Editing a journal

# Introduction

Being a journal editor can be hard work, enjoyable, frustrating, fascinating, aggravating and enlightening - frequently all at the same time. This resource will give you an overview of the role of an editor. It will highlight the benefits of being an editor, how the role fits into

the journal publishing process, and some of the challenges and decisions you will face in your work as an editor.

Whether you are learning about editing a journal for the first time, or want to develop new skills, this resource will give you experience of some of the tasks involved in being a journal editor.

# Editors

As an editor, you have a vital role to play in the publication and dissemination of scholarly research - you will ensure the quality and integrity of your discipline by selecting the best articles to publish and helping authors to improve their papers.

This section will highlight the key elements of the editor’s role and how this fits into the overall journal publishing process.

## Why be an editor?

To be a journal editor is to take responsibility for representing your discipline - selecting articles which add to the body of knowledge and ensuring that only good quality research is disseminated.

## How does being an editor benefit you?

As a personal benefit, it will ensure that you are kept at the leading edge of your discipline, and being able to read about new studies in advance of publication is a privilege that few are allowed. Being an editor can also put you in contact with the leading thinkers in your field, whether as authors, reviewers and other editors.

## What qualities will you need?

The cornerstone of a good editor is subject knowledge; alongside this, you will need good judgement, organisation and decisiveness. In your role, you will directly affect the reputation of the journal, and even the discipline. If you have these traits and are ready to take on the challenge of being an editor, then not only will you benefit the journal that you manage, but you will also gain hugely from the experience.

## Why be an author?

Articles are written for a variety of reasons. To be an effective and successful editor you should also be an active researcher, writing your own articles and contributing to journals. This ensures you understand the role and motivations of the author and you can provide the right services for them: timely and constructive review and comment, and quality production and publication.

Most authors have two main aims:

* to tell people about their research
* to build their career

Publishing in the right journal will enhance an author’s reputation as other people read, cite and refer to the author and their research. Equally, publication of research helps to build and support future studies. It is important to understand what drives authors, so you can ensure that your journal performs the functions that authors want and need: publication, dissemination and building of reputation.

# Editorial responsibilities

As an editor, you have responsibilities to every party involved in the publication process from the author through to the reader. Below you can see details of the various parties and the editors’ responsibilities to them.

## To authors

* To be timely in your communication and work
* To be always polite and professional
* To treat their submissions in confidence
* To communicate your expectations and requirements clearly and reasonably

## To reviewers and the editorial board

* To treat communications relating to article review as confidential
* To respect their time, opinions and viewpoints and acknowledge their contribution to the journal

## To the publisher

* To keep to the journal’s schedules
* To avoid bringing the journal into disrepute

## To readers

To ensure that you publish to the highest standard and that you exercise good quality control so they can trust the journal.

As a journal editor you must always be polite and professional and show good judgement. You need to take advice and defer to the judgement of specialists, but you must also be decisive and firm in your choices. And finally, you need to be able to reconsider a decision if the circumstances require this.

# The journal process

To fully appreciate all aspects of an editor’s role you must see it in the context of the wider journal publication process.

This section will highlight the different stages of the publication process and the associated editorial actions.

Below you can see details of each stage of the journal publication process.

## Before submission:

* Some authors will make pre-submission queries – for example, asking if you might be interested in their article. You should make sure that you never promise to publish but tell them whether their proposal sounds interesting or not.
* You may also invite articles - perhaps you’ve heard someone speaking on an interesting topic, or you know someone who has some interesting research that you would like to publish. Again, make sure that you do not promise to publish (because they may write something unsuitable), but equally you must be positive (otherwise you would not be asking them).

## Submission – Editorial First Check

* After an author submits an article, it is your role as an editor to perform an initial check. This allows you to confirm articles which are worth considering, and immediately reject totally unsuitable ones. Think about whether the article fits the journal’s aims and mission. Is it covering a topic that the journal’s readers would be interested in?
* Also check that all required elements have been supplied - figures and tables if they are mentioned in the text, references, author details, etc. - if not, you need to get these before you move onto the next step.

## Selection and Invitation of Reviewers

* You need to identify appropriate specialists who can evaluate the article and provide advice about its suitability for publication. The number that you invite is determined by the journal, but usually two reviewers are used.
* Some articles may not be reviewed, e.g. letters to the editor.
* If you have invited someone to write an article, you should still review it; even the top specialists can make mistakes.
* Reviewers should be invited (usually by email), given the title of the article and an abstract or summary, and the date by which you would like the review returned. Do not give them the authors’ names if using a double-blind peer review system.
* Send the article to the reviewer only after they have agreed.

## Reviewing and Decision-making

* You may need to chase and remind reviewers to send in their reviews.
* Check what the reviewers say and read and comment on the article yourself; remember that the reviewers are providing specialist advice, but it is you who will make the final decision and who assumes responsibility for this.
* The editorial/publishing decision and any useful comments from the reviewers should be sent to the authors.
* The decision may be to accept with no change, accept with changes, reject but invite a resubmission after substantial changes, or reject without resubmission.
* Thank the reviewers for their report and their time. Let them know the publishing decision you have made.

## After Acceptance

* After an article has been accepted it moves into production.
* Some journals work on a flow system: each article enters and moves through production as it is ready.
* Some journals work on a bulk system: you collect all the articles for an issue, and only when they are all in and accepted to the move into production.

## Production

* The Publisher’s production editor will see the journal through the production phases. If you are self-publishing the journal from your department or society, these tasks may be performed by the editorial team.
* Copyediting: articles need to be read and corrected to ensure they are in the house style (spelling, references, etc.). They also need to be read carefully to ensure they make sense and that nothing is missing. This process is called copyediting.
* Sometimes queries arise at this point that need to be answered by the authors.
* Typesetting: when an article is ready, it is ‘set’ into the house design style (including font and layout).
* Proofing (or proofreading): You and the author are sent a typeset copy, or ‘proof’, of the article to check; mistakes may occur during copyediting and typesetting.
* Correction: when an author has returned their proof, any corrections should be collated with those which you noted.

## Issue Collation

* A journal is a collection of articles (and sometimes letters), plus some additional pages such as author guidelines, editorial lists, and adverts.
* In a bulk journal, all articles intended for an issue will be collected and sent for correction together. The proofs will be paginated (divided into pages) and in the right order. After corrections have been made, the additional pages will be added (e.g. author guidelines, editorial lists, adverts, etc.).
* In a flow journal, articles are typeset and sent for checking as and when they are ready. Once corrections have been made, they can be called ‘held for press’ – ready for issue selection at a later date. At this point they may be uploaded onto the website as an ahead-of-print article.
* At the schedule date, you will select and order the articles for publication in an issue. The production editor will collate (put together) and paginate (add page numbers and an index to) the issue and add the additional pages.

## Publication

Journals are published in print, online or in both formats. Once the issue has been collated and final corrections made, the typesetter will generate the files needed for:

* Online publication (to be sent to the website managers)
* Print publication (to be sent to the printers)

## Post-Publication

* You should alert the authors that their article has been published and encourage them to promote it.
* You should email all the reviewers (of the accepted articles) to thank them again and say that the articles they reviewed will be published.
* You should liaise with the journal’s marketing contact to make sure that notifications are sent out via email alerts, social media posts, bookmarking etc. to tell people that the new issue has been published. Some notifications are better received (and only allowed) if sent by the editor, others can be sent by the publisher.

# Making decisions

Decision making is at the core of an editor’s role. One of your key duties as a journal editor is to decide what to publish, and when an article is ready to be published.

This section will explore the area of decision-making, which is sometimes straightforward but can often be complicated.

## Responding to review comments and recommendations

After a journal article has been sent for review, it is your job to respond to the reviewers’ comments and make decisions. The reviewers will have made some comments and a recommendation. Your task is to judge whether you accept their recommendation or not. Although they are specialists and their recommendations must be seriously considered, there may be times when you disagree with them and when you think they have misunderstood the article. As the editor it is within your right to overrule their recommendations, but make sure you have a good reason to do this.

Another common problem is that one reviewer will say one thing, and another will contradict them. This is where your own judgement is important. You must always read the article and make your own decision. You should then compare this with those of the reviewers. Where two reviewers have conflicting comments, you need to adjudicate - and only if you cannot, should you send the article to another reviewer for clarification.

Equally, you may not agree with all the suggestions made by the reviewers - one may ask for changes that you think are unnecessary considering the journal’s mission or audience, or you think their suggestions are actually wrong. Again, you must make a decision, but ensure that you have a good reason for your verdict.

## What decision could you make?

After the article has been reviewed and you have considered the comments and recommendations, you will need to make a decision about the article.

You can choose between the following four options:

* Accept with no changes
  + This is relatively uncommon (most articles need some corrections).
* Accept with changes
  + The article needs some changes, but if they are made satisfactorily then you would be happy to accept the article.
* Reject but invite resubmission after substantial changes
  + The article needs substantial changes, but you would welcome a resubmission from the authors after revision - the resubmission will be treated as a new article.
* Reject without resubmissions
  + The article is considered unsuitable for publication in the journal - usually because of problems with the research, or because you feel that it does not add anything to the body of knowledge.

When sending your decision to the author, include the anonymised reviewer comments alongside your decision. Unless the reviewer has written rude, biased or inappropriate comments, send their entire report. Help the author navigate substantial reviews, suggesting ways they could incorporate the suggestions. Remember that you are an author too. Be sympathetic and helpful, even if you are rejecting the article.

Note that if you ‘accept with changes’ you should instruct the authors to indicate where they have made changes, and where they have addressed the suggestions made by reviewers and by you. In some cases, you can judge whether they have properly addressed any problems and make a decision (to accept, or to ask for further changes). Sometimes, however, the changes are sufficiently important, or sufficiently great, to warrant sending the article out for review again - perhaps to just one reviewer, and perhaps to the same reviewers who saw the original manuscript so they know what changes were asked for and can judge if the author has made them satisfactorily.

Now it is your turn to explore some decisions. You will now see 3 short article extracts complete with review comments and recommendations. Act as the editor for each article and make a decision having read the reviewers’ comments.

Familiarise yourself with this abstract and consider the reviewers’ notes below.

### Article 1 title:

A Taxonomy to Support the Statistical Study of Funding-induced Biases in Science

### Abstract:

The biomedical community is a leader in research on bias in science, including funding-induced bias. To facilitate this research, we have developed a taxonomy of fifteen different types of potential funding-induced bias. We describe each type of bias, as well as giving a snapshot of existing research and briefly discussing the potential for various forms of statistical analysis. We also introduce the concept of an amplifying bias cascade, wherein bias builds through successive iterations.

### Article credit:

Wojick D. and Michaels P. A Taxonomy to Support the Statistical Study of Funding-induced Biases in Science [version 1; referees: 2 not approved] F1000Research 2015, 4:886 (doi: 10.12688/f1000research.7094.1). Distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

### Article 1 – Review 1

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper. While it tackles an important subject, we have serious reservations about its approach and conclusions, and do not approve it.

The fact that this is to be published in an “Opinion” section does not absolve the writers from clearly expressing what text is actually opinion, what text is fact, and what facts are used to support their opinion. We would urge more scholarship in how the information is presented. The discussion within each category, what information is available, and how to get it appears very superficial…. They refer to “Scientific Peer Review” by Lutz Bornmann and say that it is “widely recognized” because Google Scholar lists “120 citations for this article”. The authors do not indicate whether the citations are used in a positive or negative light, or even in the same concept as these authors think. As of 10/17/15, the first 6 citations were by Bornmann himself.

The authors make the statement: “For the purposes of future research the concept of funding-induced bias is analyzed in the context of various practices in science where bias can occur.” There is little to no “analysis” provided, other than Google Scholar hits, which is meaningless for analysis as it has too many hidden variables to allow adequate evaluation, followed by suggestions as to how information may be obtained. The suggestions do not provide specific means to obtain information.

…

The authors write that “There appears to be very little scientific research on potential funding-induced bias in the construction or use of scientific models.” and “This appears to be a major gap in policy related research” Web of Science gave back 320 hits for “research funding” and “bias” and “modeling."

### Article credit:

Excerpts from Oransky I and Abritis A. Referee Report For: A Taxonomy to Support the Statistical Study of Funding-induced Biases in Science [version 1; referees: 2 not approved]. F1000Research 2015, 4:886 (doi: [10.5256/f1000research.7638.r10827](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article1-review1-link)). Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article1-review1-licence).

### Article 1 – Review 2

The paper…has interesting potential. As it stands, however, I suggest "not approved" for the reasons that follow.

The underlying logic is flawed. On one hand, the authors write, “We make no distinctions regarding the source of funding.” On the other hand, they are aware of Krimsky’s findings about the biasing effect of commercial funding. Given the differences in funding goals by commercial and non-commercial funders and different types of non-commercial funders, failure to consider funder mission as a variable undermines the analysis.

…

Finally, the organization of the paper makes it hard to follow. The discussion of cascading effects would make much more sense at the end of the manuscript rather than at the beginning once the discussion of individual effects has been completed.

I would find this paper more valuable if it developed the taxonomy in terms of funder-dependent differences in biases and their potential functions within the funding organizations. For instance, NIH intentionally is known to be biased towards new investigators but recently discovered to be unintentionally biased towards minority investigators. Once the funder-dependent biases have been documented, a discussion of how they might arise and how they might influence investigator behavior also would be interesting to develop further.

### Article credit:

Excerpts from Grinnell F. Referee Report For: A Taxonomy to Support the Statistical Study of Funding-induced Biases in Science [version 1; referees: 2 not approved]. F1000Research 2015, 4:886 (doi: [10.5256/f1000research.7638.r11669](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article1-review2-link)). Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article1-review2-licence).

### Article 1 – Decision

Answer: Reject but invite a resubmission after substantial changes or reject no resubmissions.

Here is where your judgement as the Editor is needed. Reviewer one acknowledged that the article covers an important topic, and reviewer two thought that it had potential. However, both reviewers found significant problems with the authors’ approach and analysis. If you think the article could make an impact to the field, once revised, you could suggest the authors address the reviewers’ comments and resubmit as a new article. On the other hand, if you think the changes are too substantial, you could reject it outright.

### Article 2 title:

Are scientific abstracts written in poetic verse an effective representation of the underlying research?

### Article credit:

Illingworth S. Are scientific abstracts written in poetic verse an effective representation of the underlying research? [version 1; referees: 2 approved with reservations]. F1000Research 2016, 5:91 (doi:[10.12688/f1000research.7783.1](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-link)). Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-licence).

### Abstract:

The central purpose of science is to explain. However, who is that explanation for, and how is this explanation communicated once it has been deduced?

Scientific research is typically communicated via papers in journals, with an abstract presented as a summary of that explanation. However, in many instances they may be written in a manner which is non-communicatory to a lay reader. This study begins to investigate if poetry could be used as an alternative form of communication, by first assessing if poetic verse is an effective form of communication to other scientists. In order to assess this suitability, a survey was conducted in which two different groups of participants were asked questions based on a scientific abstract. One group of participants was given the original scientific abstract, whilst the second group was instead given a poem written about the scientific study. Quantitative analysis found that whilst a scientific audience found a poetic interpretation of a scientific abstract to be no less interesting or inspiring than the original prose, they did find it to be less accessible. However, further qualitative analysis suggested that the poem did a good job in conveying a similar meaning to that presented in the original abstract. The results of this study indicate that whilst for a scientific audience poetry should not replace the prose abstract, it could be used alongside the original format to inspire the reader to find out more about the topic. Further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of this approach for a general audience.

### Article credit:

Illingworth S. Are scientific abstracts written in poetic verse an effective representation of the underlying research? [version 1; referees: 2 approved with reservations]. F1000Research 2016, 5:91 (doi:[10.12688/f1000research.7783.1](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-link)). Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-licence).

### Article 2 – Review 1

I enjoyed reading this paper because it is clearly written and its core question, how should we make science accessible and compelling, matters. I also appreciate knowing about the author’s blog.

The author’s argument is that it is possible to transform a scientific abstract into accessible and compelling poetry and that the poetic version can be effective, accessible, and compelling. I think he offers a demonstration that suggests this may be possible. However, this argument is somewhat like saying you can transform a tractor into a bicycle and still retain many of the tractor’s key features… I think this paper should pass peer review, if it discusses the goals that animate science versus the goals that animate popularization. Here are some resources that may be useful for this discussion.

…

One other limitation to the study is its design. Currently, the design involves a sample of one: one study… Perhaps three to five abstract-poetry pairs would be a more realistic request for the study’s design. Then, there would be a chance to observe whether the topic of a study has an impact on the chances of rendering its abstract in poetry. Regardless, I think this paper is so well written and its topic so important that I hope a revised version, with the limitations or concerns noted here, is published.

### Article credit:

Excerpts from Rowan K. Referee Report For: Are scientific abstracts written in poetic verse an effective representation of the underlying research? [version 1; referees: 2 approved with reservations]. F1000Research 2016, 5:91 (doi: [10.5256/f1000research.8377.r12267](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-review1-link)). Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-review1-licence).

### Article 2 – Review 2

I would really like to see this paper pass peer review eventually as it is undoubtedly an interesting topic. However, in my opinion, it needs a lot of work to knock it into shape and they may even change the conclusions. I think a bit more here on what an abstract should be (or is) and previous research on the clarity of abstracts would be useful…It should be completely clear, written in simple language and understandable to those outside the research field and hopefully to the general public.

You could take any abstract from Science or Nature and it would often not be understandable by a lay-person, or most scientists that are not active in the particular field that the paper is about. You have chosen an example that is relatively good, I wonder if you had presented folk with something a little more dense whether you would have got the same result?

The dataset is much richer than suggested by your simple analyses. I would like to have seen some analysis of demographics v response - otherwise why present the data in your supplemental? Do men and women respond in the same way? What about the proximity of someone’s own topic/job/role to that of the abstract you provided.

…

The discussion is very weak. I would expect to see the results reflected in the literature. You may be better splitting the results and discussion section into two parts.

### Article credit:

Excerpts from Johnson M. Referee Report For: Are scientific abstracts written in poetic verse an effective representation of the underlying research? [version 1; referees: 2 approved with reservations]. F1000Research 2016, 5:91 (doi: [10.5256/f1000research.8377.r12381](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-review2-link)). Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article2-review2-licence).

### Article 2 – Decision

Accept with changes.

Both reviewers like the article and thought it was well written, but they identified areas in the argument and research design that need to be reconsidered. If the author is able to address these to your satisfaction, it can be accepted. (If the changes are substantial, you may want to get another peer review report before finally accepting.)

### Article 3 title:

Architecture of the sperm whale forehead facilitates ramming combat.

### Abstract:

Herman Melville’s novel Moby Dick was inspired by historical instances in which large sperm whales (Physeter macrocephalus L.) sank 19th century whaling ships by ramming them with their foreheads. The immense forehead of sperm whales is possibly the largest, and one of the strangest, anatomical structures in the animal kingdom. It contains two large oil-filled compartments, known as the “spermaceti organ” and “junk”, that constitute up to one-quarter of body mass and extend one-third of the total length of the whale. Recognized as playing an important role in echolocation, previous studies have also attributed the complex structural configuration of the spermaceti organ and junk to acoustic sexual selection, acoustic prey debilitation, buoyancy control, and aggressive ramming. Of these additional suggested functions, ramming remains the most controversial, and the potential mechanical roles of the structural components of the spermaceti organ and junk in ramming remain untested. Here we explore the aggressive ramming hypothesis using a novel combination of structural engineering principles and probabilistic simulation to determine if the unique structure of the junk significantly reduces stress in the skull during quasi-static impact.…

### Article credit:

Panagiotopoulou O, Spyridis P, Mehari Abraha H, Carrier DR, Pataky TC. (2016) Architecture of the sperm whale forehead facilitates ramming combat. PeerJ 4:e1895 <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.1895> Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article3-licence).

### Article 3 – Review 1

The manuscript…meets all the editorial criteria of PeerJ and is a well written scientific paper. However, there is a major weak point in the design of the study regarding the anatomy of the sperm whale model used in FEA. The authors test the impact during a ramming event on the junk of the sperm whale nose. However, the junk is not the most rostral part of the nose in adult males. The rostral tip of the spermaceti organ (SO) is situated more rostrally than the junk (see Fig. 1 and Cranford 1999). Thus, the SO must be hit first during “head-butting” and not the junk. I suggest that the authors should either run the same tests with a model of the sperm whale nose that includes the SO (and I would be very interested to see these results) or explain in detail why the SO should not be involved in potential ramming events although it is the most rostral tip of the head of adult males.

### Article credit:

Excerpt from Huggenberger S (2016) [Peer Review #1 of "Architecture of the sperm whale forehead facilitates ramming combat (v0.1)"](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article3-review1-link1). PeerJ <https://doi.org/10.7287/peerj.1895v0.1/reviews/1> Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article3-review1-licence).

### Article 3 – Review 2

The authors presented an interesting study about an impact-protect system in the forehead of the sperm whale. The major organs like connective tissue partitions, spermaceti organ and skull were abstracted and a FEM model was established assuming all materials were elastic. The influence of the variation of the elastic modulus was considered using Monte Carlo simulation. And the author found the stress in the model with more partitions was reduced.

…

The effect of reducing the stress should be discussed in more detail. The resistances of different organs are different. For the connective tissue, the reduction of stress may be small compared to its hardness.

### Article credit:

Excerpt from Anonymous Reviewer (2016) [Peer Review #2 of "Architecture of the sperm whale forehead facilitates ramming combat (v0.1)"](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article3-review2-link1). PeerJ <https://doi.org/10.7287/peerj.1895v0.1/reviews/2> Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=article3-review2-licence).

### Article 3 – Decision

Accept with changes.

Both reviews are positive but infer that the model used in the study’s design has some weaknesses and further discussion is required on some points.

What happens when the author disagrees?

Authors will not necessarily agree with changes that you and the reviewers an have requested. Sometimes they will be right to resist making these changes.

You should allow authors to make a case for leaving parts of their article as originally submitted and make a judgement whether you agree with them or not. It is possible that you and the reviewers made a mistake or misunderstood what the author was saying. Always allow for errors.

However, if - after giving the author the opportunity to explain their case - you still feel that the changes are necessary, it is important to be clear about this, to ensure the quality of your journal.

## Appeals

When you reject an article, it is good practice to tell the author why you are rejecting it, and if possible, to make suggestions for what they could do next. If you think there are other journals more suitable for the article, it is helpful to suggest these. If you think there are flaws within the research, you should tell authors this - to help them with their next research project.

However, sometimes the authors will disagree with you, and you should allow them to make a case for their article to be accepted; to make an appeal. You should have a policy for how you will deal with appeals. Usually, the article will be handled by a different editor who will look at the reviewer and editor comments and make a judgement on whether to reconsider the article or not. It is usual for authors to have only one chance of appealing.

# Problems

Alongside reviewing the content of an article and making sure it is well-written, as the editor you have further responsibilities to ensure that articles meet legal and ethical requirements.   
  
This section will explore some of the problems that editors need to watch out for.

## Ethical and legal problems

Ethical problems occur frequently in some journals and rarely in others. Fortunately, there are internationally accepted guidelines and codes of practice that can be used to help when something happens.

The Committee on Publication Ethics provides some useful resources:

* + [COPE Guidelines for editors and reviewers](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=cope-guidelines)
  + [COPE flowcharts - what to do when a problem happens](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=cope-flowcharts)

All authors are expected to adhere to international ethical standards. These include ensuring that their research conforms to institutional and international standards with regard to confidentiality, data protection, plagiarism and rights, and that they have not fabricated any information.

## Author problems

Authorship can be a problem - authors being missed off lists, added without their knowledge or appearing in the wrong order. Any such problems must be sorted out by the authors themselves, although they frequently try and involve the editor. If any such problem arises, you should instruct authors to sort it out and hold the article (do not publish it) until they do.

There are guidelines as to the criteria for authorship. These come from the ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors - but they are not only for medical journals). If you have any problems with claims over authorship, direct authors to use [these criteria](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=icmje-criteria).

## Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the theft of someone’s ideas and passing them off as your own. For example, translating an article into English, putting your own name on it as author and submitting it to a journal. This is highly unethical, and something that is treated extremely seriously by academic and research institutions. People can lose their jobs over this.

The University of Manchester defines plagiarism as:

“Presenting the ideas, work or words of other people without proper, clear and unambiguous acknowledgement.”

There is an overlap between plagiarism and copyright infringement, but the rule is that if anything is re-used in an article (a quotation, a figure, etc.) then it must be cited; full attribution to the original publication must be given.

### How do you know if something is plagiarised?

You have to rely on the honesty of authors - and fortunately most of them are honest. If you (or the reviewers) suspect something (tell-tale signs are a paragraph of text written in a different style, or a figure that appears scanned), then you should investigate.

### How do I investigate suspected plagiarism?

The simplest way to investigate text is to copy up to a few sentences or a paragraph into a search engine and see if anything is found. Unfortunately, with figures there is no such system; if you suspect anything you need to ask the authors, and you have to rely on their answers. Similarly, if you think the article has been translated you cannot search for the original text and have to rely on asking the authors.

### Tools that can help

You may have access to iThenticate (often used to detect student plagiarism) through your institution and you may be able to use this to check any articles that you are suspicious of.

[iThenticate](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=ithenticate) publish a number of guides on the topic of plagiarism, which you may find useful as further reading.

### Further advice on plagiarism

[Academic Integrity](https://www.education.library.manchester.ac.uk/mle/academic-integrity/#/): This My Learning Essentials resource explores some of the issues around plagiarism and academic integrity.

Plagiarism is very serious, and if you find evidence of it you should immediately reject the article and write to the authors to explain that you have discovered the plagiarism and tell them of the seriousness of their offence.

# Plagiarism

There are a number of other issues which journal editors need to consider.

## Privacy

Submissions remain confidential until they have been published, and you and the reviewers have a duty of confidentiality to keep details of the article and the authors private. Reviewers should be reminded of this, and all members of the editorial board must also be aware of this duty.

## Research ethics

All research must be undertaken ethically - this means respecting the rights of humans and animals, and in some areas, there are strict guidelines about this. If you are concerned that an article you are considering reports unethical research, you are within your rights to ask the authors to prove they had ethical approval, or that the research met ethical guidelines. If they cannot provide this then you are within your rights to reject the article.

## Conflict of interest

Sometimes the authors, reviewers or even you as the editor have a conflict of interest. If an author, for example, has been funded to do a piece of research by a commercial company, then this must be declared in the article. If a reviewer is asked to review an article written by a colleague or a rival, then they should tell you and probably not review the article. If you receive an article written by a close colleague or a family member, then you should not handle the reviewing and acceptance/rejection process as you will be biased.

In this case, you should ask another editor, or a member of the editorial board, to handle the article, explaining that you have a conflict of interest.

## Rights and permissions

Although you don’t need to be a legal expert, you do need to grasp the principles of copyright so you can ensure that neither you nor your authors are infringing the law - and so you can answer straightforward queries from authors.

For more information you can visit [The Copyright Guidance Service subject guide](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=copyright-guide). This guide gives advice on how copyright affects you and the work of journal editors.

## Other legal issues

The only other legal issue that you are likely to come across is that of libel - defaming or damaging the reputation of a person or organisation. The defences for libel are truth and public good. Although the author of the work is most at risk, you and the publisher are also going to be involved if there is any legal case to answer. Therefore, if you receive anything with content that you think may libel someone, you must consult your publisher for advice - even if the author assures you that what they are saying is true or for the public good.

If any legal problem does arise, it is important that you do not attempt to deal with it alone. You should immediately inform your publisher and liaise with them over how it will be managed. It is very easy to make the situation worse when you are trying to help, so always take advice from and consult the publisher.

## Managing problems

Should problems arise during publication, it is important that you know how to manage them effectively.  
  
This section will explore the kinds of problems you may encounter and suggest ways in which you could deal with them.

## Dealing with problems before publication

If a problem arises before publication, it should be dealt with before the article is published - which may mean that the article is ‘frozen’ until the problem is resolved.

Sometimes the problem is one that the authors have to sort out, and you should not become involved - otherwise you can become embroiled in something that is not your problem. There are some rare cases where an editor has to report an author to their institution, and if you think that something of this magnitude has occurred, you should consult with the publisher.

Whilst it is not your personal responsibility to resolve every problem or to ensure that every article is 100% correct and has no ethical problems, you do have a responsibility to perform your duties with ‘due diligence’. This means that you should take care to ensure there are no problems and be on the lookout for them. When a problem arises, it is important that you deal with it and do not ignore it.

## Examples

You will now be presented with several problems that you could encounter in the publication process, for each, try to think of how you would handle this situation.

### Problem 1

You are contacted by someone saying that her name should be included as an author on an article that is in production.

### Suggested answer

If someone says they should be named as an author, your first response should be to ascertain why the person thinks they should be named as an author, and then to contact the original submitting author. Ideally you should pass the problem over to them to resolve (and hold the paper in the meantime). When they have a resolution, this should be confirmed by all the named authors of the article.

### Problem 2

You are contacted by an anonymous person saying that the data of an article under review are fabricated.

### Suggested answer

Dealing with anonymous ‘whistleblowers’ can be a complicated - they may be troublemakers or may be providing valuable information. Your first response should be to ask them for their identity (stressing that this will be kept confidential). You need to make a judgement on whether you think their information is valid, and then take the accusation to the author while maintaining the anonymity of the whistleblower, asking for their opinion and response. You may want to discuss the issue with another of your editorial team or your publisher depending on the accusation.

### Problem 3

The day after you accept an article, you receive a delayed reviewer comment saying that the article is fatally flawed and should not be published.

### Suggested answer

After you have made a decision, any new information should still be taken into account. You should first review the comments from the reviewer (the author may have already answered them) and make a judgement on whether they affect your judgement about the article. You are entitled to change your mind about acceptance (or rejection), but you must always have good reason to do so.

### Problem 4

You receive an obituary for a famous person recently deceased which says that the person had an alcohol addiction and cheated on his wife.

### Suggested answer

Although libel laws do not apply when a person is dead (in the UK), angry relatives can sue for damages if the statements are felt to be sufficiently derogatory. However, regardless of the law, any such accusation within an obituary should be treated with extreme caution. It is generally good practice for any such obituary to be read and approved by the family of the deceased, and you should ask the author to do this (and provide evidence of this).

### Problem 5

The production editor contacts you to say that the author has requested substantial changes at the proof stage - almost rewriting the article.

### Suggested answer

Substantial changes after an article has been accepted require approval. It is quite possible that they change the substance of the article, and if so then the article should be treated as a new submission and reviewed again. In this instance you should evaluate the level of changes. If they are justified, but might incur additional correction costs, you should decide if the journal will support them or ask the author if they are willing to pay. If you think they change the substance of the article, you should contact the author and inform them that the article requires re-reviewing. It is quite likely that the author will decide to go ahead with the article without correction.

## Dealing with problems before publication

If a problem comes to light after publication, you should discuss it with your publisher. However, as with problems before publication, you should always treat any reported problem seriously and seek to resolve it and not ignore it.

In the first instance, you should alert your publisher to the problem, and then investigate to determine what - if any - corrections should be made.

If the problem is minor (perhaps small typographical mistakes), and does not affect the understanding of the article, then your publisher may decide to leave the error, or make the corrections online.

If the problem is larger - perhaps an author’s name left off the article, then you should immediately inform your publisher, but no correction should be made until you are sure of what is wrong and what should be corrected. Sometimes this may not be simple - for example if there is a dispute between the authors. Sometimes it can take a long time for a problem to be resolved and the right course of action to be determined.

# Summary

Being an editor can be very rewarding for you as well as for authors, the journal and its readers. This resource has given an overview of the journal editor’s role, and challenges you could face.

**Remember:**

* be clear about what you want your journal to achieve - what do you want to publish?
* write clear communications, especially to authors and reviewers
* respond promptly - to enquiries, submissions, problems
* take guidance and advice - respect copyright, follow good practice and use your publisher for advice
* be respectful - of authors, reviewers and the editorial board
* be decisive - take advice but be prepared to make decisions
* be sympathetic - it is hard to be a rejected author, but don’t be so sympathetic that you accept bad articles
* be ready to deal with mistakes - your own and those of others

# Related resources

You’ve reached the end of this resource. You can find more information on citation analysis by visiting the web pages below.

## COPE and ICMJE

[Committee on Publication Ethics](https://publicationethics.org/) (COPE) and [International Committee of Medical Journal Editors](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=icmje-criteria) (ICMJE) provide a number of free guides, case studies, recommendations and flowcharts to help both new and experienced journal editors.

[A short guide to ethical editing for new editors](https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines-new/short-guide-ethical-editing-new-editors) (COPE)

## Journal publishers

Journal publishers have put together guidelines and support services for their editors. Some of their advice may be particular to the journals they publish, but often will be useful for any editor.

[Springer](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=springer)

[Taylor and Francis](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=taylor-francis)

[Emerald](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=emerald)

## PKP School

The [Public Knowledge Project](https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/link/?slug=pkp) (PKP) has created a number of free, online modules around journal publishing including a step by step guide to editing a journal. It covers some of the same areas as this resource as well as setting good policies, strategic planning and marketing.