



RESEARCH INTEGRITY TRAINING

Recognizing Conflict of Interest, Confidentiality & Honest Reporting

A practical guide to identifying, disclosing, and managing the ethical responsibilities that protect the integrity of research

AVOIDING CONFLICT OF INTEREST · PROTECTING CONFIDENTIALITY · HONEST REPORTING OF RESULTS

Agenda

Three pillars of ethical research conduct



01

Conflict of Interest

Recognizing, disclosing, and managing competing interests



02

Confidentiality

Protecting sensitive data, participants, and unpublished work



03

Honest Reporting

Presenting results with accuracy, transparency, and integrity

Why Research Integrity Matters

Integrity is the foundation that makes research trustworthy and useful to society

Trust

Public and peer confidence depends on honest, unbiased work

Funding

Grants and institutional support rely on a credible track record

Impact

Flawed or biased results can misdirect policy and patient care



These three principles — avoiding conflicts of interest, protecting confidentiality, and reporting results honestly — form the ethical backbone every researcher is expected to uphold.

01



Conflict of Interest

Recognizing when personal, financial, or professional interests could compromise judgment

What Is a Conflict of Interest?



Definition

A conflict of interest (COI) exists when a researcher's personal, financial, or professional interests have the potential to influence — or appear to influence — their objectivity, decisions, or actions in the conduct or reporting of research.

Key point

A COI is not misconduct by itself — it becomes a problem only when it is hidden or left unmanaged.

Actual

The interest is currently affecting judgment or decisions

Potential

The interest could reasonably influence judgment in the future

Perceived

A reasonable observer might believe influence exists, even if none does

Types of Conflict of Interest

COI can take several forms — and researchers may face more than one at once



Financial

Stock ownership, consulting fees, honoraria, patents, or funding tied to a company whose product is being studied



Personal

Close relationships with study participants, students, collaborators, or reviewers being evaluated



Professional

Career advancement, reputation, competing loyalties, or reviewing a rival's work

Common Examples of COI



Industry-funded research

Evaluating a drug or product made by a company that also funds your lab



Peer reviewing a colleague

Reviewing a manuscript or grant from a close collaborator, rival, or former student



Outside consulting roles

Advising a company while publishing research that affects that company's market

Red Flags: How to Recognize a COI

Ask yourself these questions before starting a project, review, or evaluation



Do I — or my close family — have a financial stake in the outcome?



Could my judgment be swayed by a personal relationship?



Am I reviewing work from someone I compete with or depend on?



Would a reasonable colleague question my objectivity if they knew?



Have I received gifts, travel, or fees from an interested party?



Could my career or funding benefit from a particular result?

If you answer “yes” or “maybe” to any of these — disclose it.

Consequences of Unmanaged COI

Undisclosed conflicts carry real costs — for individuals and institutions



Retracted publications

Journals retract papers when undisclosed COI is discovered post-publication



Loss of funding

Institutions and agencies may withdraw grants or bar future applications



Reputational damage

Trust, once lost with peers and the public, is difficult to rebuild



Disciplinary action

Ranges from formal warnings to termination or licensing consequences

Disclosing & Managing a COI

A simple four-step process protects you and your research



COI Best Practices Checklist



Disclose all relevant interests before a project begins, not after



Update disclosures whenever circumstances change



When in doubt, disclose — let reviewers decide relevance



Recuse yourself from decisions where your objectivity is in question



Keep personal and professional relationships separate from evaluations



Review your institution's COI policy at least once a year

02



Confidentiality

Protecting sensitive data, participants, and unpublished research from unauthorized disclosure

What Is Confidentiality in Research?



Definition

Confidentiality means protecting sensitive information — participant data, unpublished findings, proprietary methods, or peer-review materials — from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure.

It applies to information you:

- Collect directly from participants
- Access as a reviewer or committee member
- Generate but have not yet published



*Confidentiality is both
an ethical duty and,
often, a legal one.*

Why Confidentiality Matters



Protects participants

Prevents harm, discrimination, or embarrassment from exposed personal data



Preserves trust

People are more willing to participate honestly when privacy is assured



Safeguards originality

Prevents premature disclosure or theft of unpublished ideas and data



Meets legal duties

Required by IRB protocols, data protection laws, and funding agreements

Types of Confidential Information



Participant data

Names, health records, survey responses, biological samples, identifiable images



Unpublished results

Draft manuscripts, preliminary findings, and data not yet released publicly



Peer review content

Manuscripts, grant applications, and reviewer comments under evaluation



Proprietary information

Trade secrets, methods, or materials shared under a confidentiality agreement

Confidentiality Breaches: Real Risks

Breaches are often unintentional — but the harm is real



Sharing manuscripts under review

Forwarding a paper you're reviewing to a colleague for "a second opinion"



Discussing unpublished data

Mentioning preliminary results at a conference or on social media



Unsecured data storage

Leaving identifiable participant files on unencrypted drives or shared folders



Informal conversations

Discussing participant details casually, even without using names

Protecting Confidentiality: Best Practices



Store data securely — encrypted, access-controlled, and backed up



De-identify or anonymize data whenever possible



Limit access to those with a legitimate need to know



Sign and honor confidentiality/non-disclosure agreements



Never discuss unpublished work or reviews outside authorized channels



Report suspected breaches to your institution immediately

Confidentiality in Peer Review & Data Sharing



As a Peer Reviewer

- Treat manuscripts and grants as strictly confidential
- Do not cite or use unpublished ideas before publication
- Decline to review if you cannot maintain confidentiality
- Destroy or securely delete copies after the review



When Sharing Data

- Remove or mask personally identifiable information
- Use secure, approved platforms for transfer and storage
- Confirm participant consent covers the intended data use
- Follow institutional and journal data-sharing policies

03



Honest Reporting of Results

Presenting findings accurately, completely, and without manipulation

What Is Honest Reporting?



Definition

Honest reporting means presenting research methods, data, and results completely and accurately — including negative or unexpected findings — without fabrication, falsification, or selective omission.

It means reporting what actually happened — not what you hoped would happen.



Accuracy · Transparency · Completeness

Forms of Research Misconduct

Commonly referred to as “FFP”



Fabrication

Making up data or results and recording or reporting them as real



Falsification

Manipulating research materials, equipment, or data so the record misrepresents what happened



Plagiarism

Using another person’s ideas, words, or results without appropriate credit

Consequences of Dishonest Reporting

The cost extends well beyond the individual researcher



Retraction

Published papers are withdrawn from the scientific record



Wasted resources

Other labs and clinicians build on — and lose time to — false results



Career consequences

Loss of position, funding eligibility, or professional licensure



Public harm

Faulty findings can misinform treatment decisions and policy

Principles of Honest Reporting

-  Report all relevant data, including results that contradict your hypothesis
-  Describe methods in enough detail that others could replicate the work
-  Never fabricate, alter, or selectively omit data points
-  Give proper credit through accurate citation and authorship
-  Correct errors promptly and transparently once identified
-  Distinguish clearly between raw data, analysis, and interpretation

Bringing It Together: A Scenario



A researcher's data does not support the results promised to a corporate sponsor who also funds their salary. A colleague suggests adjusting the analysis to “improve” the numbers before the paper is submitted for peer review.



COI

Sponsor funding creates a financial conflict — it should already be disclosed



Confidentiality

Sponsor pressure or unpublished data should not leak before formal review



Honest Reporting

Report the true results — adjusting data to fit expectations is falsification

Key Takeaways



Recognize Conflicts of Interest

Identify and disclose financial, personal, or professional interests early and often



Protect Confidentiality

Safeguard participant data, unpublished work, and materials under review



Report Results Honestly

Present complete, accurate findings — including inconvenient ones

When these three principles guide every decision, research earns — and keeps — the trust it depends on.



Integrity Is Everyone's Responsibility

Recognize conflicts of interest · Protect confidentiality · Report honestly

Questions? Contact your institution's research integrity or ethics office.