

A reviewer's guide to ethics in publishing

During a recent online webinar, Publisher Jaap van Harten pinpointed exactly what a researcher is – and isn't – responsible for when reviewing a paper

By Dr. Jaap van Harten Posted on 13 August 2015

Share story:

There are two important elements to bear in mind when discussing this topic: What is the reviewer responsible for – like transparency and fairness – and what is the author responsible for? It's always interesting to see how that last point really divides people.

Ethics misconduct – where does the responsibility lie?

In 2009, [Sense About Science](#) conducted a peer review survey and discovered around 80 percent of respondents thought the peer review process was responsible for picking up ethics misconduct, such as fraud and plagiarism, in papers. And only around 35 percent of them thought reviewers were successful in this role.

Well, let's be very clear - it is NOT the role of the reviewer to detect ethics issues in papers. It is the responsibility of the author to abide by the publishing ethics rules. Just consider for a moment the situation where someone shoplifts a new coat from a department store. Is the person who steals the coat legally responsible for the theft or should we blame the department store for inadequate protection of their property? Of course, the fault lies with the shoplifter, the person who carried out the offence.

Having said all that, it is great if you CAN and DO spot misconduct but we know how tough it can be. Many of the authors responsible for these cases are not lazy, but often spent significant time on manipulating their data! In the [webinar](#) I shared some examples of the kinds of issues you might see – depending on your field – and when I present these examples of figure manipulation in face-to-face workshops, it's always noticeable that people struggle to spot where the misconduct lies. However, there will be times you might recognize sections from your own work or, through your reading on the topic, someone else's work. It's worth remembering that the majority of journal manuscripts are run through the plagiarism screening service [CrossCheck](#) before they reach reviewers these days, and that has proved a big help.

Jaap's May webinar is just one of many resources available on [Elsevier's Publishing Campus](#) – a new free online training platform for researchers.

- [Discover](#) the Publishing Campus's interactive courses, online lectures and videos for reviewers
- [View](#) the archived version of the webinar

Understanding the reviewer's role

Peer review is based on trust. As a reviewer you should always remember the following:

The manuscript you review is a *confidential* document.

- The content is and remains the exclusive property of the authors
- You should not disclose it to others

If you have printed the manuscript:

- You must keep it confidential until the review process has been completed
- After the final decision by the editor, you must destroy it

If you have shared responsibility for the review with a colleague, you should provide that person's name and affiliation to the editors, not only for procedural transparency but also to give your colleague the credits for their work.

And finally, you should:

- Not "use" data / ideas reported in the manuscript
- Not communicate directly with authors
- Provide an honest, critical assessment
- Provide specific suggestions for improvement
- Always avoid any conflict of interest (if in doubt, consult with the editor)
- Help the editors reach a decision on a paper:
 - by recommending Accept / (minor/major) Revision / Reject. (Keep in mind: the reviewer *recommends*, the editor *decides*!)
 - by writing a reviewer report for authors that is in line with the recommendation to the editor
- Only accept manuscripts for review....
 - in your area of expertise
 - when you can complete the review on time

Some common publishing ethics issues

Publication misconduct

- Plagiarism
 - Different forms / severities
 - The paper must be original to the authors
- Duplicate publication
- Duplicate submission
- Inappropriate acknowledgement of prior research and researchers
- Inappropriate identification of all co-authors
- Conflict of interest

Scientific misconduct

- Fabrication – Making up research data

- Falsification – Manipulation of existing research data
 - Improper use of humans or animals in research
-

Author Biography

Dr. Jaap van Harten is Executive Publisher for Pharmacology & Pharmaceutical Sciences at Elsevier in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He trained as a pharmacist at [Leiden University](#), The Netherlands, and got a PhD in clinical pharmacology in 1988. He then joined Solvay Pharmaceuticals, where he held positions in pharmacokinetics, clinical pharmacology, medical marketing, and regulatory affairs. In 2000, he moved to Excerpta Medica, Elsevier's medical communications branch, where he headed the Medical Department and the Strategic Publication Planning Department. In 2004, he joined Elsevier's Publishing organization, initially as Publisher of the Genetics journals and books, and since 2006 as Executive Publisher Pharmacology & Pharmaceutical Sciences.

