INTEGRITY BY DESIGN · 16TH GW ETHICS IN PUBLISHING CONFERENCE

Peer Review by Design

Building integrity into high-stakes clinical editorial workflows

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YOUR SPEAKERS

Two editors, lots of experience with large clinical portfolios

Daniella Thoren

Associate Director, Content Management and Publishing
Wolters Kluwer Health | Lippincott Williams & Wilkins

20+ years in healthcare publishing, leading editorial strategy and content development for clinical and nursing journals at Wolters Kluwer and WebMD.

EDITORIAL LEADERSHIP

Editor-in-Chief, Science Editor, Council of Science Editors; Editorial Consultant, WebMD.

Jennifer Regala

Senior Director, Publishing and Product Development
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25+ years across the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Wolters Kluwer Health, the American Urological Association, the American Society of Plant Biologists, Sheridan Journal Services, and Cadmus.

SOCIETY LEADERSHIP

Director at Large, SSP Board of Directors; Past Treasurer of the Council of Science Editors

Two reviewer invitations. Which one gets a yes?

INVITATION A

From: The Editors
Subject: Invitation to review manuscript [MS-ID]

Dear Dr. [LASTNAME],

You have been selected as a potential reviewer for the manuscript titled "[TITLE]." Please respond within 7 days to accept or decline. The review is due 14 days from acceptance.

Thank you for your service to the journal.

Sincerely, The Editors

INVITATION B

From: Anna Chen, Editor
Subject: Invitation to review: post-surgical wound infection

Dear Dr. Patel,

We are inviting you specifically because of your 2024 work on post-surgical wound infection. We are asking 3 reviewers; you are #2.

The manuscript is 11 pages. We expect the review to take 90 minutes. You will have 21 days. If you cannot accept this invitation, please suggest a colleague. That takes 60 seconds and we will credit you.

We will share the other reviews and the decision with you.

Thank you, Anna Chen, Editor

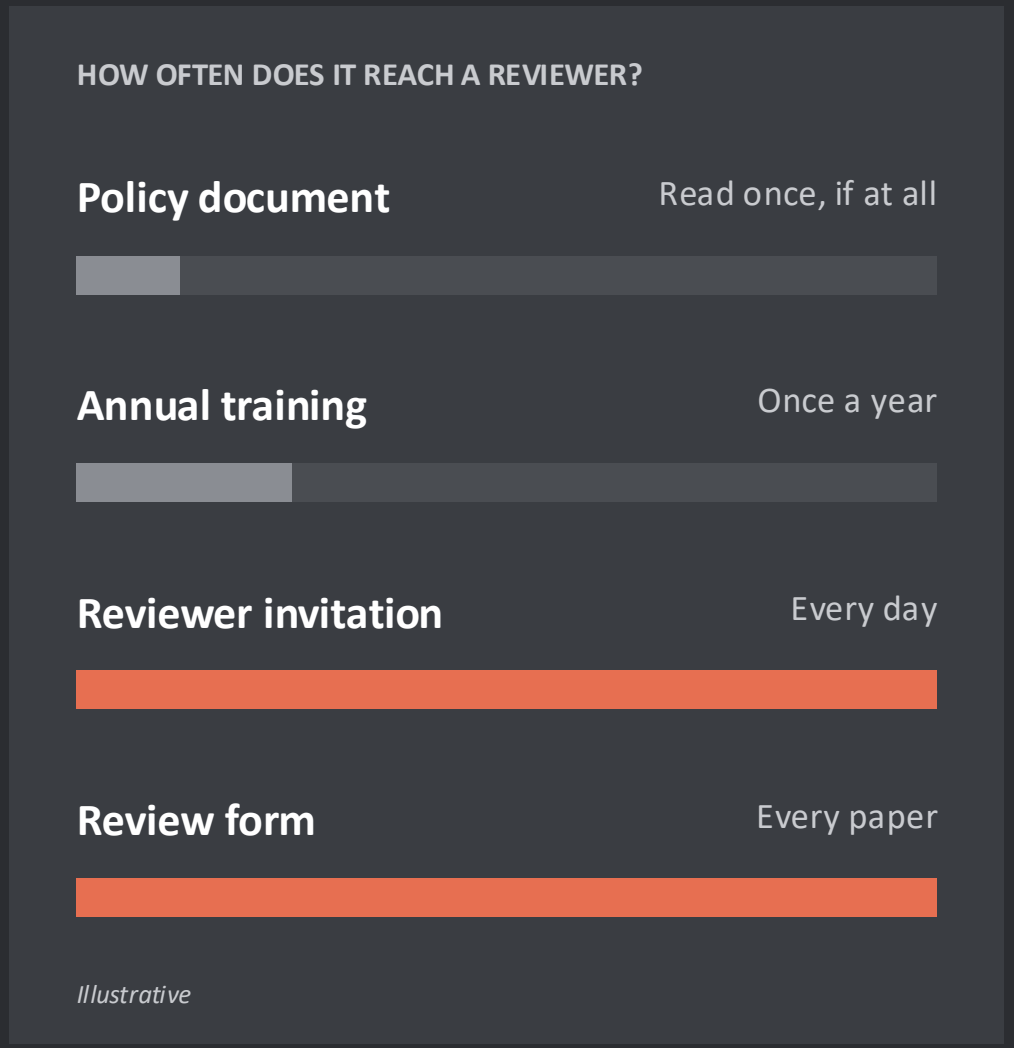
OUR ARGUMENT

You cannot train your way out of bad design.

When integrity problems surface in peer review, the instinct is to add a policy or a training.

Real durability comes from designing integrity into the workflow itself, so the right behavior is the easiest behavior.

The operational version of "integrity by design"



Three tests for every peer review touchpoint

☑ Is it embedded?

Integrity behavior lives in the artifact a person interacts with (the email, the form, the letter), not in a separate document they have to remember.

☑ Is it default-on?

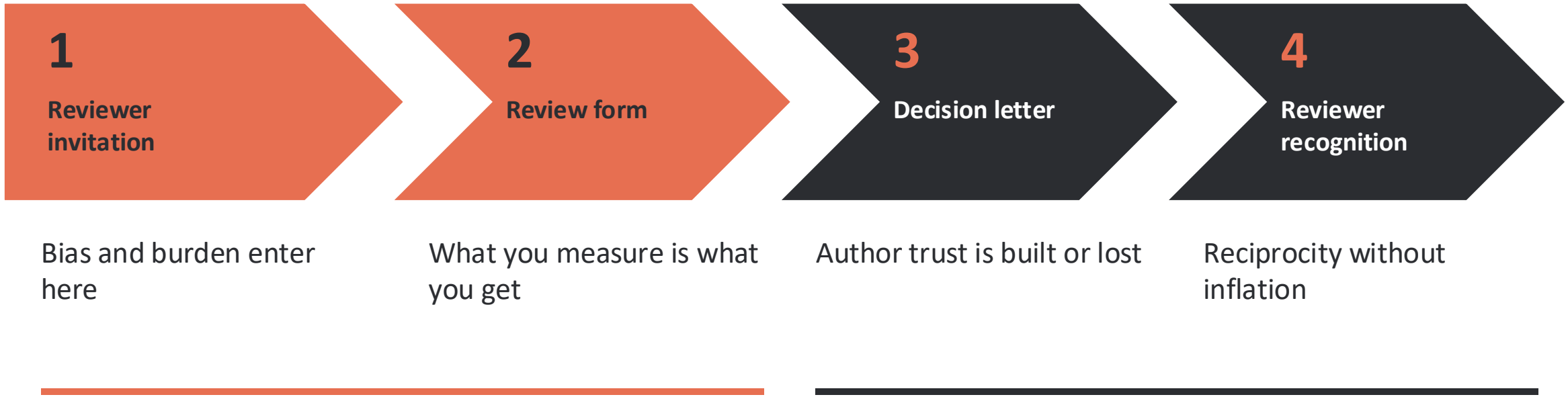
The integrity-preserving option is the path of least resistance. The reviewer or editor has to opt out, not opt in.

☑ Is it measurable?

Every touchpoint produces evidence. You can audit it. You can A/B test it. You can show advertisers, boards, and authors that it is working.

THE FOUR TOUCHPOINTS WE WILL REDESIGN

A map of where integrity risk lives



Then we step back, look at the patterns, and give you a way to audit your own journal.

SHOW OF HANDS

In the last two years, have you rewritten your…

A

Reviewer invitation template?

Hands raised: _____

B

Decision letter template?

Hands raised: _____

Hold that thought.

The reviewer invitation: five small design moves

BEFORE Anonymous, undifferentiated, vague		AFTER Specific, fair, reciprocal
No reason given for selection	→	**Name the specific reason this reviewer was chosen**
No estimate of effort or page count	→	**State page count and realistic time estimate**
No alternative reviewer prompt	→	**One-click "suggest a colleague" with reviewer credit**
No commitment of feedback to reviewer	→	**Promise to share other reviews and final decision**
Implicit penalty for declining	→	**Editor signs name; no implicit penalty for declining**

Source: Publons Global State of Peer Review 2018 · COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

The review form: from one open box to a scaffold

BEFORE Open boxes, no scaffolding

Review form

Comments to author

- COI captured once at registration, never re-asked
- Methodological rigor mixed with stylistic critique
- No prompt on statistical or ethics review
- No structured strength-based reviewing

AFTER **Structured, scaffolded, scoped**

Review form · Manuscript [MS-ID]

Before you begin: any work with these authors in the last 36 months, or a financial interest in the products evaluated?

1 Strengths required	Confidence	Low	Med	**High**
2 Methods required	Confidence	**Low**	Med	High
3 Clarity required	Confidence	Low	**Med**	High

☐ Statistical review needed: refer to specialist ☐ Ethics concern: refer to specialist

AI-use disclosure: Did you use a generative AI tool to assist this review? If so, which one and for what purpose?

Source: F1000Research structured review · COPE position statement on AI

HANDING OVER

Touchpoints 3 and 4

The decision letter and reviewer recognition, with Jennifer Regala

The decision letter: synthesis first, verdict second

BEFORE Verdict-first, opaque

We regret to inform you that your manuscript has been rejected…

Reviewer 1 comments (pasted in)

Reviewer 2 comments (pasted in)

Sincerely, The Editors

- Reasoning buried below the verdict
- No essential vs. optional guidance
- No path stated for disagreement or appeal
- Journal-as-institution voice

AFTER **Synthesis-first, transparent**

1 **What the reviewers agreed on**

Editorial synthesis opens the letter

2 **Our decision**

Stated after the synthesis

3 **Revisions**

ESSENTIAL Clarify the primary outcome

ESSENTIAL Report missing data handling

OPTIONAL Consider a shorter introduction

4 **Where reviewers disagreed, and how we decided**

Named explicitly

5 **Your appeal path and timeline**

Stated up front, not hidden

Signed by the handling editor, by name. Not "The Editors."

Source: Smith, BMJ Editor-in-Chief reflections · COPE guidance on appeals

Recognition without inflation

"The problem with most reviewer recognition programs is that they pay reviewers in the currency of more reviewing."

WHAT DOES NOT WORK

- ✕ "Top reviewer" badges that lead to more invitations
- ✕ Free journal access (most reviewers already have it via their institution)
- ✕ Public leaderboards that pressure reviewers into accepting more

WHAT WORKS

- Verified reviewer credit via ORCID and Publons / Web of Science
- Editor-signed letters reviewers can send to their tenure committees
- GENUINE thank you notes
- Discounts on relevant CME / conferences (real money)
- "Suggest-a-colleague" credit when declining
- Be creative. Understand your community!

THE STRUCTURAL FIX

- Cap invitations per reviewer per year
- Track decline reasons and respond to them
- Diversify the reviewer pool. Recognition without a pipeline just exhausts your top 50

Source: Tracz & Lawrence, 2016 · ORCID Peer Review

GOING FURTHER

When the workflow goes open

When implementing open peer review, there are valid concerns: fewer reviewers, harsher reviews, gaming, retribution/retaliation for reviews.

The reality: The structural design choices around the open review matter more than the openness itself.

THINGS TO CONSIDER TO MAKE PEER REVIEW OPEN

- Reviewers opt in to being named on the published review
- Structured review template: same five sections, every paper
- Editorial synthesis published with the reviews
- Author response visible alongside the reviews

Source: Regala, "A Journey in Open Peer Review," GW Ethics Conference 2023

WHAT YOU WILL SEE

No drop

in reviewer acceptance rates after going open

More balanced

tone, measured by sentiment analysis

Higher

author satisfaction with feedback received

STEPPING BACK

Three patterns across all four touchpoints

WE STOP RELYING ON	WE DESIGN FOR	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
~~Generality~~	→ **Specificity**	Named reviewer, named reason, named ask, named editor. Generic language is where bias and burden hide.
~~Willpower~~	→ **Structure**	Required sections, mandatory re-disclosure, tagged asks, capped invitations. We stop relying on people to remember the right thing.
~~Extraction~~	→ **Reciprocity**	Reviewers see other reviews. Authors see the synthesis. Suggesting a colleague earns credit. The journal gives something back at every touchpoint.

FOR YOUR JOURNAL

Five audit questions to use Monday morning

Score your own journal as we go. Yes or no.

		YES	NO
1	Does our reviewer invitation name a specific reason this reviewer was chosen?	☐	☐
2	Does our review form re-ask about conflict of interest at form open, not just at registration?	☐	☐
3	Does our decision letter open with an editorial synthesis, before the verdict?	☐	☐
4	Can a declining reviewer suggest a colleague in one click, and earn credit for doing so?	☐	☐
5	Are our top reviewers being invited more than 8 times a year, and do we know who they are?	☐	☐

A REALITY CHECK

Design will not save you from a thin reviewer pool

The biggest threat to peer review integrity is not bad reviewers.

It is too few reviewers, asked too many times, in too narrow a pool.

Audit reviewer concentration

What percent of your reviews come from your top 10% of reviewers?

____% Know your number

Diversify by career stage

Invite early-career reviewers in pairs with a senior mentor.

Diversify by geography and institution

Audit the geographic distribution of your reviewer pool against your author pool.

HONEST CAVEATS

What we will not tell you today

WE WILL NOT TELL YOU THAT…

~~There is one right design.~~

Adapt the patterns, not the templates.

A nursing journal, an ob-gyn journal, a humanities journal, and a physics journal will land on different versions of the same patterns.

WE WILL NOT TELL YOU THAT…

~~Design solves the AI problem.~~

Design helps. Judgment is still required.

AI in peer review is real and disrupting fast. Structured disclosure fields and explicit AI policies help, but they do not remove the need for active editorial judgment.

WE WILL NOT TELL YOU THAT…

~~Redesign is free.~~

Plan for the real costs.

Internal time, change management, vendor configuration, and reviewer / editor retraining are real costs. The ROI is still worth it.

IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE

Three things to do Monday morning

1

Rewrite your reviewer invitation.

One hour with a colleague. Apply the five design moves from Touchpoint 1. Ship the new version this month.

2

Audit your top 10 reviewers.

How many times have they been invited in the last 12 months? If any are over 8, cap them and start growing the pool.

3

Run the five audit questions on your journal.

Answer them honestly. Pick the lowest-scoring one. That is your project for the next quarter.

Integrity by design is not a slogan. **It is three hours of work this month.**

Questions

We would love to hear how this lands at your journal.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

How do we get our editors to adopt new templates?

What does this look like for smaller journals without dedicated staff?

How do we handle AI-assisted reviews in this framework?

Is open peer review right for clinical / nursing journals?

Thank you.

We would love to continue the conversation, or hear how this lands at your journal.

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FOR YOUR TOOLKIT

Selected references and resources

ETHICS AND POLICY

- COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers
- COPE Council — Appeals and Complaints
- COPE — AI Position Statements

EVIDENCE ON PEER REVIEW

- Publons / Web of Science — Global State of Peer Review 2018
- Tracz & Lawrence (2016) — Open Peer Review and Reviewer Recognition
- Smith R. — BMJ Editor-in-Chief reflections

MODELS AND TOOLS

- F1000Research — Open Peer Review Model
- ORCID — Peer Review Credit Integration
- Regala J. (2023) — A Journey in Open Peer Review, GW Ethics Conference

COMMUNITIES AND STANDARDS

- Council of Science Editors — Science Editor (journal)
- AAM Council on Audience Engagement — Audit Standards