

THE
BLUE BOOK
OF
**THE PITFALL OF
USING THIRD PARTY EDITING
AGENCIES**
IN SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING
2020

The Blue Book of the Pitfall of Using Third Party Editing Agencies in Scholarly Publishing

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Third party agencies can provide valuable assistance to authors and help them get published. However, some disreputable agencies offer unethical services that should be avoided. This blue book provides detailed advice to authors on how to tell the difference between legitimate services and practices that are not ethical. Special attention is given to clinical research involving human subjects, tissue or data. At the end of the guideline quiz questions are included with answers and explanations to help confirm understanding of the guidelines.

Introduction

Scholarly publishing is an important pillar of global scientific advancement and knowledge dissemination. Almost every researcher is involved in scholarly publishing in one way or another in his or her career, as a reader, author, or editor, and so on. With the growth of scientific activities and the upgrade of information technologies, the service industry that is closely connected with scholarly publishing has become increasingly active and diverse, and is showing a steady flow of innovations. In this context, “third-party services” have become one of the most exploratory and challenging segments in the field of academic publishing. This blue book is intended for researchers, academic institutions, and funding organizations etc., to help them understand clearly the background and boundaries of third-party services so they can use third-party editing agencies appropriately to improve scholarly publishing efficiency. By providing a summary of typical disreputable activities of some “third-party services”, this blue book also hopes to help researchers steer clear of the pitfalls.

Definition

A third party editing agency is an agency, independent of any publisher or academic institution, that offers services to researchers intended to aid with the conduct, writing, publication and/or dissemination of their research. The researcher is charged a fee for these services.

In some instances a third party editing agency may work in collaboration with or exclusively with a publisher. A publisher may provide services similar to those of a third party editing agency.

There is a wide range of services provided by third party agencies including, but not limited to:

- proof-reading
- correcting grammar and spelling
- creating and formatting figures and diagrams
- providing input on the scientific or scholarly content of a manuscript*
- helping to collect data
- helping researchers to choose the most suitable journal to submit to
- helping researchers to respond to peer reviewer comments
- helping researchers to present their research in poster format

*Some third party agencies employ people with expertise in specific scholarly fields who provide advice on the interpretation of the researchers’ data.

Principles

Third-party editing agencies shall conduct their professional activities to provide services to researchers with the principles of integrity, transparency, and good will.

Integrity

The principle of integrity is the most basic requirement that third-party editing agencies should follow. Third-party editing agencies should always maintain strong integrity, practise publishing ethics and do not provide, facilitate or participate in any academic misconduct. Academic misconducts include but are not limited to: plagiarism, improper authorship, data fabrication or falsification, fake reviewers, repetitive publications, and duplicated submissions.

Transparency

Third-party editing agencies should provide fully transparent services, and list their specific services and detailed descriptions on their websites to ensure that the services are open and transparent and researchers can obtain the necessary information quickly and easily.

Good will

Third-party editing agencies should adhere to the principle of good will and provide assistance for researchers within reasonable limits. They should refuse to provide services when they are not suitable or ethical, and they should be aware if behaviours violate publication ethics or are considered as academic misconduct.

Background

International publishers and journals recognise that authors may not be aware of journal publishing processes and policies or be fluent enough in English to write or present their research to a standard suitable for an international research publication. They also acknowledge that many researchers are busy and do not have time to perform the administrative tasks associated with manuscript submission such as formatting and re-formatting their manuscripts to comply with different journal requirements. In addition it is understood that junior researchers may be disadvantaged because they are inexperienced in navigating the publication process.

For these reasons, there has been a long standing and acceptable practice of assisting authors through the process of writing and submitting their research. Many publishers provide editing services or work in collaboration with editing agencies to provide such services and there are many independent and reputable third party agencies that provide these services **(see appendix 1 for examples)**.

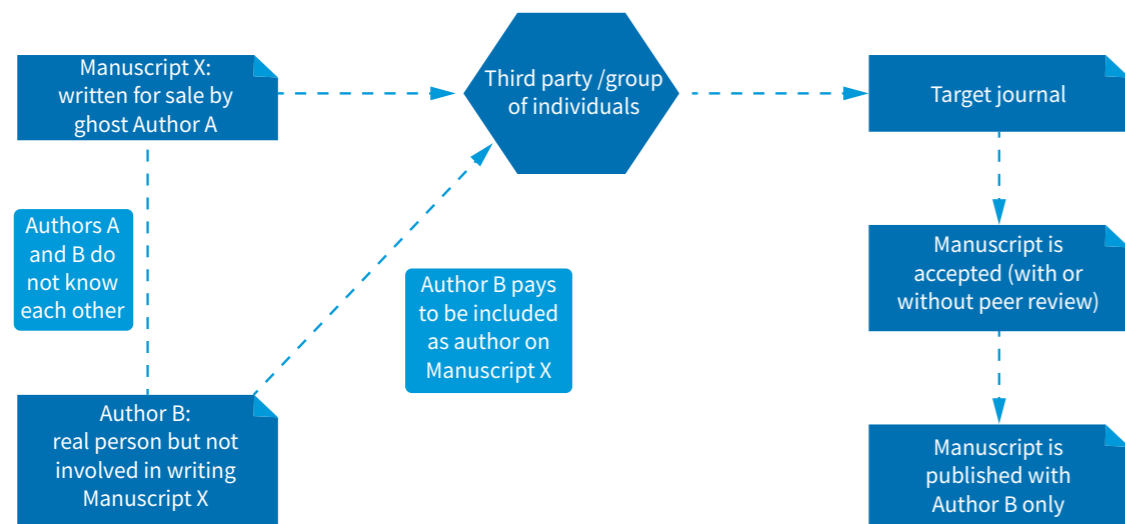
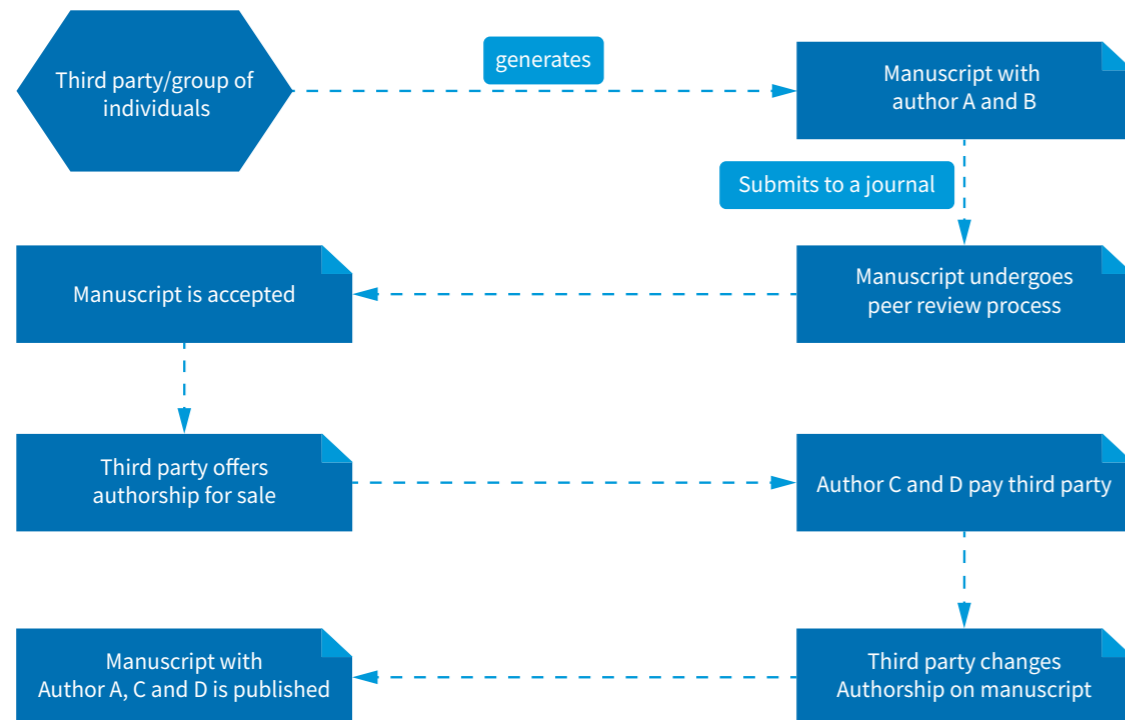
It is not unusual for junior researchers’ employment, funding and ultimately their careers to be dependent on the number of publications they can achieve in international journals. Inexperienced researchers who are under such pressure will naturally want to find the most efficient way to conduct and

publish their research and will turn to third party agencies to ease the publication process for them.

In recent years, however, a new phenomenon has emerged whereby some third party agencies have exploited the pressure to publish that researchers are under^{[1][2][3]}. They have done this by offering ‘disreputable’ services that aim to manipulate the publication process. The two most prominent examples of such manipulation are peer review manipulation and authorship for sale.

Peer review manipulation refers to the practice of impersonating peer reviewers via the use of falsified email addresses to take control of the peer review process. In such cases a third party editing agency offers the researcher the guarantee of publication in a particular journal for a fee. The third editing party editing agency then submits the researcher’s manuscript to the journal and suggests potential peer reviews using falsified email addresses via the journal’s submission system. In this

way, invitations to peer review the submission are directed back to the third party editing agency which then produces falsified favourable peer review reports to ensure the manuscript is



These two types of manipulation are blatantly unethical and constitute research misconduct. However, there are many services that third party editing agencies may offer throughout the whole research cycle where the line between acceptable and unacceptable is less clear. For the inexperienced researcher

it may be difficult to decide whether or not particular service offered by a third party editing agency is ethical and acceptable.

The following chapter proposes some guidelines to help researchers determine whether to trust or avoid services offered by third party editing services.

Third-party editing agencies: what to trust and what to avoid.

Third party editing agencies may provide assistance throughout the whole life-cycle of a piece of research, from data collection to the preparation of a manuscript and publication and dissemination of the research.

The set of guidelines that follow aim to provide a framework of ethical practices to help researchers make informed decision about which services they should use or avoid.

Agencies that offer types of assistance described in the blue boxes are proposed as trusted. It is recommended that services described in red boxes should be avoided.

It is also recommended that the authors transparently declare in the manuscript, for example in the Acknowledgements section, that they used a third party service, and specify the types of assistance provided.

Collecting data

Specialised research services

In some very specialised fields, researchers may not have access to specialist equipment or processes to collect the data they require. In such circumstances a third-party agency, which has access to such equipment may collect data for the researcher. An example is genome sequencing.

Trust (✓)

Collecting data that cannot be collected by the researcher because of the need for specialist equipment that is part of the researchers' own study protocol. If data is collected for the researcher in this way, this must be acknowledged in the methods and acknowledgement section of the researcher's manuscript.

*In the case of research conducted on animals or humans, human tissue or human data, researchers are responsible for ensuring that the data they use for their research is collected in compliance with internationally agreed standards for human research (see next chapter). This is the case even if the data was collected by the third party agency on behalf of the researcher.

Data curation and deposition

With the increasing emphasis on data sharing and the development of journal policies that require authors to share their data^[7] third party editing agencies may offer services to prepare data for deposition in data repositories.

Trust (✓)

Curating the authors' raw data, providing advice on where to share/deposit their raw data and providing administrative assistance with the data deposition process.

Avoid (✗)

Any offers to provide 'raw data' (for example, to comply with a journal's data deposition requirements) that have not been collected by the authors as part of their own study protocol.

Presenting research for publication

Scientific editing/Pre-submission peer-review

Some third party editing agencies employ people with specific expertise to help researchers to interpret their findings or present the findings in a way that might be appealing to their target journal

Trust (✓)

A service where an editor with expertise in the field provides advice to the author on how the scientific aspects of the manuscript could be improved.

Avoid (✗)

Any offer to write the manuscript for the author or provide 'data' for the author to include in their manuscript. Attempts to come to conclusions that are not supported by the researchers' data or to suppress data that is not favourable.

Plagiarism check

Plagiarism detection software such as [iThenticate]^[8] is in common use amongst journals and publishers. Third party editing agencies can help researchers by checking their manuscripts before they submit it to a journal.

Trust (✓)

Running the manuscript through plagiarism detection software to detect areas where there may have been inadvertent copying of text or where a citation is needed to provide proper attribution for the copied material.

Avoid (✗)

Any service that offers to re-write or re-format plagiarised material in such a way that plagiarism is not detected.

Statistical services

Sometimes researchers may have collected data but are unsure of the best statistical analysis to use to test their hypothesis. Third party editing agencies may employ statisticians who assist researchers in choosing the most appropriate analysis or perform the analysis for the researcher.

Trust (✓)

Advising on the a6 1036eo(ough pl8vSqq 1 0 0 1T0 0.459 0.759 scn5r)10 (tBT/CO_0MCh68.

Avoid (x)

Any service offering to provide data that was not collected by the researchers themselves and/or ready-made statistical analysis and results.
Any attempts to manipulate the data or analysis to provide a desired outcome that is not supported by the data.
Any attempt to suppress unfavourable data.

English language and proofreading

The services of a third party editing agency are particularly useful for researchers who don't have English as a first language. In such cases, third party editing agencies help to make manuscripts suitable for submission to international journals

Avoid (x)

Any offers to write a manuscript or provide a prewritten manuscript for the author.

Formatting manuscripts, figures and illustrations to conform to submission guidelines

Third party editing agencies commonly help researchers to format their manuscripts so that they comply with journal submission requirements.

Avoid (x)

Any service offering ready-made manuscripts, images, figures or tables that were not created from the researchers' own data.

Journal selection

Providing authors advice on the most suitable journal for their manuscript

Help researchers understand if a journal's Aim & Scope matches the research work, the characteristics and advantages of a journal, its editorial process and review turnaround time etc.; make journal selection suggestions to help researchers choose the most suitable one for submission.

Avoid (x)

Offering guaranteed publication in a given journal, especially for a fee

Peer review

Peer-review response letter editing

After receiving the peer reviewer's comments, authors need to compose the response to the reviewers' comments point by point or provide a description about how to revise their manuscript and respond to the reviewers. Third-party agencies can help researchers polish and improve their response to reviewer's comments.

Avoid (x)

Any offer to write a point-by-point response to a peer review report on behalf of the authors without any input from the authors.
Any offer to take over the peer review process of a manuscript.

*Some agencies employ people with scientific expertise who might make suggestions on what the researcher might say to a peer reviewer's comment. However, researchers should remember that, regardless of any assistance they may receive from an agency, they are responsible for any responses they make to a peer reviewer report and they should be prepared to justify their responses if challenged.

Assistance with identifying appropriate reviewers

Some journals ask authors to suggest the names of people who might have the expertise to peer-review their research. In such cases authors can suggest researchers in their field who they feel will be able to give an informed and object opinion on their work.

Avoid (x)

Offering to suggest people to peer review the researchers work without involving the researchers.*
Any offer to take over the peer review process of a manuscript.

*If an agency offers to suggest peer reviewers to the journal on behalf of the authors, researchers should ensure that the suggestions are people with the appropriate expertise to comment on their work and ensure that the correct contact details are provided to the journal.

Translating services

Avoid (x)

Submitting a translation of a manuscript that is already published in a non-English language journal without informing the journal, without permission from the original journal (if needed) and/or without citing the original non-English article.

Disseminating and promoting research

Poster preparation

Promoting the authors' work

Question 3:

You have finished collecting your data, but are unsure of the best way to analyse it. You ask an editing agency that claims to have expert statisticians on their staff to help you. **Indicate which of these responses seem to come from a trustworthy agency and which suggest you should avoid the agency.**

- a) The agencies statistician asks to have a meeting with you because they want to understand the aims of your study. Trust or avoid?
- b) The agency tells you not to worry, they will have an analysis and results ready for you within 24 hours. Trust or avoid?
- c) The agency offers you a set of ready-made figures and tables and tells you they can help you incorporate them into your manuscript, so you don't need to worry about analyzing your data. Trust or avoid?
- d) The agency tells you it can guarantee that your manuscript will be published in an international journal if you take up their services. Trust or avoid?

Question 4:

You need help to write up your research. You find a third party editing agency online and make an enquiry about the services they offer and the details about their prices. **Indicate which of these responses seem to come from a trustworthy agency and which suggest you should avoid the agency.**

- a) The agency tells you that it can produce a manuscript ready for submission within 24 hours of receiving your payment. Trust or avoid?
- b) The agency asks you questions about the services you need and refers you to information on their website. Trust or avoid?
- c) The agency sends details of its prices and asks you which service you require. Trust or avoid?
- d) The agency tells you that with its help you will be guaranteed a publication in an international journal. Trust or avoid?

Special considerations for clinical research involving human subjects, tissue or data

Background

Medical research is closely regulated because of the potential for harm to human participants of such studies as well as patients who receive treatment as the result of medical research. For example, there are international (The Helsinki Declaration)^[9] guidelines and national and local regulations on the conduct

of medical research that aim to ensure the safety and dignity of human participants of research. These regulations include the need for formal independent ethical oversight of certain types of medical research as well as the need to obtain fully informed consent from study participants.

There are also guidelines (the EQUATOR network)^[10] on how different types of clinical research should be reported to ensure that important information is available to other researchers and peer reviewers who may wish to repeat the study or peer review it. To ensure transparency and avoid wasteful repetition of previous research, it is also good practice to register certain types of medical research in an official trial registry^[11] before it has begun.

Because of these regulations the process of conducting and reporting medical research can be difficult and confusing for researchers. This is especially true for international collaborations where national regulations may differ slightly from country to country.

In addition, communicating the outcome of clinical research needs to be done in professional terms using technical language to members of the medical profession but in layman's terms to members of the public so that it is easy to understand. This can be challenging for authors.

For these reasons, there are agencies which assist medical researchers to design their research to ensure it complies with guidelines and regulations, and to write their research for publication and dissemination to a wider audience via conference posters, presentations and information for patients.

The International Society for Medical Publication Professionals is an organisation for "pharmaceutical, medical device, and biotechnology industries; publication planning and medical communications companies; academia; and medical journal staffs, including editors and publishers" that aims to set best practice standards and policies for the publication of medical research.^{[12][13]}

The following are proposed guidelines for researchers on the use of third party medical writing agencies.

A reputable medical writing agency should:

- Ensure that any protocol for a clinical study that it provides assistance for complies with the principles in The Helsinki Declaration^[9]. Maintaining the safety and dignity of human participants of research as well as respecting their rights to privacy should be paramount considerations in any type of medical research.
- Help authors to comply with national and local regulations related to medical research. For example, this might involve providing assistance with writing information for participants and/or participant consent forms, registering a trial in a recognised registry, writing an application for approval from an ethics committee etc.
- Help authors to write up their research for publication in compliance with the reporting guidelines available on the

EQUATOR network^[10] to ensure manuscripts are written transparently and accurately.

- Ensure that when submitting research for publication, authors have complied with the journal's requirements and policies for medical research as detailed on the journal's information for authors pages.

A reputable medical writing agency should not:

- Assist researchers to conduct or report research where principles of the Helsinki Declaration^[9] have not been adhered to.
- Assist authors to circumvent or avoid meeting national and local regulations related to medical research. For example, an agency should never encourage authors to conceal important information from study participants, write up research in a way that would suggest it did not need approval from an ethics committee when it did etc.
- Encourage authors to put a positive but inaccurate 'spin' on the outcome of a piece of research, to make the study design seem more robust or the findings more interesting than they are.
- Provide pre-written material that does not accurately reflect the study protocol or its results.
- Violate any of the international, national and local principles and regulations related to the conduct and reporting of medical research not mentioned above.

Questions II (medical)

Answers and explanations can be found on Appendix 2

Question 5:

You have completed your research which involved human research subjects. You want to publish it in an international medical journal but you are confused by all the requirements listed in the journal's editorial policies and instructions for authors, so you are seeking a medical writing agency to help you. Here are some statements from websites of agencies you are considering. **Indicate which of these statements seem to come from a trustworthy agency and which suggest you should avoid the agency.**

- a) "We will write your manuscript so that it complies with the Declaration of Helsinki." Trust or avoid?
- b) "Our writers are will help you write your manuscript to comply with CONSORT guidelines. Trust or avoid"?
- c) "We provide assistance with writing patient information and consent forms for your research." Trust or avoid?
- d) "We can provide statements of ethics committee approval." Trust or avoid?

Question 6:

You have completed your research which involved human subjects and written your manuscript, but now realise that the journal requires you to make a statement about ethics committee approval which you did not obtain. You are working with a medical writing agency and ask their advice on what you should do. **Indicate which of these responses seem to come from a trustworthy agency and which suggest you should avoid the agency.**

- a) The agency provides you with some standard text about ethics committee approval for you to put in your manuscript. Trust or avoid?
- b) The agency tells you to tell the journal that your study did not need approval from an ethics committee because it complies with the Declaration of Helsinki. Trust or avoid?
- c) The agency tells you to tell the journal that you did not obtain ethics committee approval for the study. Trust or avoid?
- d) The agency tells you that your study is exempt from ethics approval because it is an audit not a research study. Trust or avoid?

Question 7:

You are writing up a case report to submit to a medical journal and are confused about the instructions for authors on the journal website that state that you need consent to publish. You ask a medical writing agency what that means. **Indicate which of these responses seem to come from a trustworthy agency and which suggest you should avoid the agency.**

- a) The agency gives you a statement and tells you to add it to your manuscript. Trust or avoid?
- b) The agency tells you that you must obtain written permission from the patient (via a signed consent form) to publish details of their case. Trust or avoid?
- c) The agency tells you that because your manuscript reports a case report, you don't need consent to publish because that only applies to manuscripts reporting clinical trials. Trust or avoid?
- d) The agency tells you that if you change some of the details in your case report and obscure the faces in any photographs of people you have in the manuscript you won't need consent to publish. Trust or avoid?

Conclusion

It is important to remember that third-party editing agencies provide an important and valuable service by assisting inexperienced researchers and those where English is not their first language to disseminate their work in the international scholarly community. However, researchers should be aware that, while the use of third-party editing agencies has been accepted for a long time, there are some services offered by some agencies that do not align with best publication practice and that should be avoided.

The principles that underlie best practice in the use of writing and editing assistance are that:

1. In general, the assistance should only involve administrative and copyediting tasks aimed to improve the presentation or promotion of the authors' own work. The work (i.e. the design and conduct of the study, including data collection and analysis in most cases) must be done by the authors.
2. If a third party editing agency provided statistical or other scholarly input to the manuscript, researchers should declare in their manuscript and to the journal editor the use of any type of assistance. Acknowledgment should be given to anyone who contributed to the actual writing of the manuscript in any way.
3. The authors remain responsible for the integrity of their data and the contents of their manuscript regardless of whether or not have used an editing service.

Reputable editing agencies act to increase the chances of acceptance for publication of the authors' own work. Their services will be transparently advertised. They will not offer unadvertised services or make guarantees of acceptance.

Any services that aim to avoid the normal peer review process or provide pre-written data, figures tables or manuscripts that do not represent the researchers' own work, should be avoided.

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Appendix 1: Examples of editing services offered by Springer Nature

Nature Research Editing Service

English Language Editing

- High quality language editing to standards set by Nature Research, to help you sound like a native English speaker
- Native English editors with a research or clinical background in your subject area, who undergo substantial editorial training and are continually reviewed for quality
- Two levels of editing (Silver and Gold) and a quality guarantee

[Get English Language Editing](#)

Scientific Editing

- Examines all aspects of your scientific document
- Uses field-specific PhD-qualified editors, editing to quality standards set by Nature Research
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Appendix 2

Answers and explanations to questions.

Question 1:

- a) **Trust:** This is an acceptable service for a third party agency to provide.
- b) **Avoid:** Any agency that offers a guarantee of publication should be avoided.
- c) **Trust:** This is an acceptable service for a third party agency to provide.
- d) **Avoid:** Any service that offers ready-made manuscripts or parts of manuscripts should be avoided.

Question 2:

- a) **Avoid:** Offers to 'write the paper for you' should be treated with suspicion. The researcher is responsible for the research and will be the authors. They should write the content. An agency may provide copy editing services to improve the researcher's own first draft.
- b) **Trust:** The agency is honest about what it can and can't do.
- c) **Avoid:** Senior and eminent scientists are unlikely to work for editing agencies. They will be busy running their own laboratories and research programs.
- d) **Avoid:** Reputable agencies are unlikely to need to state this because they will be transparent about all of the services they offer.

Question 3:

- a) **Trust:** This response suggests the statistician is trying to understand your work and genuinely interested in giving you the most appropriate advice.
- b) **Avoid:** The very fast turnaround offered without any questions about your work sounds suspicious and suggests that the agency may have 'ready-made' statistical analysis.
- c) **Avoid:** Your manuscript should always only include your work. Ready-made content is not acceptable.
- d) **Avoid:** Always be suspicious of guarantees of publication.

Question 4:

- a) **Avoid:** The fast turnaround time and promise of a manuscript ready for submission without and further input from you is suspicious.
- b) **Trust:** The agency is transparent about what it offers.
- c) **Trust:** The agency is transparent about its pricing and wants to understand what you need.
- d) **Avoid:** A guarantee of publication is suspicious.

Question 5:

- a) **Avoid:** Research cannot be written to comply with the Declaration of Helsinki because the Declaration is about how the research should have been conducted.
- b) **Trust:** The CONSORT guidelines are to help researchers write up their research in a transparent way. The agency is right to help you to do this.
- c) **Trust:** It is acceptable to obtain assistance with this when you are planning your research.
- d) **Avoid:** Only your institutional ethics committee can provide such a statement after it has properly considered your study protocol.

Question 6:

- a) **Avoid:** If you did not obtain ethics committee approval, the agency should not encourage you to state that you have.
- b) **Avoid:** Complying with The Declaration of Helsinki is not a substitute for ethics committee approval. The agency is giving false information.
- c) **Trust:** The agency is telling you to be honest with the journal.
- d) **Avoid:** If you have done research involving human subjects, claiming that it was an audit does not exempt the research from ethics committee approval.

Question 7:

- a) **Avoid:** Your statement must reflect whether or not you really did obtain consent to publish and the agency should explain to you what this is. It is not acceptable to just add a standard statement.
- b) **Trust:** The agency is giving you the correct advice.
- c) **Avoid:** The agency is giving you incorrect advice. You should obtain consent to publish for a case report.
- d) **Avoid:** The agency is giving you incorrect advice.

Appendix 3

Summary table of practices to trust and avoid

Service	Trust	Avoid
Specialised research services	Services that provide data collection where specialised equipment or expertise is required, for example genome sequencing. The use of such services should be acknowledged in the manuscript.	Services that offer to collect data on the authors' behalf where the authors have not verified the source of the data themselves. Failure to declare in their manuscript that data collection services were used.
	Curating the authors' raw data, providing advice on where to share/deposit their raw data and assisting with the data deposition process.	Any offers to provide 'raw data' (for example, to comply with a journal's data deposition requirements) that have not been collected by the authors as part of their own study protocol.

