



publicationethics.org

**GUIDELINES:
EDITING PEER REVIEWS**

GUIDELINES



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GUIDANCE ON EDITING PEER REVIEWS

These guidelines are formal **COPE** policy and are intended to advise editors, publishers, and researchers on expected practices regarding editing peer reviews.

Summary

- Journals should have clear guidelines for reviewers on what is acceptable and unacceptable in a reviewer report regarding tone, language, and content.
- The journal policy for whether and under what circumstances a review might be edited or suppressed should be clearly stated.
- Ideally, any edits of the review should be the result of collaboration with the reviewer by giving them the opportunity to revise the report themselves to comply with the journal's guidelines.
- The editor should inform the reviewer of any significant edits made to their review if the reviewer was not involved in the editing process. Such edits should address only issues of tone, language, and deviations from journal policy and reviewer guidelines, and should not change the meaning or intention of the review, nor alter the reviewer's professional opinion about the quality, content, or intellectual validity of the manuscript under review.
- As an alternative to editing the review itself, the editor should provide guidance to the author on how to respond to a hostile or unprofessional review and reference the journal policy that precludes editing the reviews, if applicable. This guidance could be provided in editorial parenthetical comments within the review itself or in an editor's decision letter.

Introduction

According to the **COPE** discussion document, Who 'owns' peer reviews?,¹ peer reviews are solicited by journals to assist "editors in deciding whether the research is suitable for publication in their journal" and are "expressly solicited as a work product by a journal". The discussion document notes that "most reviews meet the requirements for protection as 'an original work of authorship'" and that "the reviewer holds copyright to their reviewer comments".

These two perspectives can be in conflict if, before forwarding a peer review to an author, an editor feels that it would benefit from editing to improve clarity or to remove destructive, discriminatory, or defamatory comments, or personal attacks. In extreme cases, an editor might want to withhold a review. The editor has specifically commissioned the review as part of the journal's operation and is responsible for ensuring that authors receive useful and professional feedback and advice. However, reviewers have volunteered their time and expertise to advise the editor and author about the disposition and improvement of the paper, and therefore they deserve to be consulted if revisions are needed and should be given the opportunity to approve the final version of the review.

At a **COPE** Forum in March 2020, discussing editing of reviewer comments,² the lack of general guidance about if or when editing, redaction, or suppression of peer reviewer comments is appropriate was apparent, as well as the relevant procedures involved. A literature review in 2019 identified no pertinent papers that examined this issue. This document, therefore, aims to provide basic guidelines for editors to develop journal policies and procedures on editing peer reviews.

Need for guidelines on editing peer reviews

COPE conducted a short survey to obtain information from its members about their experience with, and views on, editing reviewer comments. The survey was piloted with **COPE** Council and Trustee Board members before being distributed to all **COPE** members. Although the response rate was insufficient to support a robust quantitative analysis, the results highlighted several aspects that require careful consideration. A total of 145 individuals completed some or all of the survey.³ Approximately 25% of respondents reported that it is never acceptable to suppress a full review, and 14% said that it is never acceptable to edit a review. The most common reasons cited for suppressing or editing a review were concerns about a hostile or personal tone, and non-compliance with the journal's reviewer guidelines. Similar results were reported by Hamilton *et al*⁴ after conducting a survey of the editors of 1500 journals of ecology, economics, medicine, physics, and psychology; 322 responded. The survey explored a variety of topics, including situations where an editor might edit a reviewer's report. The survey found that when the reviewer had used inappropriate or offensive language, 15% of editors responded that it was never acceptable to edit the report, 58% said that it was acceptable without the reviewer's permission, and 26% said that it was acceptable but only with the reviewer's permission. Similar results were obtained if the reviewer had made an inappropriate reference to the author's age or gender. Spelling, grammatical errors, or English language problems were considered to be never acceptable to edit by 33-35% of respondents, correctable without the reviewer's permission by 17-25%, and correctable only with the reviewer's permission by 42-48%. In contrast, 81% of respondents reported that it was never acceptable to edit the review if the editor disagreed with the reviewer's recommendation; 8% felt that it was acceptable without the reviewer's permission and 11% responded that it was acceptable to edit but only with the reviewer's consent. Importantly, 84% indicated that their journal did not have an official policy on editing peer review reports.

Both of these surveys reinforce the importance for journals to provide clear instructions to reviewers about how to write peer review reports and whether the journal's policy is to edit them. Instructions to reviewers should clarify relevant journal policies (with links to those policies) regarding the tone, language quality, and content of reviews, specifying that comments should be constructive, courteous, and clear. If the journal policy allows for editing of reviewer reports, the information for reviewers should clearly articulate what would prompt editing, as well as the editing procedure. The instructions could also explicitly state whether reviewers retain the copyright to their reviews, whether reviewers should remain anonymous in their reports, and whether and how peer reviews are published.

Level of editing and editing procedure

Some journals might choose to have a general policy of reserving the right to edit all journal content and correspondence for style and clarity, which might include peer reviews. Editors who choose to do so should be consistent, fair, and transparent. Policies should state whether the reviews might be edited, either with or without permission of the review author, and whether a review might be suppressed altogether and under what circumstances. All journals, however, have a duty to screen for and deal with potentially libellous, offensive, and unethical content. Stewart and Forster⁵ note that "Editors will edit reviewer comments before sending them to authors, to neutralise and balance unconstructive or emotive comments".

Hamilton *et al*⁴ reported that although correction of misspelling, grammar, and language use seem benign, further editing which changes the tone, intention, or content of the review is more treacherous ethically, especially if done without the reviewer's consent or collaboration. It is unprofessional for the editor to alter a review in a substantial way without the consent of the reviewer, or to suppress a review for reasons other than ethical or legal concerns. Such behaviour undermines the peer review process.

Ideally, the reviewer should be asked to participate in the editing of the review before it is sent to the author. This allows the reviewer to maintain control over the content and also serves an educational purpose.

If the reviewer declines to edit the unacceptable portions of the review and if this is acceptable within journal policy, the editor could proceed with editing of the review. When corrections are made, they should address the tone and language only and should in no way change the opinion or judgement of the reviewer on the quality, content, or intellectual validity of the article. Corrections can also address deviations from journal policy and reviewer guidelines. The reviewer should be informed if a significant edit is made to their review. Also, a notation in the manuscript management system of any changes or suppression should be made, and the unedited version should be retained. Reviewers who decline to edit hostile or inappropriate comments or who repetitively submit reviews with such content should be informed that this is not acceptable and be removed from the reviewer pool.

Alternative to editing

The many concerns about non-constructive, hostile, or inflammatory content of reviewers, both by the respondents to COPE's survey and in the survey of Hamilton *et al*,⁴ suggests that editors should use reasonable means to prevent unacceptable content. If a journal has a stated policy of not editing or suppressing reviews, the handling editor could use the decision letter to advise the author about how to respond to a hostile or otherwise unprofessional review, and to express their own opinion about the paper and, in the same venue, explain the policy of not editing or suppressing reviews. Alternatively, the editor could annotate the review document itself, by inserting parenthetical comments immediately adjacent to concerning review comments to provide guidance to the author. For example, if the review contained inappropriate, defamatory, or ad hominem text, the editor could insert

“[Editor: our policy ([link to policy](#)) is to not edit peer review reports. I apologise for this statement. Please feel free to ignore it.]”

Although most of the respondents in both surveys supported the option of editing, and less so suppressing a review, a sizable minority indicated that these actions were never justifiable. There is a real concern that an editor might suppress or alter reviews that run counter to their own opinion, which would subvert the peer review process. Editors should be sufficiently self-aware that if they are considering suppressing or substantially editing a review that runs counter to their own opinion of the paper, they should consult with an associate editor or editorial board member. Alternatively, the editor might consider asking for an additional independent review.

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