Description

Science is practiced by those who aspire to seek the truth. Accordingly, the work of scientists is accepted by society as the standard for separating fact from fiction. For this reason, all researchers must conduct their work ethically, including avoiding conflicts of interest. From conducting experiments, writing manuscripts, and undergoing peer review, scientists must maintain a transparent and honest account of their work.

When manuscripts are submitted to journals, editors seek out experts in the field to review manuscripts. Since researchers working in a similar field often know one another, there can be conflicts of interest in peer review. There are basic rules for reviewers to avoid such conflicts as well as simple rules for writing that help authors be clear regarding authorship and sponsorship.

Rules for Reviewers

Journal editors seek scientists who work in the area of research related to the manuscript under review. In doing so, editors try to identify conflicts of interest, including cases when a potential reviewer has published or worked with the author recently or is sponsored by a pharmaceutical company related to the work under review. Such conflicts of interest must be avoided while conducting peer review.

Once manuscripts are sent for review, reviewers are expected to complete several tasks, including avoiding conflict of interest. Such conflicts can include financial interests, personal disagreements, or professional opportunism. As a general rule for reviewers, an individual must disclose any conflicts of interest to the editor and, if serious, simply abstain from reviewing. If there is any uncertainty over the need to recuse oneself from editing, seek the advice of the editor or senior individuals in one's department.

The consequences of failing to disclose a conflict of interest and engaging in an unethical review of a manuscript are varied. For example, a reviewer can be "blacklisted" such that a journal or group of journals will decline to work with a reviewer who is found to have engaged in misconduct. In more serious cases, relevant authorities or deans of universities can be informed so that they can perform an investigation and take any necessary action.

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Adding Authors After Peer Review

While many reviewers are careful to be transparent in the conduct of their work, some fail to properly disclose conflicts of interest. Recently, for example, a manuscript was submitted for review and was published after having received a positive review. However, one of the reviewers was a close collaborator with the research group of the original manuscript. After publication, the main author sought to add additional co-authors, including one of the original reviewers, to the author list. Following the disclosure that the reviewer was involved in the work included in the manuscript, it was retracted. The editor offered to reconsider the manuscript using a different associate editor and team of reviewers. In attempting to add a co-author after acceptance, it became clear that the manuscript required retraction and undergo peer review once again.

According to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), manuscripts ought to be retracted when their review is compromised by conflicts of interest. While editors must always be mindful of potential conflicts of interest and the scientific validity of research, it is up to a reviewer to be transparent. Retractions of manuscripts are damaging to researchers and, in this case, additional peer review still found that the manuscript was acceptable for publication. In the end, authors and reviewers are best served by being transparent regarding their work.

Dangers of Misconduct in Peer Review

In some instances, authors and reviewers can intentionally be paired by reviewer requests during the manuscript submission process. Likewise, excluding potentially conflicted reviewers is also important. When competitors review manuscripts, they may not disclose their vested interest in seeing a manuscript fail. While some review processes are not blinded such that authors and reviewers know each other's identities, some review processes are single- or double-blinded. In these cases, an author may never be able to contest a peer review that was conducted improperly.

Peer review is a hallmark of research. When conflicts of interest in peer review arise, editors, journals, and authors are all expected to be transparent. This simple rule allows for the continued self-governance of the research process. Failures in the process, such as attempting to add authors, including reviewers, to manuscripts after acceptance or publication, result in retractions and disciplining of those involved. When research is done correctly, it can transform a field or result in the discovery of new cures. For this reason, all scientists must ensure that conflicts of interest in peer review are avoided.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Ethics

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