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Editorial

Using AI in academic writing: what's allowed and what's not

Sumaya Laher

As an editor, reviewer, and author, it's hard to ignore the growing presence of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in academic writing. AI tools are designed to perform tasks that traditionally required human intelligence, such as generating text, improving writing style, and even analysing data. AI offers significant time- and resource-saving opportunities by allowing quick summarising of work, language editing, and reference checking for example. It also holds significant potential for enhancing scholarly work and even inspiring new ideas. Equally AI is able to generate entire pieces of work with precision and finesse such that it becomes difficult to distinguish original work written by an individual and work generated by AI. Hence, the questions arise in academic publishing about the extent to which AI use in academic writing is acceptable or not.

Looking at the published guidelines from organisations like COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics, 2024), Sage Publishing (2025), American Psychological Association (2025), and ASSaf through its SA Journal of Science platform (South African Journal of Science [SAJS], 2024), it's evident that these bodies share a unified message: while AI tools can certainly play a role in academic writing, their use must be approached with transparency, caution, and respect for ethical standards. In this editorial, I will attempt to briefly distil the contents across these documents to provide some direction for authors, reviewers, and editors. In this landscape, it is first important to distinguish between AI-assisted content and AI-generated content.

AI-assisted vs. AI-generated content

AI-assisted content refers to work that is predominantly written by an individual but has been improved with the aid of AI tools. For example, an author might use AI to assist with grammar checks, enhance sentence clarity, or provide style suggestions. In this scenario, the author remains firmly in control, and the AI merely acts as a helpful tool to polish the final product. This kind of assistance is generally accepted by most publishers, including COPE and Sage, without the need for formal disclosure, as long as the work remains original and the integrity of the research is upheld.

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On the other hand, AI-generated content is produced by the AI itself, typically but not always with little to no input from the individual author. This could mean that the AI tool generates a significant portions of text, or even entire sections, based on a prompt provided by the author. This raises ethical concerns, especially regarding authorship and originality. For AI-generated content, clear and explicit disclosure is required, and in many cases, this type of content may face restrictions or even be outright rejected by publishers, as outlined in the COPE guidelines.

So what's allowed and what's not

Across the guidelines, there is consensus that AI tools can be used for routine tasks like improving grammar, revising sentence structure, or assisting with literature searches. These applications do not require specific disclosure. Other aspects linked to AI assistance like assistance with correcting code, generating tables or figures, reducing word count, or checking on analyses should be indicated in the manuscript usually at the end in a declaration or acknowledgements section.

Across the guidelines, AI-generated content is prohibited unless there are clear reasons why this was necessary for the research and the content is clearly delineated and referenced as such. Thus, depending on how AI is used, its use must be referenced in the manuscript. It could be referenced in the literature review and/or indicated as part of the methods section and/or acknowledged in a declarations section at the end of a manuscript. The guidelines published by Sage and COPE emphasise that authors must disclose when AI-generated content is used, providing specific details such as the AI tool's name, version, and the prompt used. This level of transparency is necessary to uphold the credibility of academic work. Whether AI assisted or AI generated, authors are responsible for checking the accuracy of any AI-generated content, ensuring it's free from bias, plagiarism, and potential copyright infringements. AI tools cannot be listed as co-authors or take responsibility for the content.

As AI begins to play a role in the peer review process, it's important for reviewers and editors to stay vigilant about maintaining the rigour and credibility of academic publishing. AI tools are helpful for organising thoughts or managing review tasks, but they cannot replace human judgement or critical evaluation. The guidelines are clear in that reviewers may not use AI tools to generate peer reviews of manuscripts. The confidentiality of the manuscript should also be respected, and reviewers should not upload manuscripts to AI platforms. If a reviewer uses AI tools for other tasks, such as organising feedback or refining writing, they must disclose this use in the same way that authors are required to do so. Editors have a responsibility to ensure that the peer review process is not compromised by AI as far as it is possible to do this. While AI can help with administrative editorial tasks, it should never replace the careful, human judgement required to assess the quality and integrity of a manuscript. The guidelines are clear in that editors should not be using AI to customise decision letters.

The final word (for now)

AI tools can undoubtedly enhance the academic writing process, but their use must be approached with care. It is essential that authors, reviewers, and editors remain vigilant in maintaining academic integrity, particularly when AI is involved. Authors should verify the accuracy and appropriateness of AI-generated content, ensuring that it doesn't compromise the originality or validity of their work. Like authors, reviewers are accountable for the content of their review reports and must uphold the confidentiality of the submission. AI-generated review reports will not be accepted. Uploading any part of a manuscript into an AI tool or similar technology breaches the

confidentiality between authors, reviewers, and the journal. However, reviewers may use AI tools for tasks like editing or translating their review reports, provided it does not violate confidentiality.

Thus, in line with best practice guidelines, authors, reviewers, and editors should be citing AI use when AI is used in ways that allow it to be cited in the body of a manuscript. In this case, there are different conventions for citing use, but all seem to agree that the name of the generative tool used, the date accessed, and the prompt used should be cited. McAdoo (2024) writing on behalf of the APA suggests the following citation:

> OpenAI. (2023). *ChatGPT* (Mar 14 version) [Large Language Model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat

However, this reference does not include the prompt used, and as McAdoo (2024) indicates, there are a number of questions about citation that remain unanswered.

It is possible that AI could have been used to improve language or assist with other editing functions and cannot be explicitly cited in the body of the manuscript. In such cases, I would recommend, in line with current practice (see Gorraiz, 2025), that AI use be declared in the Acknowledgements section of the manuscript. Students are typically encouraged or mandated to include AI-use statements in a declaration section for an assignment or thesis. However, most journal article templates do not include a section for a declaration. Rather they include 'Acknowledgements' and a 'Declaration of conflicting interest'. Given this, in the current landscape, the use of AI, if not explicitly acknowledged in the manuscript and reference list, can be acknowledged in the Acknowledgements section of a manuscript.

The language used in such an acknowledgement has no standard format and can best be explained as suits the author/s and reviewer/s and the context of the research. An example of this could read as follows:

- *The authors declare that AI assisted tools (list the tools used in brackets) were used for searching for appropriate literature, summarising and/or editing content in this manuscript, checking language and grammar, correcting code for analysis. The final prompts used were: . . . AI generated content was not used in this article.*

It may be that AI-generated content was used for legitimate purposes, and this should be explained along with the prompt used and the date the tool was accessed. Recently, Resnik and Hosseini (2025) have provided excellent suggestions as to when the declaration of AI should be mandatory, optional, and unnecessary. Authors can consult this resource if in doubt. Also, if unsure, the best advice would be to include the use of any form of AI (assisted or generated) in the acknowledgement.

It is very likely that these recommendations will be revised in due course as AI continues to evolve, but it is equally important that we start somewhere with a concrete way forward on acknowledging AI use, ensuring that our work as a scholarly community continues to be both rigorous and responsible.

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