

# CSE Recommendations for Standards for Critiques/Responses to Published Articles

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Is it better to be criticized or to be ignored? In scholarly publishing, responsible debate, critique, and disagreement are important features of science, and journal editors should encourage such discourse.<sup>1</sup> When the CSE Editorial Policy Committee (EPC) recently decided to add a section on how to handle reader discourse to the CSE recommendations, I volunteered to take the lead in writing this new section, having worked closely on the policy for readers' comments and responses for *Annals of Internal Medicine*. I consulted the recommendations from the International Committee for Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) along with resources from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).<sup>2</sup> After much discussion and revision by the CSE committee members, Standards for Critiques/Responses to Published Articles has now been added to the recommendations. These standards are available at <https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/publication-ethics/> and summarized here.

In this new section, the Recommendations provides guidance for journals, journal editors, readers, and authors. The first section begins with journal responsibilities. Journals should provide readers a mechanism to comment on published articles. Often, readers will have questions about findings and conclusions in articles, and journals have a responsibility to respond to potential errors. Also, journals should make their policies clear: "Journals should make known their practice for handling correspondence in the information for authors or other relevant section."<sup>3</sup> The policies should address word count and reference citation limits as well as timeframes for submission of correspondence and should note if correspondence will be internally reviewed or peer reviewed.

Many times, correspondence about published articles can be less than collegial. It is important that editors screen correspondence for inappropriate or offensive language and/or harassment or personal attacks. Editors have the

right to reject any correspondence for this reason or if the comment is irrelevant, is uninteresting, or lacks cogency.<sup>1</sup> Editors can choose to publish correspondence, also known as Letters to the Editor, in a section of the journal, or they can choose to post the comment online to the article only. Such commenting is not indexed in MEDLINE unless it is subsequently published on a numbered electronic or print page.<sup>1</sup>

Authors of correspondence should disclose any potential conflicts of interest at submission. It is important for authors of published articles to be made aware of correspondence and critiques of their published article, and they should be given an appropriate amount of time to respond to comments. In particular, if a comment suggests a potential error in the article, the author(s) of the article should respond in a timely manner, noting if there is a correction or providing clarity to the reader. If a correction is warranted, the author should work with the journal on the correction required, as outlined in the CSE recommendations on correcting the literature (<https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/publication-ethics/3-5-correcting-the-literature/>).

When an error is noted by the commenter and a subsequent erratum is published, the commenter may be acknowledged in the erratum for their help in discovering the error. Also, editors should give readers the opportunity to assess the points raised, and comment-reply exchanges should be published simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> CSE does not recommend posting comments on published journal articles to preprint servers, especially if the commenter would like to have their comment published along with an author response.

Comments on journal articles have changed drastically in the past few decades. Some of us may remember receiving typed or handwritten "Letters to the Editor" about a recent article. Oddly, I still receive these in the post at *Annals*, although it may only be once or twice a year. In the last 20 years, journals have moved toward an online version of correspondence that can be submitted more rapidly yet still screened before being posted. Some journals will consider those online comments for publication, whereas other journals may consider the comments to be a forum

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for engaging in public discussion. More recently, comments about journal articles have moved to social media platforms, such as Twitter, allowing for unscreened comments to be posted to a public audience.

The EPC hopes this guidance is a helpful addition to the recommendations paper. This new section had input from several members of the committee and includes links to other resources in the scholarly community. If you are interested in becoming involved with the recommendations paper, please consider joining the Editorial Policy Committee.

## References and Links

1. [ICMJE] International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Recommendations for the conduct, reporting, editing, and publication of scholarly work in medical journals. [accessed October 25, 2022.] <https://www.icmje.org/recommendations/>
2. [COPE] Committee on Publication Ethics. Handling of post-publication critiques. [accessed October 25, 2022.] <https://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts/handling-post-publication-critiques>
3. [CSE] Council of Science Editors. Recommendations for promoting integrity in scientific journal publications. [accessed October 25, 2022.] <https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/publication-ethics/>