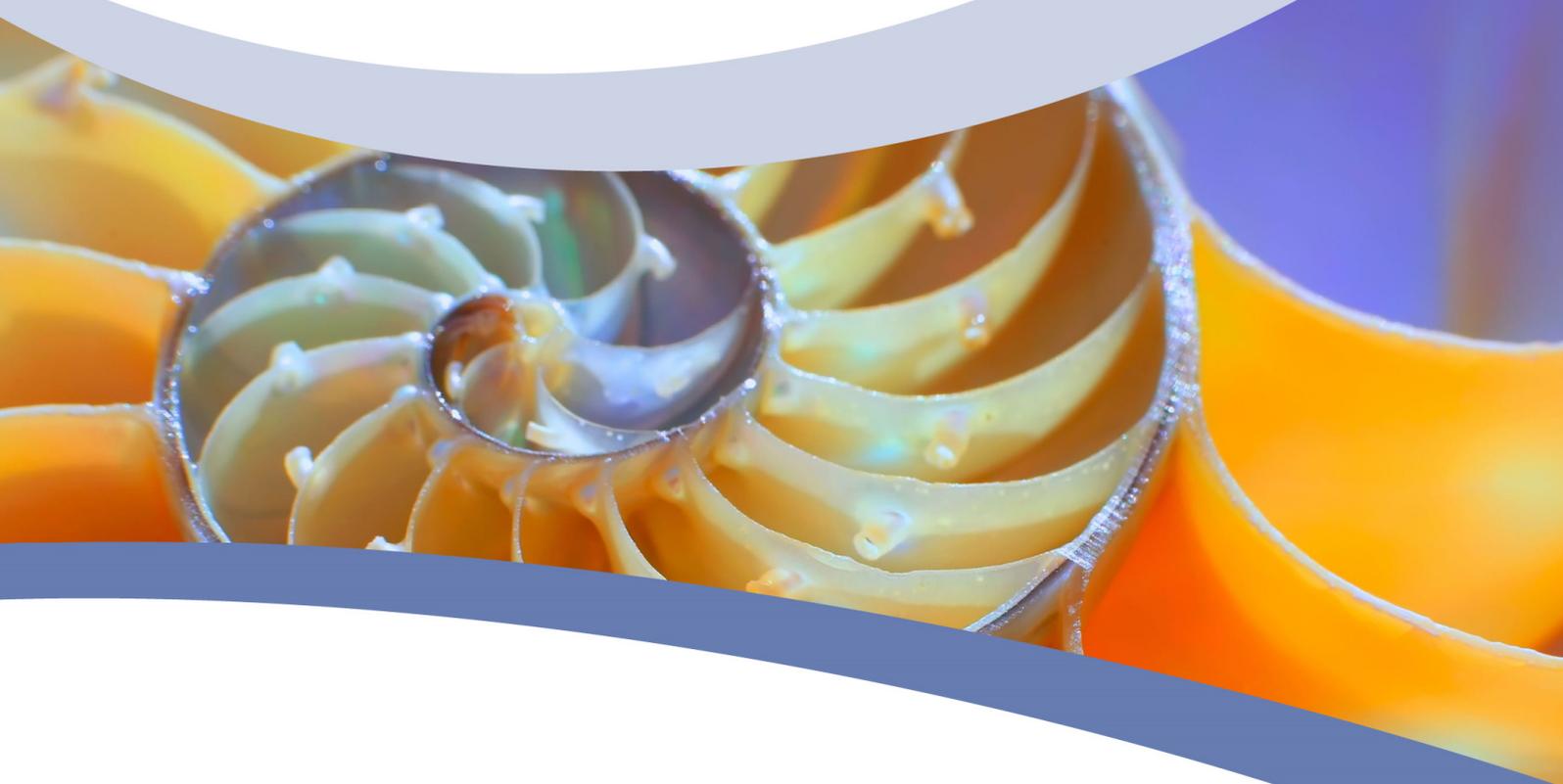


**Best Practice  
for  
Peer Review of Scholarly Books**

**National Scholarly Book Publishers' Forum of South Africa**

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## Definitions

**A scholarly work** can broadly be defined as a well-informed, skilled, original and systematic investigation undertaken in order to gain reliable new knowledge and understanding.

A scholarly book can be evaluated according to the following criteria:

1. The book should be an extensive and in-depth study on a topic(s), written with demonstrable authority by one or more scholars, which fully describes and analyses the work or creates one or more well-argued and new conceptual syntheses of already published knowledge;
2. It should make use of sound research methodologies, including statistical techniques that test the reliability of the conclusions reached; and
3. It should promote further research and innovation, and through its contribution it should improve the quality of research and strengthen the development of research areas in South Africa.

**Peer review**, also known as refereeing, is an essential part of the publishing process for scholarly publishers (hereafter termed 'publishers') to meet the objective of advancing and disseminating scholarship and cutting-edge research. It is a managed process in which the selection and review-commissioning of a small number of independently working peers (persons who have achieved a level of distinction and/or special expertise at least equal to that of the author(s) of the work) is carried out by an experienced, scholarly and independent 'editor' in such a way that a decision on publication, appropriate revision or refusal can fairly be made.

**Scholarly book publishing** aims at the widest possible distribution of the results of scholarly research that lends itself to a single extended publication, as opposed to the smaller studies typically described in articles published in scholarly journals. The range of potential beneficiaries is usually much narrower and more specialised than that of 'popular' works of fiction or non-fiction books designed for mass audiences. Some books' subject matter may, however, appeal to a general readership while still retaining its scholarly rigour.

## Scholarly book publishing: An introduction

Scholarly book publishing is mostly undertaken by commercial presses, and less often by university presses or the presses of research institutions or organisations. University and other not-

for-profit presses exist in limbo between the academy and commercial publishing: they share an uneasy combination of motivations that include the need to generate enough revenue to cover costs and holding scholarly interest and integrity above other values.

The distinguishing feature of the process of scholarly publishing is peer review. In the case of journal articles, the consideration by journal editors of confidential reports by independent peers is still standard practice, despite criticisms and novel variations. The system is considered the most feasible way of ensuring that the results and conclusions in each published article are valid and credible, and that the articles are well-written and generally of high quality.

Peer review in the case of scholarly books is just as essential a pre-publication process as it is for journal articles, but is more problematic because of the size and scope of submitted manuscripts, and the inevitable inclusion of subjective material or controversial standpoints in a fully developed volume. Peer review is nevertheless essential to assist commissioning editors/panels, publishers, and editorial boards to evaluate the merits of a manuscript. It forms the basis on which to open up discussion with the author(s) and editor(s) to strengthen and improve their work. This includes the evaluation of a manuscript's likely appeal to its intended, usually focused, audience of local and international scholars, students, researchers and niche audiences.

The National Scholarly Book Publishers' Forum (NSBPF) of South Africa acknowledges that the process of peer review of scholarly books is a complex one, and hopes that the steps outlined in this document as a set of consensus recommendations should go far to assure the quality of the process. This document is not intended to prescribe the conduct of acceptable peer review in every case. The processes outlined here specifically refers to books and edited collections and not to journals for which ASSAf and the National Scholarly (Journal) Editors' Forum has already issued a Code of Best Practice. While favourable peer reviews are necessary for publication decisions they constitute only one of a number of factors that publishers need to consider, such as: fit with the publishing programme/list, scheduling and marketing issues, and budget. These factors collectively lead to a publishing decision. In South Africa, an additional consideration is that in order for published scholarly books to be eligible for inclusion in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Research Outputs subsidy system, publishers must certify that their book publications outputs (including digital products) have undergone adequate peer review and that they also meet certain technical criteria. Peer review in the subsidy system is formally understood as follows:

Peer Review is understood to be the pre-publication refereeing or evaluation of complete manuscripts by independent experts in the field in order to ensure quality and determine whether manuscripts are publishable or not.

Source: *Government Gazette 38552 (date 11 March 2015), page 4, clause 2.4. Research Outputs Policy, 2015*

### Peer review

Generally, authors or editors submit a book proposal to a publisher to solicit publishing interest. After initial screening, proposals worthy of further consideration are presented to the internal publishing team, editorial and/or advisory boards or series editors by the commissioning editor. If the proposal is of interest, the author/editor is invited to submit a full-length (complete) manuscript, which is then sent to two or more independent expert evaluators (reviewers). A publishing decision is made after the peer review process, and if successful, the author/editor may be contracted formally for publication of the book concerned.

#### i) *Exceptions to the rule*

Some publishers tend to conduct peer review on the book proposal only and make a publishing decision after favourable review of the proposal. In South Africa, however, it is a DHET requirement to review the complete manuscript in full prior to publication, in order to qualify for DHET subsidy. While a preliminary review of a book proposal may be useful in managing the process, it is no substitute for full independent peer review of a complete manuscript.

An author may be offered a contract prior to peer review if there is a time-sensitive issue such as competition from another publisher or scheduling to meet a specific deadline. In such cases, the commissioning editor may draw on an advisory network for quick or informal vetting of the book proposal, often mainly based on the author's reputation (this vetting can be by an in-house 'editorial board', or by external academics who are able to provide quick but sound counsel). Such books will, however, not be eligible for inclusion in the local subsidy system without full pre-publication peer review of the final manuscript.

Sometimes, publishers will proceed with publication decisions without resorting to peer review when publishing a new edition of a previously published work, embarking on co-publications with international publishers, translations and, occasionally but at some risk, works intended for general readers. Publishers are advised in such cases to solicit the opinion of one or more independent reviewers to assure its quality and to position the manuscript in the market.

For publishers, peer review should thus only rarely be omitted and only after careful consideration.

ii) *Guidelines for peer reviewers of scholarly books*

Different types of books require a different set of criteria for assessment. The commissioning editor or publisher should provide a clear brief and a set of formulated questions that clarify the work's intentions and guide the reviewer in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the project in relation to its intended audience.

iii) *Steps for peer review in reaching a publishing decision?*

- Typically, the full length manuscript is anonymised and sent to two or more independent reviewers with a clear brief. The brief usually entails assessing the quality and originality of the work; its writing style; its appeal to the intended audience and lastly what improvements can be made.
- Anonymity for reviewers in the review process is crucial as it enables reviewers to freely express their opinions. However, the identities of reviewers are shared with the publications committee, editorial and/or advisory boards and series editors for them to understand the position and context of the report. If reviewers' reports are unduly critical and harsh the commissioning editor can choose not to share the report with the author and can commission a new report.
- Reviewers' identities should in principle remain anonymous and revealed only if their permission has been granted.
- If the author's identity is revealed to the reviewers they must question if there is a potential conflict of interest.
- If there are two conflicting reports, a third independent reviewer is usually commissioned.
- Anonymous reports are shared with the author and they are asked to respond to the reviews detailing how they will improve the manuscript and what suggestions from the reviewers they accept or reject.
- Approval of a manuscript may be made subject to a developmental editing process, after which re-submitting to one or both reviewers may be required. There is no direct contact allowed between the reviewers, the developmental editor and author, though the reviewer may request to review the manuscript after author and editors' revisions. The publisher may undertake developmental editing on a case-by-case basis, and depending on the needs of the manuscript at hand.

- Reviewers are usually paid an honorarium or offered books by the publisher. The amount is determined by each publisher. The average period for review is six to eight weeks, but it should be as short as possible. Reviewers who cannot guarantee submission dates should be 'de-commissioned' early to avoid delay.
- In the case of publishers, the review reports and the author's and editor's responses are circulated to the editorial or advisory boards for comment, after which the publishing director, publisher or commissioning editor need to make a case for the project if they think it is worthy of pursuing. With other publishers, the reports and responses are shared among the internal publishing team and a decision is made by the team. The identities of the reviewers are revealed to these parties with the proviso that the promise of confidentiality and reviewer anonymity is adhered to.

### Guidelines on review processes for book typologies

The following are processes recommended as best practice for peer review for the following types of research outputs. They are in no way prescriptive and each publisher should be in the position to implement exceptions based on their assessment of the manuscript. Publishers may also have other research outputs that do not fall into these categories. The underlying principle is that a publisher of scholarly books should be able to illustrate and argue the case for the review process being followed.

**Monographs** are single or co-authored books which cover an extensive and in-depth scholarly treatment based on original research that extends knowledge in the field or discipline.

- The publisher commissions at least two independent peer reviewers. The manuscript in its entirety is sent to independent reviewers not affiliated to the author's or editor's institutions for an assessment.

**Edited collections** are works with multiple contributors, with a single editor or multiple volume or series editors. They are a collection of chapters where contributors may come from different disciplines and reflect on a central or common theme. The collective approach generates new conceptual knowledge on the topic.

- The full-length manuscript as a whole is assessed by at least two independent reviewers. The reviewers are required to complete short summaries on each chapter.
- Where individual chapters may require an expert review, volume or series editors are responsible for commissioning these reports. These reports are to accompany each

chapter when the editors submit the final manuscript to the publisher. The commissioning editor may take these expert reports, and possible ensuing changes to the manuscript, into consideration to determine the need for further independent peer review.

A **co-publication** is a monograph or an edited collection where an international publisher is the originator. A **co-edition** can be created between a local and a foreign publisher where the parties commit to jointly and in parallel review and produce the book by sharing pre-publication stages such as reviewing, editing, typesetting, indexing and cover design in order to share costs. Reviewer reports are shared and initiated on both sides, with either party taking the option to secure at least one, and sometimes two, reviews.

- Reviewer reports are supplied from the originating publisher and shared with the licensing publisher. The onus is on the local South African scholarly publisher to commission one or more independent reviewers of their own to assess the value, worth and relevance of the manuscript for a local readership. This, however, is not a condition or prerequisite for acceptance.

### Conference proceedings

**Conference proceedings** are a published record of a conference, congress, symposium or other meeting where the purpose was to discuss and disseminate original research and new developments within specific disciplines, sub-disciplines or fields of study. Published scholarly conference proceedings are recognised as research outputs by the DHET. Conference proceedings differ from multi-authored scholarly books, where the latter, could emerge from a conference, symposium or colloquium but is developed, by volume editor/s into an overall coherent compilation as an edited collection.

The following are recommendations suggested to ensure a quality peer review process is undertaken:

- The conference editorial committee or board commissions and manages independent peer review of each individual paper.
- Proof of the peer review process and access to review reports accompanies submission of the final conference proceedings.
- The publisher will commission one or more independent reviewers to assess the conference proceedings as a whole, the peer review process followed by the conference, and individual reviews, as may be deemed necessary by the publisher.

## Selecting peer reviewers

Choosing appropriate reviewers for a particular manuscript is crucial. Reviewers are selected for their expertise in the subject matter and they should have a credible publishing record in the field of study (books or journals).

Reviewers may be recommended by: the author or editor in the book proposal form; the editorial boards; the commissioning editors' reviewer database; members of staff at the publisher; or the commissioning editors' advisory network. Authors or editors may also recommend exclusion of certain potential reviewers based on declared biases or conflict of interest.

Commissioning editors and editorial boards need to be aware of possible bias and conflict of interest and must read peer review reports carefully and independently. Where there is a conflict of interest – such as colleagues from the same department at the same institution, or known public enemies, the author's dissertation supervisor, etc. – such individuals should not be approached to review the manuscript.

In the case of a book series, there should be at least two independent reviews per book, and series editors should not act as peer reviewers of the manuscripts. Their role is to commission, vet and possibly help develop book projects.

## Peer review as documents of record and confidentiality

For DHET subsidy purposes, university research offices may require letters confirming pre-publication peer review. Publishers are obliged to send formal letters attesting to the conduct of peer review; however they are not obliged to send the reviewer reports. The reviewer reports are confidential documents between the publisher and the reviewers.

If a manuscript is accepted for publication, the publisher may harvest endorsements from the peer reviewers' reports for marketing purposes. Permission must always be sought from the reviewer and the endorsement may only be used with their consent.

**When a publisher issues a letter stating that a book has been peer reviewed prior to publication it therefore guarantees that:**

1. The manuscript was subjected to a rigorous review process prior to publication, double-blind or single-blind as deemed appropriate by the publisher.
2. The reviewers were independent of the publishers and authors in question.

3. The reviewers commented positively on the scholarly merits of the manuscript.
4. The reviewers recommended that the manuscript be published.
5. Where the reviewers recommended publication subject to specified revisions for improving the manuscript, the author(s) or editor(s) have responded adequately to the recommendations.

The publisher may opt to place a brief statement on its copyright page attesting to the peer review process followed, to ease subsidy claims, and to add a quality assurance aspect.

## Resources

AAUP (The American Association of University Presses). Best Practices for Peer Review. AAUP Handbook. April 2016. <http://www.aaupnet.org/policy-areas/peer-review>

Academy of Science South Africa (ASSAf). Scholarly Books: Their Production, Use and Evaluation in South Africa Today. August 2009. [http://www.assaf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/reports/evidence\\_based/scholarly\\_report.pdf](http://www.assaf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/reports/evidence_based/scholarly_report.pdf)

Association of Canadian University Presses <http://www.acup.ca/>

Department of Higher Education and Training. Research Outputs Policy 2015. Government Gazette 597: 38552. March 2015. <http://www.gov.za/documents/research-outputs-policy-11-mar-2015-1027>

**Compiled by: Roshan Cader, Pierre de Villiers, Hetta Pieterse**

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**Endorsed by:**

AFRICAN SUN MeDIA

AOSIS

Cambridge University Press SA

Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Press

Juta/UCT Press

National Inquiry Services Centre (NISC)

Pretoria University Law Press (PULP)

Publishers' Association of South Africa (PASA)

Taylor and Francis Africa

University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Press

University of South Africa (Unisa) Press

Wits University Press