

Ethics and Editing

Being an editor is an important role within our professional society. As an editor you are entrusted with determining whether a document should be published or not. An editor can take a so-so paper with the germ of a great idea and guide it into an award winning paper. To ensure that the editing process runs smoothly and to allow us to sleep at night, we want to make sure that we have a grasp of the ethical issues involved in the process.

The ethics of editing boils down to the following: a manuscript should be accepted on its merits. If the manuscript can benefit the journal reader, it should be accepted. If it does not provide insight or an improvement to existing techniques, then it should not be accepted.

That being said, there are times when an editor can be put in a situation that is uncomfortable. This document is meant to give guidelines to all editors to be aware of ethical issues that can arise.

Conflicts-of-Interest

Conflict-of-interest implies that the editor has an ulterior motive for accepting a manuscript.

A conflict-of-interest arises when an editor or reviewer accepts a paper in exchange for some sort of favor or benefit. The favors or benefits could take several forms. Some examples are:

- The authors agree to list the editor as co-author in exchange for acceptance.
- The authors are in a position to offer the editor a job position
- The authors are associated with the editor; hence accepting the manuscript could possibly enhance the reputation of the author's institution.

Editors should avoid instances of conflict-of-interest or the appearance of conflict-of-interest.

Sometimes editors can make sound, justifiable decisions regardless of their relationship to the authors. There are some situations where any of us can feel challenged by dueling loyalties. If this is the case, the best course is to either decline the assignment and/or discuss it with the Editor-in-Chief.

Editors and reviewers should never become co-authors of a manuscript under review. While the author is in the process of correcting the identified issues during the review, the editors and reviewers should not initiate working on the same problem themselves.

Sometimes it may be impossible to avoid the appearance of a conflict-of-interest. You may make a decision on the merits of the manuscript and people, being people, may still talk. Because the process is confidential, the outcome is always open to speculation. The key is to make sure that you can defend your actions to the editor-in-chief and your conscience.

Confidentiality

The editorial process is confidential. Authors trust editors and reviewers with their manuscript and the work that led to it. Reviewers trust editors to keep their identity private so that they may speak freely about the document. As an editor you are obligated to respect this trust.

Fairness

An editor has a role similar to that of a judge. Like a judge, an editor should be even-handed and fair.

Editors and reviewers are in a unique position to see unpublished manuscripts. The authors worked hard to achieve these results, at least one hopes they did. Editors and reviewers should not use results from unpublished manuscripts. Doing so gives them an unfair advantage over other researchers. If a manuscript has a good idea, the editor must wait until the manuscript is publishable before accepting it. The editor and reviewer must also wait until the manuscript is published before they can start a project using a result from that manuscript.

If an editor is working on the same problem found in a manuscript, the editor should stop reading the manuscript and tell the Editor-in-Chief to assign it to a different editor.

Editors should treat all authors respectfully. Whether the author is a legend in the field, or a budding researcher, treat all authors equally and respectfully. Experts can make mistakes; novices can make astounding observations. Both deserve careful review and judicious decisions.

Editors have a duty to the reader. The editor and reviewers sort through manuscripts to determine what is worth publishing and what is not. It is not fair to the reader to accept a manuscript that is not worthwhile. Editors should not be tempted to accept for reasons such as:

- The author needs a publication.
- The editor is worn down by the authors' rebuttals
- The author is a friend (see Conflict-of-Interest)

Accepting a manuscript that does not advance the state of the art is not fair to the reader. Nor is it fair to the author. The author deserves an honest, respectful appraisal of his or her work.

Plagiarism issues

Plagiarism is a serious moral and legal issue. If an editor suspects plagiarism, he or she should immediately report the issue to the Editor-in-Chief. The subject of plagiarism should not be mentioned to the author until it has been fully investigated by the Editor-in-Chief and the IEEE.