What to do if you suspect redundant (duplicate) publication
(a) Suspected redundant publication in a submitted manuscript

Reviewer informs editor about redundant publication

- Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate
  - Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of overlap/redundancy

- Major overlap/redundancy (i.e. based on same data with identical or very similar findings and/or evidence authors have sought to hide redundancy e.g. by changing title or author order or not citing previous papers)
  - Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work has not been published elsewhere and documentary evidence of duplication
  - Author responds
    - Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt
      - Write to author (all authors if possible) rejecting submission, explaining position and expected future behavior
      - Consider informing author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance
      - Inform author(s) of your action
    - Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)
      - Proceed with review
  - No response
    - Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)
  - Inform reviewer of outcome/action

- Minor overlap with some element of redundancy or legitimate re-analysis (e.g. sub-group/extended follow-up/discussion aimed at different audience)
  - Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal's position
    - Explain that secondary papers must refer to original
    - Request missing reference to original and/or remove overlapping material
    - Proceed with review
  - No response
    - Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance
    - Try to obtain acknowledgement of your letter
  - Inform reviewer of outcome/action

- No significant overlap
  - Discuss with reviewer
  - Proceed with review

Note: The instructions to authors should state the journal's policy on redundant publication
Asking authors to sign a statement or tick a box may be helpful in subsequent investigations

Note: ICMJE advises that translations are acceptable but MUST reference the original

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What to do if you suspect redundant (duplicate) publication
(b) Suspected redundant publication in a published article

Reader informs editor about redundant publication

Thank reader and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of overlap/redundancy

Major overlap/redundancy (i.e. based on same dataset with identical findings and/or evidence that authors have sought to hide redundancy, e.g. by changing title or author order or not referring to previous papers)

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work has not been published elsewhere and documentary evidence of duplication

Author responds

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

Consider publishing statement of redundant publication or retraction Inform editor of other journal involved

Consider informing author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months

No response

Minor overlap (‘salami publishing’ with some element of redundancy) or legitimate re-analysis (e.g. subgroup/extended follow-up/discussion aimed at different audience)

Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal’s position Explain that secondary papers must refer to original
Discuss publishing correction giving reference to original paper Where editor has reason to believe failure to refer to previous paper(s) was deliberate, consider informing author’s superior or person responsible for research governance

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance

Write to author (all authors if possible) explaining position and expected future behaviour If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months

Inform reader of outcome/action

Note: The instructions to authors should state the journal’s policy on redundant publication Asking authors to sign a statement or tick a box may be helpful in subsequent investigations

Note: ICMJE advises that translations are acceptable but MUST reference the original Editors may consider publishing a correction (i.e. the link to the original article) rather than a retraction/notice of duplicate publication in such cases

Check degree of overlap/redundancy

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What to do if you suspect plagiarism

(a) Suspected plagiarism in a submitted manuscript

Reviewer informs editor about suspected plagiarism

Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of copying

Clear plagiarism (unattributed use of large portions of text and/or data, presented as if they were by the plagiarist)

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work is original/the author's own and documentary evidence of plagiarism

Minor copying of short phrases only (e.g., in discussion of research paper from non-native language speaker)
No misattribution of data

Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal's position
Ask author to rephrase copied phrases or include as direct quotations with references
Proceed with review

Redundancy (i.e., copying from author's own work)—see flowcharts on redundancy

No problem

Discuss with reviewer

Author responds

No response

 Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

Write to author (all authors if possible) rejecting submission, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Consider informing author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance and/or potential victim

Inform author(s) of your action

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
If no resolution, consider contacting other authorities, e.g., ORI in US, GMC in UK

Write to author (all authors if possible) requesting revision, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Inform reviewer of outcome/action

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

No response

Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance

Note: The instructions to authors should include a definition of plagiarism and state the journal's policy on it
What to do if you suspect plagiarism

(b) Suspected plagiarism in a published article

Reader informs editor about suspected plagiarism

Thank reader and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of copying

Clear plagiarism (unattributed use of large portions of text and/or data, presented as if they were by the plagiarist)

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that work is original/the author's own and documentary evidence of plagiarism

Author responds

No response

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Contact all authors and tell them what you plan to do

Consider publishing retraction
Inform editor of other journal(s) involved or publisher of plagiarized books

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for current affiliations/emails)

No response

Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months

If no resolution, consider contacting other authorities, e.g. ORI in US, GMC in UK

Consider informing author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance at author's institution

Inform author(s) of your action

Inform readers and victims(s) of outcome/action

Minor copying of short phrases only (e.g. in discussion of research paper)

No misattribution of data

Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal's position
Discuss publishing correction giving reference to original paper(s) if this has been omitted

Inform reader (and plagiarized author(s) if different) of journal's actions

No response

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Inform author(s) of your action

Consider informing institution's authority, e.g. ORI in US, GMC in UK

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

Contact all authors and tell them what you plan to do

Consider publishing retraction
Inform editor of other journal(s) involved or publisher of plagiarized books

Note: The instructions to authors should include a definition of plagiarism and state the journal's policy on it

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What to do if you suspect fabricated data

(a) Suspected fabricated data in a submitted manuscript

Reviewer expresses suspicion of fabricated data

Thank reviewer, ask for evidence (if not already provided) and state your plans to investigate

Consider getting a 2nd opinion from another reviewer

Contact author to explain concerns but do not make direct accusation

Author replies

Unsatisfactory answer/admits guilt

Inform all authors that you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Contact author’s institution(s) requesting an investigation

Apologise to author, inform reviewer(s) of outcome. Proceed with peer-review if appropriate

Author replies

Satisfactory explanation

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors’ institutions

No response

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

Author replies

No response

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No or unsatisfactory response

Author cleared

Author found guilty

Reject

Apologise to author, proceed with peer-review if appropriate

Inform reviewer of outcome

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What to do if you suspect fabricated data
(b) Suspected fabricated data in a published article

Reader expresses suspicion of fabricated data

Thank reader and state your plans to investigate

Consider getting a 2nd opinion from another reviewer

Contact author to explain your concerns
Request raw data/lab notebooks as appropriate

Author replies

No response

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

Author replies

No response

Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors' institutions

Apologise to author
Publish correction if necessary (e.g. if an honest error has been detected)
Inform reader of outcome

No or unsatisfactory response

Contact author's institution requesting an investigation

Inform all authors you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Satisfactory explanation

Unsatisfactory answer/admits guilt

Author(s) guilty of fabrication
Publish retraction

Author(s) found not guilty
Apologise to author(s)

Inform reader of outcome

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No response

Author(s) found not guilty
Publish expression of concern

Inform reader of outcome

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Revised May 2011

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Changes in authorship
(a) Corresponding author requests addition of extra author before publication

1. Clarify reason for change in authorship
2. Check that all authors consent to addition of extra author

- All authors agree
  - Get new author to complete journal's authorship declaration (if used)
  - Amend contributor details (role of each contributor/author) if included
  - Proceed with review/publication
- Authors do not agree
  - Suspend review/publication of paper until authorship has been agreed by all authors, if necessary, via institution(s)

Note: Major changes in response to reviewer comments, e.g. adding new data might justify the inclusion of a new author.

Clarify reason for change in authorship
Check that all authors consent to addition of extra author
Note: Major changes in response to reviewer comments, e.g. adding new data might justify the inclusion of a new author
Changes in authorship
(b) Corresponding author requests removal of author before publication

Clarify reason for change in authorship

Check that all authors consent to removal of author

All authors agree

- Amend author list and contributor details (role of each contributor/author)/ acknowledgements as required

- Proceed with review/publication

Authors do not agree

- Suspend review/publication of paper until authorship has been agreed

- Inform excluded author(s) that if they wish to pursue the matter they should do this with their co-authors or institutions rather than the editor

Most important to check with the author(s) whose name(s) is/are being removed from the paper and get their agreement in writing
Changes in authorship
(c) Request for addition of extra author after publication

Clarify reason for change in authorship

Check that all authors consent to addition of extra author

All authors agree

Authors do not agree

Ask why author was omitted from original list – ideally, refer to journal guidelines or authorship declaration which should state that all authors meet appropriate criteria and that no deserving authors have been omitted

Explain that you will not change the authorship until you have written agreement from all authors
Provide authorship guidelines but do not enter into dispute

All authors agree

Authors still cannot agree

Refer case to authors’ institution(s) and ask it/them to adjudicate

Publish correction if required by institution(s)

To prevent future problems:
(1) Before publication, get authors to sign statement that all listed authors meet authorship criteria and that no others meeting the criteria have been omitted
(2) Publish details of each person’s contribution to the research and publication
Changes in authorship
(d) Request for removal of author after publication

Clarify reason for change in authorship

- Author(s) gives acceptable reason for change
- Check that all authors agree to change (including excluded author)
- Publish correction

Author(s) alleges fraud/misconduct

- See flowchart for fabricated data
- Author(s) has difference in interpretation of data
- Suggest author(s) put views in a letter and explain you will give other authors a chance to respond and will publish both letters if suitable (i.e. correct length, not libellous)

Author(s) writes a letter

- Contact other authors explaining what is happening
- If author insists on removal of name and other authors agree, then consider publishing correction
- Other authors submit response
- If author does not agree to write letter (or writes something unpublishable)

Author(s) does not agree to write letter

- Other authors do not wish to respond
- Publish both letters
- Publish minority view letter

Ask why author wishes to be removed from list – refer to journal guidelines or authorship declaration which should state that all authors meet appropriate criteria. Ask if author suspects fraud/misconduct

Clarify reason for change in authorship
What to do if you suspect ghost, guest or gift authorship
(see also flowcharts on Changes in authorship, as such requests may indicate the presence of a ghost or gift author)

**Review acknowledgement section and authorship declaration (if supplied)**

- and/or*

**Send copy of journal's authorship policy** to corresponding author and request statement that all quality and no authors have been omitted (if not obtained previously)

- and/or*

**Request information (or further details) of individuals' contributions***

- *Note: initial action will depend on journal's normal method of collecting author/contributor info

- **Note: including clear guidance/criteria for authorship in journal instructions makes it easier to handle such issues

- ***Note: Marusic et al. have shown that the method of collecting such data (e.g. free text or check boxes) can influence the response. Letting authors describe their own contributions probably results in the most truthful and informative answers.

**Authorship role missing (e.g. contributor list does not include anybody who analysed data or prepared first draft)**

- ‘Ghost’ identified

- Suggest missing author should be added to list

- Listed author does not meet authorship criteria

- ‘Guest’ or ‘gift’ author identified

- Suggest guest/gift author(s) should be removed/moved to Acknowledgements section

- Satisfactory explanation of author list

- Doubts remain/need more information

- Try to contact authors (Google names for contacts) and ask about their role, whether any authors have been omitted, and whether they have any concerns about authorship

- Get agreement for authorship change (in writing) from all authors. Letter should also clearly state the journal’s authorship policy and/or refer to published criteria (e.g. ICMJE) and may express concern/disappointment that these were not followed. For senior authors consider copying this letter to their head of department/person responsible for research governance

- Proceed with review/publication

- Review your journal’s instructions to contributors and submission forms to ensure clear guidance and prevent future problem

**Reference**


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Editors cannot police author or contributor listing for every submission but may sometimes have suspicions that an author list is incomplete or includes undeserving (guest or gift) authors. The COPE flowchart on ‘What to do if you suspect ghost, guest or gift authorship suggests actions for these situations. The following points are designed to help editors be alert for inappropriate authorship and spot warning signs which may indicate problems.

Type of authorship problems
A ghost author is someone who is omitted from an authorship list despite qualifying for authorship. This is not necessarily the same as a ghost writer, since omitted authors often perform other roles, in particular data analysis. (Gotzsche et al. have shown that statisticians involved with study design are frequently omitted from papers reporting industry-funded trials.) If a professional writer has been involved with a publication it will depend on the authorship criteria being used whether s/he fulfils the criteria to be listed as an author. Using the ICMJE criteria for research papers, medical writers usually do not qualify as authors, but their involvement and funding source should be acknowledged.

A guest or gift author is someone who is listed as an author despite not qualifying for authorship. Guests are generally people brought in to make the list look more impressive (despite having little or no involvement with the research or publication). Gift authorship often involves mutual CV enhancement (i.e. including colleagues on papers in return for being listed on theirs).

Signs that might indicate authorship problems
- Corresponding author seems unable to respond to reviewers’ comments
- Changes are made by somebody not on the author list (check Word document properties to see who made the changes but bear in mind there may be an innocent explanation for this, e.g. using a shared computer, or a secretary making changes)
- Document properties show the manuscript was drafted by someone not on the author list or properly acknowledged (but see above)
- Impossibly prolific author e.g. of review articles/opinion pieces (check also for redundant/overlapping publication) (this may be detected by a Medline or Google search using the author’s name)
- Several similar review articles/editorials/opinion pieces have been published under different author names (this may be detected by a Medline or Google search using the article title or key words)
- Role missing from list of contributors (e.g. it appears that none of the named authors were responsible for analysing the data or drafting the paper)
- Unfeasibly long or short author list (e.g. a simple case report with a dozen authors or a randomised trial with a single author)
- Industry-funded study with no authors from sponsor company (this may be legitimate, but may also mean deserving authors have been omitted; reviewing the protocol may help determine the role of employees - see Gotzsche et al. and commentary by Wager)

References

What to do if a reviewer suspects undisclosed conflict of interest (Col) in a submitted manuscript

1. Reviewer informs editor of author’s undisclosed Col
2. Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate
3. Contact author(s) and express concern
   - Author(s) supplies relevant details
     - Thank author but point out seriousness of omission
     - Amend competing interest statement as required
     - Proceed with review/publication
     - Inform reviewer of outcome
   - Author(s) denies Col
     - Explain journal policy/Col definition clearly and obtain signed statement from author(s) about all relevant Cols
     - Proceed with review/publication
     - Inform reviewer of outcome

To avoid future problems:
- Always get signed statement of Cols from all authors before publication (or get them to tick a box if they declare no conflict)
- Ensure journal guidelines include clear definition of Col
What to do if a reader suspects undisclosed conflict of interest (Col) in a published article

1. **Reader informs editor of author’s undisclosed Col**

2. **Thank reader and say you plan to investigate**

3. **Contact author(s) and express concern**

   - **Author(s) supplies relevant details**
     - **Thank author but point out seriousness of omission**
     - **Publish correction to competing interest statement as required**
     - **Inform reader of outcome**
   - **Author(s) denies Col**
     - **Explain journal policy/Col definition clearly and obtain signed statement from author(s) about all relevant Cols (if not obtained previously)**
     - **To avoid future problems:**
       - Always get signed statement of Cols from all authors and reviewers before publication
       - Ensure journal guidelines include clear definition of Col
What to do if you suspect an ethical problem with a submitted manuscript

Reviewer (or editor) raises ethical concern about manuscript

Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate

Author(s) supplies relevant details

Satisfactory answer
Apologise and continue review process

Unsatisfactory answer/no response
Inform author that review process is suspended until case is resolved
Forward concerns to author’s employer or person responsible for research governance at institution

Issue resolved satisfactorily
Inform reviewer about outcome of case

No/unsatisfactory response
Consider submitting case to COPE if it raises novel ethical issues
Contact institution at 3–6 monthly intervals, seeking conclusion of investigation

No/unsatisfactory response
Refer to other authorities (e.g. medical registration body, UKPRi, ORI)

e.g. lack of ethical approval/concern re: patient consent or protection/concern re: animal experimentation

e.g. request evidence of ethical committee/IRB approval/copy of informed consent documents
What to do if you suspect a reviewer has appropriated an author's ideas or data

**Author alleges reviewer misconduct**

Thank author and say you will investigate

Retrieve files (submitted MS and reviews)

- **Open review (reviewer’s identity is disclosed to author)**
  - Author accuses actual reviewer of misconduct
  - Get as much documentary evidence as possible from author and other sources, e.g., publication*, abstract, report of meeting, copy of slides, grant application: do not contact reviewer until you have assessed this
  - Review evidence (or get suitably qualified person to do this) and decide whether author’s allegations are well-founded
    - Not well-founded
      - Discuss with author/ request further evidence
    - Appear well-founded
      - Write to reviewer explaining concerns and requesting an explanation
        - Satisfactory explanation
          - Discuss with author
        - No reply/ unsatisfactory explanation
          - Contact reviewer’s institution requesting an investigation
            - Reviewer exonerated
            - If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
              - Keep author informed of progress
            - Reviewer found guilty
              - Remove reviewer permanently from database and consider reporting case in journal

- **Anonymous review (reviewer’s identity is NOT disclosed to author)**
  - Author accuses somebody who was not asked to review the article for your journal
  - Check for links between accused person and named reviewer, e.g., same department, personal relationships
  - Consider contacting actual reviewer(s) to comment on allegation and check they performed the review themselves/did not discuss the paper with others
  - Explain situation to author (decide whether you wish to reveal actual reviewer(s) name(s): this is up to you, however if your journal uses anonymous review you must get the reviewer’s permission before disclosing their identity to the author)
  - Consider removing reviewer from review database during investigation and inform reviewer of you action

**If files are no longer available at journal, request copy from author**

- **NB Do not forget people who refused to review**

*Note: The instruction to reviewers should state that submitted material must be treated in confidence and may not be used in any way until it has been published

**Note:** if author produces published paper this may be handled as plagiarism (see plagiarism flow chart)

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How COPE handles complaints against member journals

Complaint sent to COPE Complaints Officer (after journal's/publisher's own complaints procedure has been exhausted)

Complaints Officer checks that complaint:
• is against a COPE member
• is within the remit of the COPE Code of Conduct for Journal Editors
• relates to actions taken after 1/1/05 (when COPE Code was published)
• has been through journal’s/publisher’s own complaints procedure
• correspondence between complainant and journal and/or publisher provided
• complaints form has been completed and contains all required information

If so:
COPE Complaints Officer informs journal of complaint
COPE Complaints Officer consults with at least one member of COPE Council

Agree that journal has dealt satisfactorily with complaint

Agree that case requires further investigation

Refer to COPE sub-committee*

Sub-committee considers case and drafts reports

Report approved by Chair and all officers (excluding any with links to publisher of the journal being complained about)**

Report is sent to editor and complainant who may correct factual errors

COPE Council are informed

If not, COPE cannot consider complaint

Complainant may try other organisations, e.g. Press Complaints Commission, World Association of Medical Editors (WAME)

If the COPE Complaints Officer has links to the subject of the complaint either via the publishing group, journal, or complainant, the complaint will be handled by a COPE Officer

COPE Complaints Officer informs journal of complaint
COPE Complaints Officer consults with at least one member of COPE Council

Agree that journal has dealt satisfactorily with complaint

Agree that case requires further investigation

Refer to COPE sub-committee*

Sub-committee considers case and drafts reports

Report approved by Chair and all officers (excluding any with links to publisher of the journal being complained about)**

Report is sent to editor and complainant who may correct factual errors

COPE Council are informed

*Sub-committee will comprise:
• COPE Complaints Officer
• COPE Officer
• Two other Council members (aiming to include at least one who is not an editor)

Members may not work for the same publishing group as the subject of the complaint

Anonymised summary of complaint may be posted on COPE website if there are no legal concerns

**Actions recommended might include:
• editor apologises to complainant
• editor publishes statement from COPE in journal
• journal/editor agrees to improve procedures

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