



publicationethics.org

**GUIDELINES:
EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN**

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EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN

These guidelines are formal COPE policy and are intended to apply mainly to journal articles but may be applicable to other published documents. The guidelines provide advice to journal editors and publishers on expected practice when considering whether an expression of concern is appropriate, and how to issue an expression of concern.

COPE recognises that in accordance with the Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing,¹ editors and publishers are responsible for safeguarding the integrity of the scholarly literature in their journals, and policies and procedures for handling these issues when they arise should be in place. Editorial independence is also a fundamental principle of scholarly publishing, ensuring that editors make editorial decisions free from any external influence, as outlined in the COPE Position Statement on Editorial Independence.² In accordance with this statement, editors are accountable for decisions about journal content and for issuing any post-publication amendments, such as an expression of concern, where necessary.

An expression of concern is a notice to alert readers to major and credible concerns that have been raised about the reliability of a publication, but do not meet the criteria for a retraction, as outlined in the COPE Retraction guidelines,³ or conclusive evidence will not or cannot be obtained for some time. An expression of concern can be used as an interim notice and followed up with either a correction or retraction, or it could be the final outcome for an article that will not be updated further.

If you would like to comment on the content of our guidance then please contact Natalie Ridgeway, Executive Officer cope_execofficer@publicationethics.org



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Summary

Editors should consider issuing an expression of concern to alert readers to potential concerns that may impact the reliability or conclusions of the work if:

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| <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> significant and credible concerns have been raised but the evidence is unclear as to whether the work, or parts of the work, are potentially unreliable. The unreliability may be due to error, incorrect analysis, or concerns about research integrity and publication ethics that affect the main findings;</p> <p>OR</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> an institutional, funding, or other formal oversight investigation is ongoing that may result in corrections to the literature based on the reliability of the work;</p> <p>OR</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> the authors have been asked to provide additional information to address the concerns that have been raised, and this information is not immediately available;</p> <p>OR</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> there is a breach in the journal or publisher policy that cannot be resolved (eg, article data were available when the article was published but were later withheld by the authors);</p> <p>AND</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> a resolution is not expected to be reached at all or for some time (eg, several months).</p> |
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As is standard practice with other types of amendments, and adhering to guidance from NISO CREC, the National Information Standards Organization (NISO)'s Communication of Retractions, Removals, and Expressions of Concern (CREC),⁴ an expressions of concern should:

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| <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> have clear bidirectional links between the updated publication and the associated notice;</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> clearly identify the article of concern (eg, by including the title and authors in the expression of concern heading, or citing the original article, or both);</p> | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> be freely available to all readers (ie, not behind access barriers or available only to subscribers);</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> state the reason or reasons for concern;</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> state who is issuing the concern;</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> be objective, factual, and avoid inflammatory language.</p> |
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Summary (continued)

Expressions of concern are not usually appropriate if:

- ✓ the editor can readily make an initial decision leading to a correction, retraction, or no post-publication action;
- ✓ the editor expects to reach a conclusion or resolve the case in a short time frame (eg, a few weeks) because publishing an expression of concern that is immediately followed by a correction or retraction might be confusing for readers;
- ✓ the main findings of the work are still considered to be reliable;
- ✓ the only concerns related to the work are about the authorship (see section below, 'Should expressions of concern be issued for authorship disputes?').

Purpose of an expression of concern

An expression of concern is a mechanism to alert readers to potential concerns that might affect the reliability of parts or all of a published work. An expression of concern allows editors to communicate concerns when inconclusive evidence exists about the reliability of the study but the concerns do not meet the criteria for retraction. Examples might include when institutional input is needed on an issue but the author's institution will not investigate or the institution cannot be reached, or there is a breach in the journal's or publisher's policy that cannot be resolved (eg, when the article was originally published data were available, but then later withheld so the article no longer complies with a data sharing policy). In these situations, the expression of concern is usually the final outcome decision for a published article and will not be

updated further. However, expressions of concern can also be used as interim notices to inform readers of credible concerns that have been raised but that require follow-up or investigation by the journal or publisher, or institution, and are expected to take a considerable amount of time (ie, months). This information is helpful to alert readers about the concerns, and will avoid inclusion of the work in a systematic review or meta-analysis without awareness of a potential problem. Unreliable content or data can result from honest error, naive mistakes, or research misconduct. Similar to all types of amendments, the main purpose of an expression of concern is "to correct the literature and ensure its integrity rather than to punish the authors".³

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When should an expression of concern be issued?

Expressions of concern should be issued if an editor of a journal determines that concerns raised about an article are substantial and credible enough to warrant alerting readers, but insufficient information is available to decide whether a correction or retraction is required. If only a small part of an article reports flawed data or content, this error might best be rectified by a correction, or the editor may determine that minor concerns do not require an expression of concern. Concerns raised by a complainant that do not warrant a correction or expression of concern could also be resolved by some other means (eg, letter to the editor, or note or notification—see section below on ‘What if an expression of concern is not appropriate?’).

Expressions of concern might be used for concerns about data reliability, data fabrication, incorrect analyses, errors in calculation or qualification, or other ethical concerns. In clear cases of inappropriate data, figure, or text reuse, the editor should be able to decide whether a correction or retraction is warranted, and an expression of concern is likely not appropriate. If further information is required (eg, significant responses from authors, such as re-analysis or additional experiments, or investigations from an institution or other oversight body), readers might benefit from being alerted to the significant concerns while more information is being obtained.

Content and form of an expression of concern

In general, an expression of concern should relate to a single published article,⁴ but there may be rare cases where it is pragmatic and quick to use one notice that can be linked to several articles (see section 7.8 of NISO CREC guidelines, Using a single notice for multiple events,⁴ and an example of an editorial expression of concern⁵). The NISO CREC guidance recognises that expressions of concern should clearly state the reasons and basis for concern and give as much detail as necessary about which parts of the article are affected. This allows readers to make their own judgement about the reliability of parts of the article while the concerns outlined in the expression of concern remain unresolved. Where possible, expressions of concern should disclose whether an institutional investigation has been requested or whether an oversight investigation is ongoing (with permission from the investigative body, unless the investigation is already public knowledge).

In some cases, the editor may work with the authors, publisher, or an investigative body on the wording of an expression of concern. Except in rare circumstances, the wording of the expression of concern should be written and approved by the editor. An expression of concern should not be delayed only because the authors or institution do not or cannot agree on the wording.

Expressions of concern should be easy to recognise and, when reading an article, whether an expression of concern related to the article is unresolved should be apparent. Publishers are responsible for ensuring that expressions of concern are titled or labelled so that they are easily identified by readers, and also so that downstream services (eg, indexing services or bibliometric databases) can correctly discover and categorise expressions of concern.

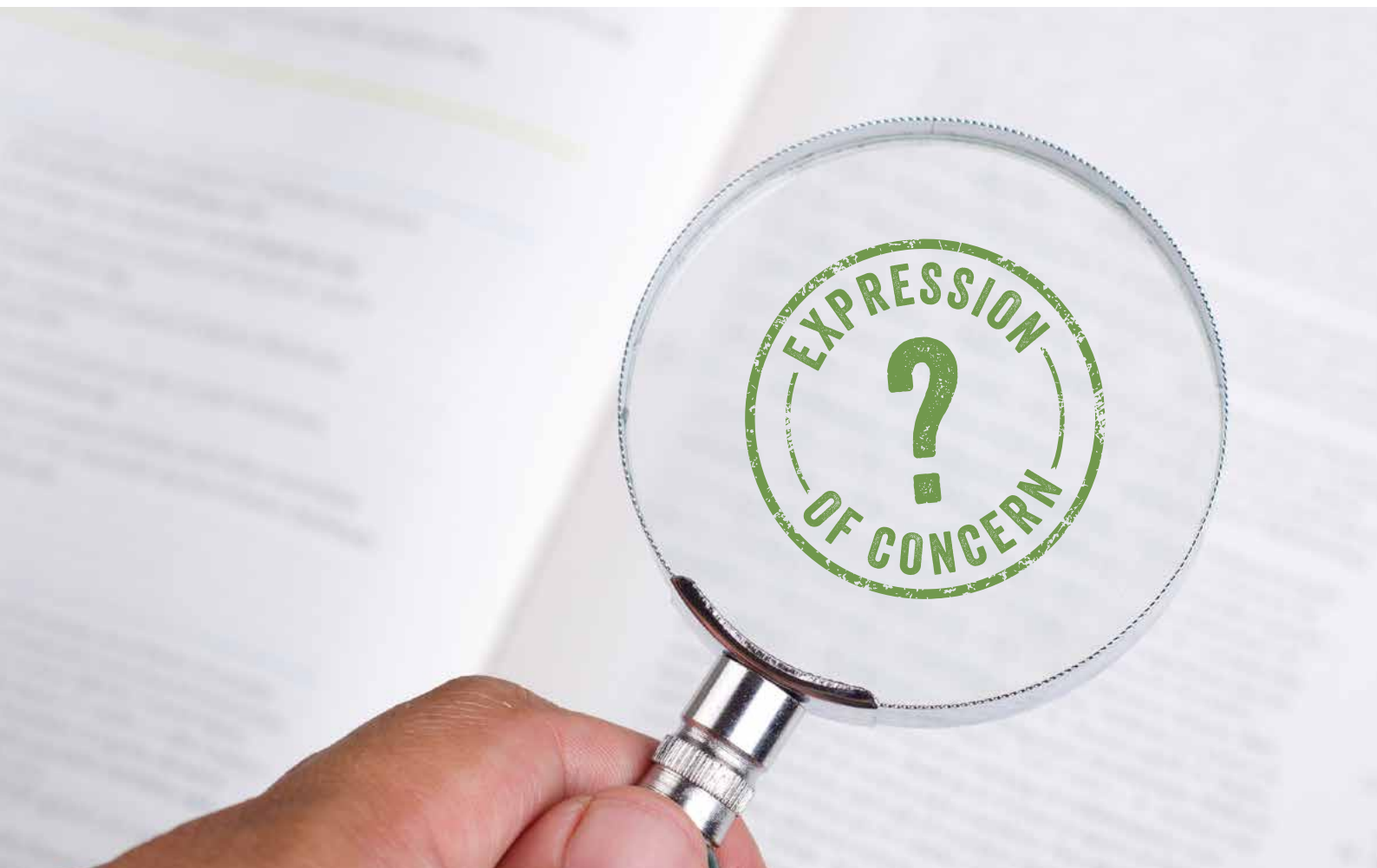
Who should issue an expression of concern?

As discussed above, it might be appropriate for an expression of concern to be issued by an editor or publisher, or both, and this decision should be reflected in the wording of the expression of concern. Because the editor is responsible for the journal's content, the final decision about issuing the expression of concern must be taken by the editor (see COPE Retraction guidelines³) and, if needed, the editor should work collaboratively with the publisher to agree on the wording of the expression of concern.

Although the editor is always responsible for deciding on the need for an expression of concern (with the support and assistance of the publisher, as needed),

there may be rare instances when the publisher will issue an expression of concern, for example, if the editor is being investigated or multiple expressions of concern (ie, batch expression of concern) are necessary in a paper mill case involving several journals.

In some cases, authors or institutions may alert the journal to an ongoing concern, which can be mentioned in the text of the expression of concern. It is not necessary for any or all of the authors to agree on the wording of the expression of concern before publication. This information could be stated in the notice.



How quickly should an expression of concern be issued?

As with retractions, timeliness is important when considering an expression of concern, particularly in areas that could affect public health or safety. Editors are responsible for assessing the credibility of concerns raised in a timely way. If the editor decides that there are credible concerns about the reliability of the article that requires an investigation, then an expression of concern should be published as soon as possible. When contacting the authors about the concerns with their article, the editor should inform the authors of the decision to publish an expression of concern while the case is being investigated. When the authors have been informed, the journal can proceed with publishing the expression of concern, stating in the notice that the authors have been informed of its publication. This approach means that serious concerns with a published article are flagged quickly in a transparent way that is recognisable to the reader and ensures further downstream dissemination (ie, at indexing services). The editor should not delay publishing an expression of concern based on uncooperative or unresponsive authors.



COPE Retraction guidelines³

As stated in the COPE Retraction guidelines³

“When editors have credible grounds to suspect misconduct, this should be brought to the attention of the authors’ institutions as early as possible, but the decision to correct or retract an article should be made by the editor and does not necessarily depend on the outcome of an institutional investigation. In principle, editors should raise concerns with all of the authors, not just the corresponding author, before contacting institutions. In rare cases, such as when allegations of serious misconduct are well founded, they might contact institutions and authors jointly (editors should consult the COPE guidelines, Cooperation between research institutions and journals on research integrity cases,⁶ the CLUE guidelines, Cooperation and liaison between universities and editors (CLUE): Recommendations on best practice,⁷ and the Working Group of Institutional Research Integrity Officers and Journal Editors and Publishers⁸).”

Where possible, an ongoing institutional investigation should be mentioned in the expression of concern. In some cases, however, because of concerns about confidentiality, an institution might not agree to referring to their investigation.

Expressions of concern can be issued at any stage after publication, regardless of whether other corrections or commentaries have been published on the same work. Where possible, the expression of concern should refer to previous corrections or commentaries and how they relate (or not) to the ongoing concerns.

What if conclusive evidence cannot be obtained?

In some instances, an expression of concern will eventually be resolved with further publication of a correction or retraction of the same article. However, if conclusive evidence is not available to allow the editor to correct or retract the article, an expression of concern remains as the final outcome. In this case,

readers have been made aware of the concerns and can make their own judgments about the reliability of some or all of the published article, based on the information in the expression of concern.

How should expressions of concern be resolved?

If conclusive evidence is not available to allow the editor to correct or retract the article, an expression of concern may become the final outcome, with the concerns remaining unresolved, but transparent to readers. In other instances, a correction or retraction might be published, referring to the expression of concern and explaining that the case is resolved with the new amendment. It is also possible that with more information and investigation, the editor concludes that the reasons for the expression of concern are unfounded, and no correction is needed to the original article. COPE recommends that the expression of concern should not be removed or retracted because

it is a permanent part of the version of record (with its own digital object identifier (DOI)). Rather, the journal should publish the outcome of their findings in resolving the expression of concern. At a minimum, the final outcome (eg, correction, editorial, note, or other appropriate publishing outcome, depending on the case and available journal options) should explain that the expression of concern is now resolved and information about how this decision was reached should be included or why the expression of concern was unfounded (see flowchart, page 50, in NISO CREC guidelines⁴).

Should expressions of concern be issued for authorship disputes?

Editors might be contacted about disputed authorship or may be alerted to institutional investigations into the authorship of an article. If there are no concerns about the research content of the article, an ongoing authorship dispute likely does not affect a reader's ability to understand the published work. Also, editors might not be able to determine whether the concerns are credible until the investigation has been completed by the relevant institutions. Hence if the only concerns about the published work are related to authorship, an expression of concern is typically not appropriate.

However, in some cases, an editor may decide to use an expression of concern where concerns about authorship and data origination cast doubt on the overall findings of the work (eg, authorship for sale, see COPE's Authorship discussion document⁹). Also, some editors use expressions of concern when an authorship dispute remains unresolved, and the case may never be resolved by an institutional investigation. Authorship disputes in relation to expressions of concern is an ongoing discussion point, and advice may be updated in future versions of COPE guidance on this topic.

What if an expression of concern is not appropriate?

There may be situations where publishing an expression of concern on an article is not appropriate. The publishing community has been experimenting with the use of more neutral ‘notes’ or ‘notifications’. These notices are case dependent and the content may be produced as ‘alerts or updates’ to quickly acknowledge that a concern has been raised, but further investigation is needed, especially if a large number of articles require an investigation. These notices might also be used to report on ‘final outcomes’ if a concern is resolved but another form of post-publication notice is not appropriate (eg, to highlight a potential conflict of interest or respond to concerns about data). United2Act has recommended their use in large scale paper mill investigations.¹⁰ FORCE11 and COPE have also referred

to their use in some situations.¹¹ COPE recommends that the use of notes or notifications should follow the NISO CREC guidelines,⁴ similar to other forms of amendment (ie, accessible, indexable items that should not be removed from the permanent record). Also, COPE recommends that notes should not be used instead of expressions of concern. If an expression of concern is considered appropriate, this amendment type should be used regardless of legal or other concerns about publishing an expression of concern. If journals plan to use notes as well as expressions of concern, the journal and publisher should have clear, publicly stated policies to clarify the two types of amendments.

Are there legal concerns that editors should consider?

As with retractions, authors who disagree with an expression of concern (or individuals whose request to issue an expression of concern is refused) sometimes threaten journals and their editors with legal action. Journals should ensure that they have clearly available public policies in place that explain when various types of amendments, including expressions of concern, are used. This approach might help reduce potential legal threats if authors confirm their compliance with the journal’s policies during the submission or publication process.

As stated in the COPE Retraction guidelines³ “even if the publishing agreement or journal instructions do not set out specific conditions for retraction, a journal can best defend itself against a legal challenge to a retraction (or expression of concern) if a suitable investigation and proper procedures are followed (see for example Mario Saad vs American Diabetes Association¹²).” If in doubt, a journal may consider requesting legal advice to determine the appropriate wording of an expression of concern.

“Journals should ensure that they have clearly available public policies in place that explain when various types of amendments, including expressions of concern, are used”

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RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

COPE Topic discussion. February 2018.

Expressions of concern

<https://cope.onl/eoc-discuss>

COPE Topic discussion. December 2024.

Revisiting expressions of concern

<https://cope.onl/express-concerns-revisited>

COPE Editorial. December 2024.

Continuing the conversation on post-publication amendment

<https://cope.onl/post-publication-amend>

Links to other sites are provided for your convenience but COPE accepts no responsibility or liability for the content of those sites.

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AUTHOR/WRITING GROUP DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

COPE provides leadership in thinking on publication ethics and practical resources to educate and support members, and offers a professional voice in current debates



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