisfactorily**
  - **No or Unsatisfactory Response**
    - Contact institution at 3-6 monthly intervals, seeking conclusion of investigation.
    - **No or Unsatisfactory Response**
      - **Refer to Other Authorities (e.g., Medical Registration Body, UKPR, ORI)**
      - Inform reviewer about outcome/action.

- **For example, lack of ethical approval, concern about patient consent or protection, or concern about animal experimentation.**
- **For example, request evidence of ethical committee/IRB approval or copy of informed consent documents.**
- **For COPE members, consider submitting case to COPE Forum if it raises novel ethical issues.**

**Publication Ethics**

Cite this as: COPE Council.
COPE Flowcharts and infographics — Full set — English.
https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.26
©2021 Committee on Publication Ethics
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
**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)
  - Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work is original and the author’s own and documentary evidence of plagiarism.

- **Redundancy** (i.e., copying from author’s own work)
  - See flowchart on redundancy

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

- **No problem**
  - Contact author in neutral terms expressing disappointment/explaining journal’s position. Ask author to rephrase copied phrases or include as direct quotations, with references.

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

- **Discuss with reviewer and proceed with review**

- **No response**
  - Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for current affiliations/emails)

- **Author responds**
  - Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt
  - Write to author (all authors if possible) explaining position and expected future behaviour. Consider if need for rejection or revision
  - Inform reviewer of outcome/action
  - Keep contacting institution every 3-6 months
  - If no resolution, consider contacting other authorities (e.g., ORI in US, GMC in UK)

- **Satisfactory explanation** (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)
  - Write to author (all authors if possible) explaining position and expected future behaviour. Consider if need for rejection or revision
  - Inform reviewer of outcome/action
  - Keep contacting institution every 3-6 months
  - If no resolution, consider contacting other authorities (e.g., ORI in US, GMC in UK)

**Note**

The instructions to authors should include a definition of plagiarism and state the journal’s policy on plagiarism.
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 (eg, 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(s) if this has been omitted

INFORM READER (AND PLAGIARISED AUTHOR(S) IF DIFFERENT) OF JOURNAL’S ACTIONS

No response

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

Author responds

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Contact all authors and tell them what you plan to do

INFORM EDITOR OF OTHER JOURNAL(S) INVOLVED OR PUBLISHER OF PLAGIARISED BOOK(S), CONSIDER PUBLISHING RETRACTION

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

Write to author (all authors if possible), explaining position and expected future behaviour. Consider if need for retraction or correction

INFORM READER AND VICTIM(S) OF OUTCOME/ACTION

No response

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, (eg, ORI in US, GMC in UK)

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

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

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

Journals should consider developing a training programme for editors and editorial board members using the eLearning course for COPE members (https://cope.onl/elearn) or other resources.

Ethical issues are often complex and the approach will vary depending on the specific problem and the resources of the journal. In general, COPE expects that member journals will adhere to these three basic principles to resolve ethical issues and cases of alleged misconduct:

- Editorial staff must be committed to correcting the literature when needed and following through on requests from institutional investigations.
- Systems must be in place to promptly attend to and resolve all complaints related to publication ethics.
- Journal guidelines and processes must be transparent.

Provide links to COPE Guidelines, flowcharts, and other materials (eg, ICMJE authorship and conflict of interest guidelines)

These items will clearly inform authors, reviewers, and readers of the processes of submission, review, publication, and grievances

Clearly identify contact information for the person responsible for handling allegations of misconduct

Establish editorial office guidelines about who responds to complaints (eg, in what manner, within what time frame, and what parameters require involvement of legal staff and the publisher). Some journals have an ethics committee; others rely on a sole editor to handle these issues

Know when and how to liaise with other editors and institutions.

Further reading

2. Wager E, Kleinert S, on behalf of COPE Council. Cooperation between research institutions and journals on research integrity cases: guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), version 1, March 2012. https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2018.1.3
Definition of systematic manipulation of the publication process

Systematic manipulation of the publication process is where an individual or a group of individuals have repeatedly used dishonest or fraudulent practices to:

- prevent or inappropriately influence the independent assessment of a piece of scholarly work by an independent peer.
- inappropriately attribute authorship of a piece of scholarly work.
- publish fabricated or plagiarised research.

Systematic manipulation is conducted with the goal of influencing the publication record and/or achieving financial gain, and involves more than one manuscript and possibly more than one journal.

Systematic manipulation of the publication process may raise concerns at different levels:

- **Peer review manipulation.** This type of manipulation can occur directly by manipulation or hacking of the submission system of the journal. It can also occur when authors are able to suggest peer reviewers and input contact email addresses for these peer reviewers on the submission system of the journal. The authors may suggest fabricated names or names of real experts, but the contact email addresses are falsified so that all correspondence with the suggested peer reviewers is directed back to the authors. The manipulators then submit positive peer review reports to ensure the manuscript is accepted for publication.

  This type of manipulation may be carried out by a group of individuals who agree to act as false peer reviewers for each other’s manuscripts, thereby guaranteeing favourable peer review reports and boosting the publication records of the group.

  Third party editing agencies may carry out this type of manipulation by suggesting peer reviewers on the authors’ behalf, for a fee, but supplying fabricated email addresses that they input on the submission system of the journal (although not necessarily with the authors’ knowledge). They then also supply the favourable reviews, thereby guaranteeing manuscript acceptance for which they can charge a fee (Fig 1).

- **Authorship for sale/papermills.** Another possibility is initially inserting the name of an accomplished guest author, especially for single-blind and open review, and then replacing the name during revision or after editorial acceptance (Fig 2).

- **Substitution of a manuscript.** Sometimes a high quality manuscript is initially submitted (to ensure it passes peer review) and then a similar, but poorer quality manuscript (the authors’ own manuscript) is substituted after editorial acceptance.

Note: Peer review manipulation may occur in isolation and be instigated by authors on a small scale, for example, if a group of individuals are trying to boost their own publication records. Authorship for sale is likely to be accompanied by peer review manipulation because claiming a fee from the authors is dependent on acceptance for publication.
How to investigate and prevent further publication manipulation

On discovering a suspicious pattern, the first considerations would be:

- To determine the cause of the problem – is it the authors, is it the reviewers?
- Search for other submissions and publications by the same authors.
- Check the peer reviewers of the suspicious manuscripts and published articles.
- Check the email addresses of peer reviewers of suspicious manuscripts and articles.
- Check whether there have been requests to change authorship or make major revisions after editorial acceptance.

Further investigation might include:

- Searching for computer IP addresses to determine whether all manuscripts were submitted via the same location.
- Cross publisher pattern checking via the COPE Publishers’ Forum.
- Seeking advice from COPE.

Prevention steps may include the following:

- Using technology, such as adding flags to manuscripts or running searches on suspicious names or emails across all journals might make patterns become apparent.
- Providing information and training for editors to raise awareness of the types of manipulation that are occurring and what to look out for would be useful.

COPE Publishers’ Forum

The COPE Publishers’ Forum is already used by publisher members of COPE to seek advice on unusual cases. It provides a confidential means of sharing information, such as patterns of behaviour, about publication process manipulation with other publishers to allow them to look for similar patterns in their systems. Over time, these shared patterns and findings could develop into a resource that all members could use to help with their investigations into suspicious activities.
Is there clear evidence of systematic manipulation?

Probably not systematic*

Follow existing COPE guidelines***

If suspicion is raised in a submitted manuscript for systematic manipulation of the publication process*

Get full documentary evidence and try to elucidate if there is clear evidence of systematic publication process manipulation (eg, share patterns of findings with other publishers via COPE)**

Suspending peer review process if suspicion is raised in a submitted manuscript for systematic manipulation of the publication process*

Contact the corresponding author, and co-authors if possible, with evidence and concerns requesting an explanation

Authors admit manipulation

Consider seeking help from the authors’ institutions

Yes the institutions might be able to investigate

Contact authors’ institutions requesting an investigation, and inform authors

Satisfactory explanation

No, the institutions are unlikely to be able to investigate

No response or inconclusive reply

Authors admit manipulation

Write to all authors and their institutions, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Yes misconduct confirmed

Satisfactory explanation

No response or inconclusive reply

Authors admit manipulation

Consider contacting the institutions every 3 months. If no response 1 year after first contact, reject affected manuscripts and inform authors and institutions**

Inform authors and institutions of the decision to reject

Reject manuscripts**

Notes

- *Please check guidance on ‘Systematic manipulation of the publication process’ (pages 21-22) for definitions of systematic manipulation and information on how to spot, investigate, and prevent it.
- **COPE encourages its publisher members to share their findings on the COPE Publishers’ Forum.
- ***If you suspect peer review manipulation see flowcharts on ‘Peer review manipulation’ (pages 26-27).
SUSPICION IS RAISED IN A PUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT FOR SYSTEMATIC MANIPULATION OF THE PUBLICATION PROCESS*

Get full documentary evidence and try to elucidate if there is clear evidence of systematic publication process manipulation (e.g., share patterns of findings with other publishers via COPE)**

Is there clear evidence of systematic manipulation?

- Probably not systematic*

- Probably

Contact the corresponding author, and co-authors if possible, with evidence and concerns requesting an explanation

Response

- Satisfactory response

- Authors admit manipulation

Consider seeking help from the authors’ institutions

Yes the institutions might be able to investigate

Contact authors’ institutions requesting an investigation, and inform authors

Inform authors and institutions of the decision to retract and retraction wording

- Yes misconduct confirmed

- Satisfactory explanation

RETRACT ARTICLES**

No response or inconclusive reply

Consider contacting the institutions every 3 months

No

Consider whether, without institutional help, the article’s integrity remains intact

Yes/probably

CONSIDER PUBLISHING AN EXPRESSION OF CONCERN

FOLLOW EXISTING COPE GUIDELINES***

Notes

- *Please check guidance on 'Systematic manipulation of the publication process' (pages 21-22) for definitions of systematic manipulation and information on how to spot, investigate, and prevent it.
- **COPE encourages its publisher members to share their findings on the COPE Publishers’ Forum.
- ***If you suspect peer review manipulation see flowcharts on 'Peer review manipulation' (pages 26-27).

- Developed in collaboration with:

*COPE Council*
*COPE Flowcharts*
*and infographics — Full set — English. [https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.26]*


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**COPE encourages its publisher members to share their findings on the COPE Publishers’ Forum.

***If you suspect peer review manipulation see flowcharts on 'Peer review manipulation' (pages 26-27).

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cite this as:
COPE Council. COPE Flowcharts and infographics — Full set — English. [https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.26]


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WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN ASKED TO PEER REVIEW A MANUSCRIPT

YOU RECEIVE A REVIEWER INVITATION FROM A JOURNAL

Is it a journal you know? Otherwise, for guidance, see ThinkCheckSubmit.org.

Is the journal legitimate?

Yes

No

Read the instructions for reviewers provided by the journal

Do you understand and accept the review model and policies?

Yes

No

Consider the review model of the journal and the evaluation criteria given

Consider any potential conflicts of interest — professional, personal or financial — and check the journal’s CoI policy

Is author information provided?

Yes

No

Contact the editor or editorial office and if confirmed,

If the journal uses double-blind review, do you have a good idea who the likely authors are?

Yes

No

Do you have any conflicts of interest?

Yes

No

Contact the editor or editorial office and discuss how potential CoIs will be minimised; otherwise

Check the title and abstract provided; do you have any conflicts of interest?

Yes

No

Contact the editor or editorial office and discuss if they want you to check only a particular aspect of the manuscript; otherwise

Check the title and abstract provided; are you able to sufficiently assess the manuscript?

Yes

No

Can you make the deadline requested by the journal?

Yes

No

ACCEPT THE INVITATION

DECLINE INVITATION

You may want to let the journal know not to contact you again.

DECLINE INVITATION

You may want to give the reason and/or suggest other potential reviewers.

DECLINE INVITATION

You may want to give the reason and/or suggest other potential reviewers.

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DECLINE INVITATION

You may want to give the reason and/or suggest other potential reviewers.
PEER REVIEW MANIPULATION

SUSPECTED DURING THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Contact named peer reviewer and ask if they also use the email address provided to you.

- **Yes**
  - Can named reviewer independently provide details of the manuscript they are reviewing?
  - **Yes**
    - Satisfactory explanation, thank reviewer
  - **No**
    - Thank the contacted individual and say you plan to investigate.
    - Contact individual who suggested the named peer reviewer (e.g., handling editor) and ask for explanation.

- **No**
  - **No response**
    - Check publication record, online search, or reviewer database to find other means of independently locating email address.
    - **Yes**
      - Suspend peer review process if peer reviewer name appears legitimate but suspicious email address provided.
    - **No**
      - Contact named peer reviewer and ask if they also use the email address provided to you.

- **No response**
  - Cite this as: COPE Council. COPE Flowcharts and infographics — Full set — English. https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.26
  - ©2021 Committee on Publication Ethics (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Note
See also infographic ‘How to recognise potential manipulation of the peer review process’ (page 28) and guidance on ‘Systematic manipulation of the publication process’ (pages 21-24).
Contact named peer reviewer on organisational email address and ask if they also use the email address provided to you

Yes

Can reviewer confirm details of manuscript?

Satisfactory explanation, thank reviewer, leave publication as stands

Thank contacted individual and say you plan to investigate

Contact individual who suggested the named peer reviewer (eg, handling editor) and ask for explanation

If satisfactory (eg, naive or genuine mistake)

Thank individual but check other reviewers had sufficient expertise to assess the manuscript

If ok

Leave publication as stands

If other reviews unsatisfactory

Conduct post-publication peer review

Consider adding expression of concern

If revisions needed or if flawed

Conduct post-publication changes as appropriate

Such as correction, retraction, or adding expression of concern

If revisions needed or if flawed

Note
See also infographic ‘How to recognise potential manipulation of the peer review process’ (page 28) and guidance on ‘Systematic manipulation of the publication process’ (pages 21-24).
Recognised features or patterns of questionable reviewer activity

- Similarity to other peer reviewer reports (purportedly from different individuals)
- Suspicious email address (including, but not limited to: gmail, yahoo, or hotmail accounts)
- A review that is vague in style (language not typical of apparent seniority, experience, or educational background of reviewer) [Ref 4]
- Positive review in strong contrast to other reviewers (with mainly grammatical changes)
- Fictitious name
- Work in an unrelated subject to the manuscript
- Extremely quick to agree to peer review (and particularly ‘active’ in a journal’s peer review database)
- Reviews frequently returned well ahead of the deadline
- Complimentary review but point out minor technical issues (appearing credible)
- Atypical features of the IP address
- Never recommends rejection
- Agreeing to review many manuscripts (and particularly “active” in a journal’s peer review database)

Best practice to minimise peer review manipulation

1. Require that authors submit manuscripts to the journal themselves.
2. Try to use institutional emails or institutionally verified ORCIDs when inviting peer reviewers.
3. Always check that suggested peer reviewers are qualified to review the manuscript and their email address is accurate.
4. Check for unusual patterns of behaviour which in combination may suggest peer review manipulation is occurring.

Peer reviewers may be suggested by:
- the Editor handling the manuscript.
- authors on submission of their manuscript to a journal.
- another reviewer who is unable to peer review the manuscript.

While there is an expectation that everyone involved in the process acts with integrity, the peer review process can be susceptible to manipulation, as discussed at COPE’s 2016 North American Seminar.

The features or patterns of activity shown opposite are suggested to help editors recognise potential signs of peer review manipulation. Often it is the occurrence of these features in combination that may indicate a potential issue, and they may only become apparent at later stages in the peer review or publishing process.

References
1. COPE Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers. https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.9

Relevant COPE cases:
Case 11-27: Author creates bogus email accounts for proposed reviewers. https://cope.onl/bogus-email
Case 12-12: Compromised peer review system in published papers. https://cope.onl/case-review

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

- The instructions to authors should state the journal’s policy on redundant publication.
- To help in future investigations, ask authors at submission stage to verify that their manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.
- During investigations, it may be helpful to request the institution’s policy.
- International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) advises that translations are acceptable but MUST reference the original.

Redundancy may be detected by text-matching software (eg, Crossref Similarity Check)

REVIEWER INFORMS EDITOR ABOUT REDUNDANT PUBLICATION

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 (ie, based on same data with identical or very similar findings and/or evidence that authors have sought to hide redundancy, for example, 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

Minor overlap with some element of redundancy or legitimate overlap (eg, methods) or re-analysis (eg, subgroup analysis/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

No significant overlap

INFORM REVIEWER OF DECISION AND PROCEED WITH REVIEW

INFORM REVIEWER OF OUTCOME/ACTION AND PROCEED WITH REVIEW

Author responds

No response

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

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

WRITE TO AUTHOR (ALL AUTHORS IF POSSIBLE) REJECTING MANUSCRIPT, EXPLAINING POSITION AND EXPECTED FUTURE BEHAVIOUR

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

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

Write to author (all authors if possible), explaining position and expected future behaviour. Consider if need for rejection or revision

Inform author(s) of your action

CONSIDER INFORMING AUTHOR’S SUPERIOR AND/OR PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR RESEARCH GOVERNANCE

If no response,

KEEP CONTACTING INSTITUTION EVERY 3-6 MONTHS

Cite this as:
Version 2:
March 2021.
©2021 Committee on Publication Ethics (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
Notes:
- The instructions to authors should state the journal’s policy on redundant publication.
- To help in future investigations, ask authors at submission stage to verify that their manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.
- 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.

READER INFORMS EDITOR ABOUT REDUNDANT PUBLICATION

Thank reader 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 dataset with identical findings and/or evidence that authors have sought to hide redundancy, for example, by changing title or author order or not referring to previous papers)

Minor overlap (‘salami publishing’ with some element of redundancy) or legitimate repetition or re-analysis (e.g., subgroup analysis/extended follow-up/repeated methods)

Contact author in neutral terms expressing concern/explaining journal’s position. Discuss publishing correction giving reference to original paper.

Where editor has reason to believe failure to refer to previous paper(s) was deliberate, consider informing author’s superior or person responsible for research governance

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

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

INFORM READER OF OUTCOME/ACTION

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/legitimate publication)

Write to author (all authors if possible), explaining position and expected future behaviour. Consider if need for retraction or correction

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

INFORM READER OF OUTCOME/ACTION

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

INFORM EDITOR OF OTHER JOURNAL INVOLVED. CONSIDER PUBLISHING RETraction, OR STATEMENT OF REDUNDANT PUBLICATION IF OTHER JOURNAL AGREES TO RETRACT

INFORM READER OF OUTCOME/ACTION

CONSIDER INFORMING AUTHOR’S SUPERIOR AND/OR PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR RESEARCH GOVERNANCE

KEEP CONTACTING INSTITUTION EVERY 3-6 MONTHS

INFORM READER OF DECISION AND LEAVE PUBLICATION AS IT STANDS

No significant overlap

INFORM READER OF DECISION AND LEAVE PUBLICATION AS IT STANDS