

Policy on the Use of Artificial Intelligence by Peer Reviewers

From the editors of *American Family Physician* and *FP Essentials*

The Importance of Peer Review

The peer review process is built on a foundation of trust and confidentiality. Reviewers are entrusted with access to unpublished, proprietary research, with the expectation that they will approach each manuscript with rigor, impartiality, and a commitment to ethical standards. The rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI), software that can create original content, including text, images, video, audio, and software code, introduces new considerations for how that responsibility is fulfilled.

Policy Statement

Peer reviewers must not upload submitted manuscripts, or portions of manuscripts, into any generative AI tool. This applies to:

- Publicly available AI tools and chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude)
- Enterprise or institutionally licensed AI platforms (e.g., Microsoft Copilot, Google Workspace AI)
- Closed-environment or firewalled AI systems deployed within institutional or organizational networks

This policy is consistent with the guidance of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), which requires reviewers to maintain manuscript confidentiality and prohibits uploading manuscripts to software or AI technologies where confidentiality cannot be assured.¹

Rationale

AI Can Generate Inaccurate, Incomplete, or Biased Content

Generative AI tools produce outputs based on statistical patterns in training data. As a result, these tools can:

- Generate fabricated information, including citations to nonexistent articles
- Produce plausible sounding text that contains factual errors
- Reflect biases present in training data, including biases related to study populations
- Lack current knowledge of recent literature

Relying on AI-generated content in peer review risks degrading the quality, accuracy, and independence of the review, undermining the intent of the process.

Confidentiality, Intellectual Property, and Data Privacy

Submitted manuscripts are confidential documents. Authors entrust journals and peer reviewers with access to unpublished, proprietary research. Uploading any part of a manuscript to a generative AI tool creates several risks:

- **Intellectual property:** Infringement of authors' intellectual property rights
- **Confidentiality:** The manuscript has not yet been published, and the authors have not consented to its disclosure to third-party systems.

- **Data privacy:** Where manuscripts contain personally identifiable information, such as patient data or information about the authors, uploading to an AI tool may breach applicable data privacy laws and regulations.

These risks apply even when an AI tool is described as “private,” “secure,” or “firewalled.” Sharing a confidential manuscript with any external or third-party system constitutes a breach of the reviewer’s confidentiality obligations. Many generative AI tools retain, reuse, or incorporate user-submitted content into future model training, particularly consumer-facing versions. While enterprise agreements may offer stronger data protections, reviewers are typically not able to verify a tool’s data handling practices independently. Furthermore, even where robust privacy terms exist, sharing unpublished manuscript content with any external system may itself constitute a breach of confidentiality obligations.

Permitted Uses of Generative AI

Generative AI may be used in a supportive capacity in the review process, provided that: (a) no manuscript content is uploaded to the AI tool, and (b) the reviewer maintains full oversight.

Permitted uses include:

- Improving the language, clarity, and structure of the reviewer’s own written comments
- Conducting background literature searches about a topic or methodology relevant to the review
- Verifying the accuracy of any questionable statements or statistics within the manuscript. For example, an AI prompt “*What is the standard sensitivity and specificity of the [X] test?*” allows the reviewer to efficiently cross-reference the manuscript’s claims against established medical or technical benchmarks.

Reviewers are reminded that AI-generated content can be incorrect or misleading. Any information obtained through AI tools must be verified before being incorporated into a review. The reviewer bears full responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, and integrity of their assessment.

Disclosure of AI Use

When a reviewer has used a generative AI tool in any permitted capacity, they must disclose this use. Disclosure is not required for basic grammar, spelling, or punctuation checkers.

Reviewers should include a disclosure statement in the “Comments to Authors” section of their review report. The following format is recommended:

During the preparation of this report, I used [NAME OF TOOL] in order to [REASON]. After using this tool, I reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for my critical assessment and feedback on this manuscript.

Responding to AI Use in Manuscripts

Reviewers may encounter manuscripts in which authors have used generative AI tools. The presence of AI-assisted writing or AI-generated content in a manuscript is not grounds for rejection. However, reviewers should notify the editors if they discover concerns about AI usage that calls into question the accuracy of the work.

Issues That Warrant Editorial Review

Reviewers who identify any of the following concerns should flag them in their review and recommend editorial review:

- Fabricated references: Citations to articles, authors, or journals that do not appear to exist or cannot be verified
- AI-generated or AI-manipulated images: Figures, clinical images, or illustrations that are inaccurate
- Plagiarism or text duplication: AI tools can reproduce or closely paraphrase existing published content. Reviewers should flag any text that appears to reproduce prior work without attribution

Reviewers are not responsible for conducting investigations into these concerns. This is the role of editors and journal staff. However, raising these issues and providing examples in the review is a valuable contribution to the editorial process.

References

1. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Use of AI by Reviewers. Accessed June 9, 2026. <https://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/artificial-intelligence/ai-use-by-reviewers.html>