Publication Ethics and Research Integrity

Ways to integrate standards and checks into your workflows to achieve effective communication, education and compliance

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OVERVIEW

Maintaining Publication Ethics and Research Integrity (PERI) standards, guidelines and best practice is essential but can be resource-heavy for editorial offices and publishers. The journal submission process is a critical point in the research timeline where we can engage stakeholders and perform checks.

Here we share our experience and present some considerations for those wanting to review their information pages, template letters and submission forms to check that they are effectively communicating the standards and policies they require authors, reviewers, editors, and readers to know about and/or comply with.

Finally, we suggest an audit framework for reviewing a journal's PERI practices and identifying areas for improvement.

DEVELOPING POLICIES

Who needs to know your policies?

- Authors
- Editors
- Reviewers
- Readers
- Staff
- Funders
- Third party partners

Who's checking?

- The editor
- The reviewer
- The editorial office
- No active check: onus on author to confirm understanding and compliance

Where are your 'touch' points for educating and informing?

- Website: 'VoR of policies'
- Sister sites (publisher / society)
- Banner adverts
- Submission system homepage
- Template letters – invitations, assignments, reminders
- Email signatures
- Editor training
- Printed journals
- Social media
- Anywhere you can add a hyperlink!

RESOURCES

There are many online resources which can be used to help you set up your policies, checklists and actions, including:

- COPE (https://publicationethics.org)
- ICMJE (https://www.icmje.org)
- WAME (https://wame.org/index.php)
- CSE (https://www.councilscienceeditors.org)
- STM (https://www.stm-assoc.org)
- C4DISC (https://c4disc.org)

Additional reading

https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines/principles-transparency-and-best-practice-scholarly-publishing

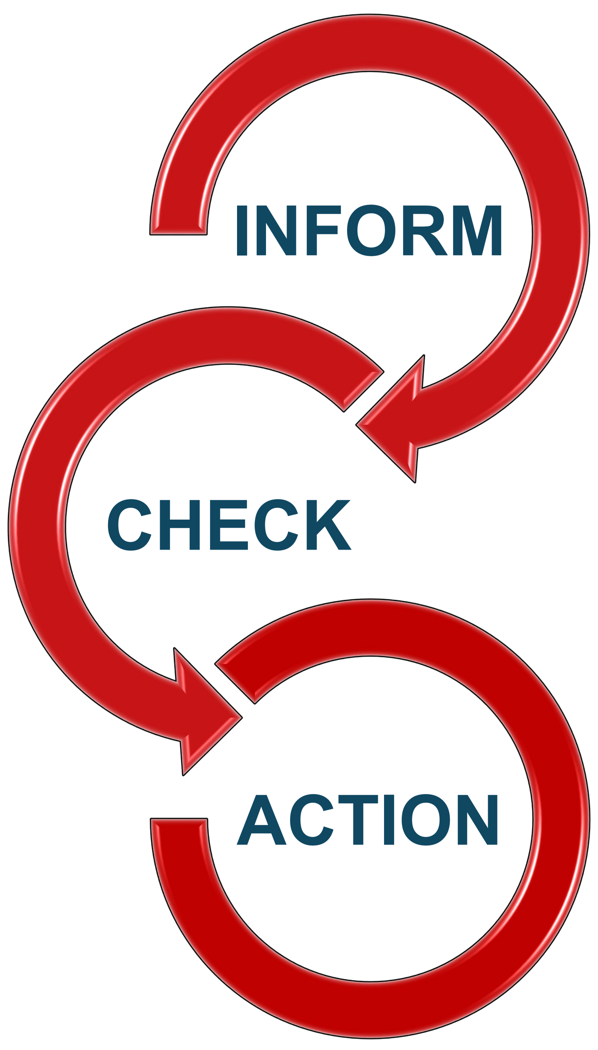
INTEGRATING AND ENACTING POLICIES AND CHECKS INTO YOUR PROCESSES

Example 1: Change in authorship

Changes in authorship can indicate potential research misconduct. We've commonly seen it happen between revisions.

CHECKLIST:

- ❑ **INFORM**
  - ❑ Ensure policy and process is clear on your website.
  - ❑ Include in revision reviewer invitations/editor assignments if you expect reviewers/editors to look out for this.
  - ❑ Consider an additional submission question at revision about authorship changes.
- ❑ **CHECK**
  - ❑ Initial authorship should match revised version.
  - ❑ Use tools to help detect author changes.
  - ❑ If manual check needed, who is responsible?
- ❑ **ACTION**
  - ❑ All authors must approve any change in authorship (see COPE guidance).
  - ❑ Set up template letters and forms to ensure a consistent and streamlined process, and clear communication.
  - ❑ Establish a retention policy / audit trail to record process followed.



Example 2: Papermill screening

Papermills remain a threat to the integrity of the scientific record.

CHECKLIST:

- ❑ **INFORM**
  - ❑ Communicate your position and action relating to papermills and the detection of them.
  - ❑ Brief all stakeholders on the common traits of papermills so there is vigilance at every 'touch' point.
- ❑ **CHECK**
  - ❑ Papermill detection tools are starting to be released and rolled out. Check with your publishers/vendors if any are available to you.
  - ❑ In the absence of a tool, you could develop a simple 'papermill detection' list to follow at submission, e.g. looking for known hallmarks, AI-generated phrases, figure formats, or introduce other policies (completed ORCiD profile for all authors) to identify potential 'bad actors'.
- ❑ **ACTION**
  - ❑ Assign a responsible person to look further into cases.
  - ❑ Check if any partners you work with (e.g. publishers) can help with the burden.
  - ❑ Establish and communicate your process, e.g. author response, retraction, withdrawal.

Example 3: Identifying data

While many journals seek consent to publish for case reports, some checklists can fail to pick up other forms of identifying data which should also require consent from the participant.

CHECKLIST:

- ❑ **INFORM**
  - ❑ Ensure identifying data is clearly explained on your website/instructions for authors.
  - ❑ Provide clear guidance for your editorial office.
- ❑ **CHECK**
  - ❑ All data should be examined prior to publication.
  - ❑ Written informed consent to publish should be clearly stated.
- ❑ **ACTION**
  - ❑ If consent is not provided, de-identify the data.
  - ❑ Use ranges for age or remove gender if not relevant to results.
  - ❑ Sample size should be considered when de-identifying.

Identifiable

Age	Sex	Disease	Side Effects	Dose
19	F	CNS	Fatigue	80 mg
47	F	PCC	Nausea	120 mg
25	M	pNET	None	120 mg
29	M	CNS	Amnesia	120 mg
54	F	RCC	Nausea	120 mg

Non-identifiable

Age	Disease	Side Effects	Dose
<20	CNS	Fatigue	80 mg
40-50	PCC	Nausea	120 mg
20-30	pNET	None	120 mg
20-30	CNS	Amnesia	120 mg
>50	RCC	Nausea	120 mg

When does the check need to happen?

PERI checks can be time consuming; it's crucial to only carry out checks *when* you need to. Ask – "Do I really need to know this information at this stage?"

- Initial submissions - high importance checks only due to time required
- Revision - time effective if you accept most revised submissions
- Pre-acceptance - last chance before final decision
- Post-acceptance - potentially too late for some showstoppers

TIP: Flags or notes can help keep track of what's been checked and be useful reminders for any required actions later in the process.

MAINTENANCE

Once polices are established, it's good to review regularly to make sure you're up to date and complying with the latest best practice guidelines. One way to do this could be to carry out a 'best practice audit', using a template like the one below:

Standard / policy	Current policy?	Website?	Submission checklist	Template letter?	Active confirmation required from AU/Rev/Ed?	Other checks	Actions
Author criteria (ICMJE)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes		None
Reviewer COI disclosure	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes – reviewer invitation	No		Consider adding aerial button to reviewer comments form
Duplicate publication	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Cross Check	None
Complaints process published	Yes	Yes	N/A	No	No	N/A	Could link from template letters
Post-publication corrections	Yes	Polices not on website	No	No	No	N/A	Publish on website, ask authors to confirm they have read and understood
Author change policy	Yes – follow COPE	Yes	N/A	Hyperlink email if author change spotted	Yes via email	N/A	- Use a form that can be uploaded rather than collecting email responses - Use an author change detection tool in submission system

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