

Best Practice  
for  
Publishers of Scholarly Books  
and Conference Proceedings



National Scholarly Book Publishers'  
Forum of South Africa

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science, technology  
& innovation

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PO Box 72135, Lynnwood Ridge, Pretoria, South Africa, 0040  
Tel: +27 12 349 6600 • Fax: +27 86 576 9520  
E-mail: [admin@assaf.org.za](mailto:admin@assaf.org.za)

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The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) was inaugurated in May 1996. It was formed in response to the need for an Academy of Science consonant with the dawn of democracy in South Africa: activist in its mission of using science and scholarship for the benefit of society, with a mandate encompassing all scholarly disciplines that use an open-minded and evidence-based approach to build knowledge. ASSAf thus, adopted in its name the term 'science' in the singular as reflecting a common way of enquiring rather than an aggregation of different disciplines. Its members are elected based on a combination of two principal criteria, academic excellence and significant contributions to society.

The Parliament of South Africa passed the Academy of Science of South Africa Act (No 67 of 2001), which came into force on 15 May 2002. This made ASSAf the only academy of science in South Africa officially recognised by government and representing the country in the international community of science academies and elsewhere.



## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Definitions.....	1
Scholarly Book Publishing: An introduction.....	2
Peer Review Process .....	3
Guidelines on Review Processes for Book Typologies .....	5
Conference Proceedings .....	6
Selecting Peer Reviewers .....	7
Documents of Record and Confidentiality: Peer Review Reports .....	7
Metadata Standards, Persistent Identifiers and Technical Aspects of Research Assessment .....	8
Predatory Publishing .....	8
Generative Artificial Intelligence Policy for Authors and Peer Reviewers .....	8
Generative Artificial Intelligence Policy in the Publishing Process .....	9
Resources .....	10
Document Compilation .....	11



## Introduction

This document, developed by the Academy of Science of South Africa's (ASSAf's) National Scholarly Book Publishers' Forum (NSBPF), serves as a guide for South African publishers of scholarly books, edited collections, and conference proceedings, which contribute to the country's research outputs as outlined in the 'Definitions' section.

This guideline will be periodically updated to reflect changes and advancements in scholarly and digital publishing, including the evolving role of Artificial Intelligence tools, as described in the 'Definitions'.

## Definitions

**Scholarly works** can be broadly defined as well-informed, skilled, original, and systematic investigations undertaken to gain reliable new knowledge and understanding.

A book can be defined as scholarly if it meets the following criteria:

- The book should be an extensive, in-depth study on one or more topics, written with demonstrable authority by one or more scholars. It should either provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the subject matter or offer well-argued, novel conceptual syntheses of existing knowledge.
- The work must be grounded in evidence-based research, employing sound analytical methodologies to address gaps in knowledge, generate new insights, or advance existing scholarship.
- It should employ sound research methodologies, including, where applicable, statistical techniques to test the validity of the conclusions reached.
- It should promote further research and innovation, while contributing to the improvement of research quality and the strengthening of key research areas in South Africa.
- The work should prioritise knowledge production from African and Global South perspectives, ensuring its relevance to the global scholarly community.

**Peer review**, also known as refereeing, is a crucial part of the publishing process for scholarly publishers (hereafter referred to as 'publishers') aimed at advancing and disseminating scholarship and cutting-edge research. It is a managed process in which an experienced, scholarly, and independent editor selects and commissions a small number of independent peers (individuals who possess a level of distinction and/or special expertise at least equal to that of the author(s)) to review the manuscript. This process ensures that a fair decision regarding publication, appropriate revisions, or refusal can be made.

To uphold international best practice standards, the peer review process should ideally be overseen by an independent editorial board or a similar body. This oversight ensures that the process maintains scholarly rigour and adheres to ethical guidelines. While some publishers may not yet have such structures in place, it is encouraged as a future goal to standardise and enhance the quality of scholarly publishing.

**Scholarly book publishing** aims for the widest possible distribution of the results of scholarly research that can be presented in 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 narrower and more specialised than that of 'popular' works of fiction or nonfiction intended for mass audiences. However, some books may



address subject matter that appeals to a general readership while still maintaining scholarly rigour.

A **scholarly conference**, congress, or symposium is an event designed to discuss and disseminate original research and new developments within specific disciplines, sub-disciplines, or fields of study. These events are typically hosted by an institution or industry body. Webinars hosted by individual academics, while informative, do not constitute a conference.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems** are machine-based systems designed to achieve explicit or implicit objectives by processing input to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments. AI systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptability after deployment.

**Generative AI (GenAI)** is a type of AI system primarily designed to generate outputs across various content types that resemble human-created content.

In the AI content development environment, publishers must provide authors with specific guidelines for AI use, addressing transparency, ethical considerations, and content ownership. Additionally, publishers should be transparent about the use of AI in peer review and other publishing processes.

### Scholarly Book Publishing: An introduction

Scholarly book publishing is carried out by a range of publishers, from commercial multinational companies to international and local university presses, research institutes, and small independent publishers. Scholarly publishers, particularly mission-driven or not-for-profit ones, face unique sustainability challenges. These publishers and presses share a combination of 'push and pull' motivations, including the need to generate enough revenue to cover costs while publishing niche content that prioritises scholarly interest and integrity above other values.

A key feature of scholarly publishing is the peer review process. For journal articles, the evaluation of confidential reports by independent peers remains a standard practice, despite criticisms and novel variations. Peer review is still regarded as the most feasible method for ensuring that the results and conclusions in each published article are valid, credible, well written, and of high quality.

Peer review for scholarly books is just as essential a pre-publication process as it is for journal articles, though it presents additional challenges due to the size and scope of submitted manuscripts, as well as the inevitable inclusion of subjective material or controversial viewpoints in a fully developed volume. Nevertheless, peer review plays a crucial role in helping commissioning editors, publishers, and editorial boards to evaluate a manuscript's merits and enhance its value. It serves as the foundation for opening discussions between the author(s) and editor(s) to strengthen and improve the work. This includes assessing the manuscript's potential appeal to its intended, typically specialised, audience of local and international scholars, students, researchers, and niche readers.

Peer reviewers also serve as co-creators of new knowledge by providing authors of monographs and edited volumes with critical and strategic feedback for improvement. In this role, peer reviewers go beyond the traditional 'gatekeeper' function; they actively contribute to strengthening scholarship by asking important questions, guiding the

manuscript in new directions, and identifying any potential weaknesses or instances of plagiarism.

The NSBPF acknowledges the complexity of the peer review process for scholarly books. The steps outlined in this document are offered as a set of recommendations to ensure the quality of this process. However, this document is not intended to prescribe acceptable peer review practices in every case. The processes outlined here specifically refer to books and edited collections, not journals, for which ASSAf and the National Scholarly (Journal) Editors' Forum have already issued a Code of Best Practice.

While favourable peer reviews are necessary for publication decisions, they are only one of several factors that publishers must consider. Other factors include alignment with the publishing programme or list, scheduling and marketing considerations, and budgetary constraints. These factors collectively lead to a publishing decision.

In South Africa, an additional consideration is that, 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 publications (including digital products) have undergone adequate peer review and meet specific technical criteria. Peer review within the subsidy system is formally defined 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 Process

Generally, authors or editors submit a book proposal to a publisher to solicit publishing interest. After an initial screening, proposals deemed worthy of further consideration are presented by the commissioning editor to the internal publishing team, editorial or advisory boards, or series editors. If the proposal is of interest, the author or editor is invited to submit a full-length 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 or editor may be formally contracted for publication. It is crucial to ensure that reviewers are not friends, colleagues, or family members of the authors to avoid conflicts of interest. While some publishers allow authors to suggest reviewers, this practice can sometimes lead to bias in favour of the author or publisher, undermining the integrity of the peer review system.

#### Exceptions to the rule

Some publishers conduct peer review only on the book proposal and make a publishing decision based on a favourable review of the proposal. In South Africa, however, it is a DHET requirement to review the complete manuscript prior to publication to qualify for DHET subsidy. While a preliminary review of a book proposal may be useful for early manuscript assessment, it is not a substitute for a full independent peer review of the 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 the need to meet a specific deadline. In such cases, the commissioning editor may seek quick or informal vetting of the book proposal from an advisory network, often based on the author's reputation. This vetting can be conducted by an in-house editorial board or by external academics who can provide prompt but reliable counsel. However, books contracted under these conditions will not be eligible for inclusion in the local subsidy system without full pre-publication peer review of the final manuscript.

Publishers sometimes proceed with publication decisions without peer review when publishing a new edition of a previously published work, engaging in co-publications with international publishers, and translating works, and, occasionally but at some risk, for works intended for a general readership. In such cases, publishers are advised to seek the opinion of one or more independent reviewers to ensure quality and to effectively position the manuscript in the market.

For some scholarly books, it may be impossible to fully anonymise the author's identity, especially when the work builds on extensive previously published research by the author or involves self-reflection and disclosure, as is required in some social science traditions. This scenario makes it even more critical to ensure that reviewers have no conflicts of interest or close relationships with the author.

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

#### Guidelines for peer reviewers of scholarly books

Different types of books require different 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.

#### 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 any suggested improvements.
- Best practice is for reviewers' identities to remain anonymous unless an exception applies, as in the scenarios mentioned above. Reviewers' identities should only be disclosed to authors if the reviewers have granted their permission.
- Anonymity for reviewers is crucial as it enables them to freely express their opinions. However, the identities of reviewers are shared with the publications committee, editorial and/or advisory boards, and series editors so that they can understand the context of the report. If reviewers' reports are unduly critical, harsh, or unconstructive, the commissioning editor may choose not to share the report with the author and instead commission a new report.
- If there are two conflicting reports, a third independent reviewer is usually commissioned.
- Anonymous reports are shared with the author, who is then asked to respond by detailing how they will address the reviewers' comments and indicating which suggestions they accept or reject.

- Approval of a manuscript may be made subject to a developmental editing process, after which resubmission to one or both reviewers may be required. Direct contact between reviewers and the developmental editor or the author is not advised, although a reviewer may request to review the manuscript after the revisions by the author and editor. The publisher may undertake developmental editing on a case-by-case basis, depending on the manuscript's specific needs.
- Reviewers are usually compensated through an honorarium or offered books by the publisher, with the amount determined by each publisher. The average review period is six to eight weeks, but it should be kept as short as possible. Reviewers who cannot guarantee submission dates should be 'de-commissioned' early to avoid delay.
- For publishers, the review reports, along with the author's and editor's responses, are circulated to the editorial or advisory boards for comment. The publishing director, publisher, or commissioning editor must then make a case for the project if they believe it is worth pursuing. In other instances, the reports and responses are shared among the internal publishing team, which makes the final decision. The identities of the reviewers are disclosed to these parties, with the understanding that confidentiality and reviewer anonymity will be maintained.
- Publishers without an independent editorial board or similar structure are encouraged to work towards establishing such mechanisms. This added layer of oversight not only strengthens the credibility of the peer review process but also ensures alignment with global standards of academic integrity.

### Guidelines on Review Processes for Book Typologies

The following processes are recommended best practices for peer review for different types of research outputs. These practices are not prescriptive, allowing each publisher the flexibility to implement exceptions based on their assessment of the manuscript. Publishers may also manage research outputs that fall outside these categories. The core principle is that a scholarly book publisher should be able to demonstrate and justify the review process used for each output.

**Monographs** are single or co-authored books that provide an extensive, in-depth scholarly analysis based on original research designed to extend knowledge within a specific field or discipline.

- The publisher commissions at least two independent peer reviewers. The entire manuscript is sent to the reviewers, who preferably are not affiliated with the authors' or editors' institutional departments, for assessment.

**Edited collections** are works featuring multiple contributors, overseen by one or more volume or series editors. These collections consist of chapters from contributors who may come from various disciplines, all reflecting on a central theme. This collaborative approach generates new conceptual knowledge on the topic.

- The full-length manuscript is assessed by at least two independent reviewers, who are required to provide brief summaries of each chapter.
- If individual chapters require expert review, the volume or series editors are responsible for commissioning these reports. These reports should accompany each chapter when the editors submit the final manuscript to the publisher. The commissioning editor may review these expert reports and any resulting



manuscript revisions to determine whether further independent peer review is necessary.

A **co-publication** is a monograph or edited collection initiated by an international publisher. In a **co-edition**, a local and a foreign publisher collaborate, jointly committing to review and produce the book by sharing pre-publication tasks such as reviewing, editing, typesetting, indexing, and cover design, thereby sharing costs. Reviewer reports are initiated and shared by both parties, with each securing at least one, and sometimes two reviews.

- Reviewer reports are provided by the originating publisher and shared with the licensing publisher. The local South African scholarly publisher is responsible for commissioning one or more independent reviewers to assess the manuscript's value, worth, and relevance for a local readership. However, this is not a condition or prerequisite for acceptance.

### Conference Proceedings

Conference proceedings are a published record of a conference, congress, symposium, or other meeting aimed at discussing and disseminating original research and new developments within specific disciplines, sub-disciplines, or fields of study. The target audience for these proceedings is typically peers and specialists in the field.

Papers must be selected for publication in the conference proceedings by an editorial committee or board. The committee or board should have a significant majority of members beyond a single affiliation. Articles in conference proceedings are typically between 2 500 and 5 000 words, including an abstract. Publishers should ensure that authors grant permission for their conference papers to be considered for publication in the proceedings and specify who will hold the copyright on the paper and the entire work.

Published scholarly conference proceedings are recognised as research outputs by the DHET. Conference proceedings differ from multi-authored scholarly books, which may emerge from a conference, symposium, or colloquium but are developed by volume editor(s) into a coherent compilation as an edited collection.

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

- The call for papers for the conference should clearly state that all submissions will undergo independent, anonymous peer review prior to acceptance and publication in the conference proceedings.
- The conference editorial committee or board should commission and manage the independent peer review of each individual paper before acceptance and publication.
- Proof of the peer review process, along with access to review reports, should accompany the submission of the final conference proceedings to the publisher.
- The publisher should commission two or more independent reviewers to assess the conference proceedings as a whole, the peer review process followed by the conference editorial committee or board, and individual reviews, as deemed necessary by the publisher.
- Sufficient front matter on the peer review process should be provided in the publication to allow the DHET to determine whether the proceedings qualify for DHET subsidy.

## Selecting Peer Reviewers

Selecting appropriate reviewers for a manuscript is crucial. Reviewers should be chosen based on their expertise in the subject matter and must have a credible publishing record in the field, including books or journal articles.

Reviewers may be recommended by the author or volume editor in the book proposal form, by members of the editorial board, from the commissioning editors' reviewer database, by the staff publisher, or from the commissioning editors' advisory network. Authors or volume editors may also suggest excluding certain potential reviewers based on declared biases or conflicts of interest.

Commissioning editors and editorial boards need to be aware of potential bias and conflicts of interest and they must read peer-review reports carefully and independently. In cases of conflicts of interest—such as potential review by colleagues from the same department or institution, known adversaries, or the author's dissertation supervisor—these individuals should not be approached to review the manuscript.

In the case of a book series, there should be at least two independent reviews for each book. Series editors should not act as peer reviewers for the manuscripts; their role is to commission, vet, and potentially help develop book projects.

## Documents of Record and Confidentiality: Peer Review Reports

For DHET subsidy purposes, university research offices may require letters confirming that pre-publication peer review was conducted. Publishers are obliged to provide formal letters attesting to the completion of the peer review process; however, they are not required to send the reviewer reports. These reports remain 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 obtained from the reviewer, and the endorsement may only be used with their consent.

When a publisher issues a letter stating that a book has undergone peer review prior to publication, it guarantees that:

- The manuscript was subjected to a rigorous review process, whether double-anonymous or single-anonymous, as deemed appropriate by the publisher.
- The reviewers were independent of both the publishers and the authors.
- Reviewers provided positive comments on the scholarly merits of the manuscript.
- The reviewers recommended that the manuscript be published.
- If reviewers recommended publication subject to specified revisions, the author(s) or editor(s) have adequately addressed these recommendations.

The publisher may choose to include a brief statement on the copyright page attesting to the peer review process followed. This statement can facilitate subsidy claims and enhance quality assurance.

If there are concerns about whether cited publications are questionable or predatory, authors should be encouraged to consult reputable resources before finalising their manuscript citations and reference lists.

### Metadata Standards, Persistent Identifiers and Technical Aspects of Research Assessment

Publishers should adhere to the following industry standards and best practices regarding metadata standards, persistent identifiers, and the technical aspects of research assessment:

- Use interoperable, agnostic, and non-proprietary standards.
- Align with international best practices.
- Consider national licences for standard identifiers such as DOIs for content, ROR for organisations, ISNI & ORCID for authors.

### Predatory Publishing

"Predatory journals and publishers are entities that prioritise self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterised by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices." (Grudniewicz A et al., 2019)

Scholarly book publishers must protect their reputation and uphold ethics and standards. The best way to curb predatory publishing is a multi-pronged approach:

- Ensure that publishers align with industry best practices for peer review as outlined by ASSAf, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA), and the International Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers (STM).
- Educate researchers on identifying predatory publishers and predatory publishing practices.
- Ensure that research offices at South African Higher Education Institutions screen all research outputs before submitting them to the DHET.
- Implement measures to ensure that journal articles and book publications from predatory publishers do not gain DHET accreditation.
- Advise authors to avoid citing or publishing in predatory or questionable publications, as this leads to citation pollution and degrades the quality of knowledge.

### Generative Artificial Intelligence Policy for Authors and Peer Reviewers

Scholarly publishers strive to maintain the highest standards of editorial integrity and transparency. However, public Generative AI (GenAI) systems may pose a risk to confidentiality, intellectual property rights, and data, including personally identifiable information.

Therefore, publishers should establish clear policies on the use of GenAI for authors, editors (including series, collection, and commissioning editors), and peer reviewers.

- Authors should check their publishers' AI usage policies before utilising GenAI. If permitted, authors must consider the implications of copyright, privacy, and confidentiality, ensuring they have obtained all necessary rights to upload third-party copyrighted content, such as quotes or translations. Ultimately, authors are responsible for ensuring the authenticity, validity, and integrity of their manuscripts. It is important to note that only humans can be considered authors. Authors should refer to the 'ASSAf and SciELO Guidelines for the Use of AI Tools and Resources in Research Communication' on the ASSAf website, as well as the STM policy document 'Generative AI in Scholarly Communications' (Dec 2023).

- Editors and reviewers must not upload any part of an unpublished manuscript (including supplementary material) to publicly available GenAI systems, such as ChatGPT, while evaluating any part of an unpublished manuscript due to risks of copyright infringement, privacy violations, and confidentiality breaches.
- Reviewers are advised against using public GenAI as an authoring tool for their reports. Peer review reports must be authored by humans based on their specialised knowledge and skills.
- When agreeing to peer review, publishers must clearly communicate their AI policies to reviewers—either on their website or in the reviewer's brief. Reviewers should be expressly warned of the consequences of using AI to generate their reports.
- Publishers may utilise integrity-checking tools like Turnitin or iThenticate to determine if a peer review report was created using AI. Reviewers are encouraged to submit their reports alongside any originality checks. However, it should be noted that these tools are not well suited for detecting AI-generated content, and developing this capability may be challenging.

### Generative Artificial Intelligence Policy in the Publishing Process

Authors may use AI as a tool in their research or when preparing their manuscripts to generate content, though the extent and specifics of this usage must be clearly declared.

Publishers should make their AI policies publicly available to authors and other stakeholders. These policies should detail when and how AI was utilised by authors, ensuring full transparency in referencing and citations.

Publishers should also disclose the extent to which AI tools are utilised in their editorial, production, and metadata processes—such as for artwork creation or designing jacket covers. They should begin implementing processes to document the details of AI usage, including the programmes, prompts, and results of inputs. This documentation must align with regulatory frameworks, contracts, and copyright law.

Additionally, publishers should establish policies regarding the reuse of published works as inputs in the training of Large Language Models (LLMs). These policies should address how attribution will be managed, how the use of content will be regulated, and what safeguards are required for any outputs generated.

Specific terms and conditions outlining the publisher's AI policies, including the AI tools used in-house, should be incorporated into contracts with authors. Publishers must also seek express permission from authors if they intend to use any content with third-party stakeholders or in LLM training.

To develop their own AI policies, publishers should refer to the following guiding documents: the ASSAf and SciELO Guidelines for the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools and Resources in Research Communication (endorsed by the ASSAf Council on 17 September 2024) and the STM document 'Generative AI in Scholarly Communications' (December 2023).

## Resources

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

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Turnitin. 2024. [Turnitin Originality | Amplify your academic integrity standard | Turnitin](#)

USAF. 2019. [Scholarly Presses in South Africa: How Sustainable Are They? Universities South Africa. usaf.ac.za](http://www.usaf.ac.za)



## Document Compilation

### First Compiled By:

Roshan Cader, Pierre de Villiers, Hetta Pieterse

**Date:** February 2017

### Revised Draft Compiled By:

Roshan Cader, Andrew Joseph, Hetta Pieterse, Cecile de Villiers, Wikus van Zyl

**Date:** October 2024

### Approved By:

National Scholarly Book Publishers' Forum of South Africa (NSBPF)

Committee on Scholarly Publishing in South Africa (CSPISA)

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- University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Press

