Authors on the record

Publication of a paper initiates the process of scientific exchange that requires the ongoing participation of authors.

Scientific discourse is mediated, in part, by peer-reviewed papers, which present snapshots of our understanding of a system at a particular time. Our knowledge of a system evolves as subsequent studies test these published models and present new data that build upon, and regularly contradict, earlier work. Yet, in the daily lives of scientists, publications are often viewed as the final step in a long process. Rather than seeing papers as an endpoint, scientists should instead approach publication as the beginning of a discourse and be mindful of the ongoing responsibilities that come with authorship.

Authors are most familiar with their prepublication responsibilities, which are typically outlined in the submission guidelines of scientific journals. Corresponding authors assume primary responsibility for ensuring that studies are rigorously executed and that all original data are available and well documented. At Nature journals, the corresponding author also coordinates communication with the journal and is responsible for obtaining agreement from all authors on the author list and the contents of the manuscript. As a condition of submission, authors of Nature journal articles agree that they will deposit relevant data sets in public repositories, coordinate data release with publication and make available materials, reagents and additional data to readers upon request. Prior to publication, Nature authors are also required to declare any potential competing financial interests and provide a statement that outlines the contributions of each author to the study.

The substantial author responsibilities undertaken at submission do not end once the paper appears in a journal. As the scientific community evaluates the results and conclusions of a published study, the corresponding author must continue to serve as a responsive primary contact for any inquiries about the work, which may include managing requests for data and materials or fielding diverse questions about the study from readers, the press and possibly the general public. The corresponding author must also be alert to the possibility of errors and be aware that other scientists may raise technical questions about the data or conclusions of the published work; in these cases, the corresponding author must inform all authors about the concerns and, when appropriate, take action to correct the published record associated with the paper. Research papers at Nature Chemical Biology are currently published online in advance of print. The online version is the version of record and carries the official publication date for the study; any changes to the paper (or its associated supplementary information) after this date require a formal correction. Authors should be aware that there are several pathways to correct papers published in Nature Chemical Biology.

Relatively straightforward corrections can be handled by publication of a Corrigendum or Erratum, which correct errors originating with the authors or the journal, respectively. We encourage corresponding authors to contact the journal if they find any substantive errors in their published papers as soon as the problem is discovered. In general, we do not correct inconsequential typographical errors, but we consider errors in the publication record (names, affiliations, funding sources, etc.) or scientific content (text, data, figures, supplementary information and so on) that may affect the accuracy or clarity of the published paper worthy of correction. In these cases, the online version of the paper is updated, and a notice that explains the error and how it was corrected is published with the paper online and in print.

Follow-up studies often provide new data and mechanistic insights that both broaden and deepen the conclusions of earlier papers. Though citation trails that link later studies with their predecessors provide a useful way to follow progress in an area, in some cases, authors may seek a forum to communicate new insights that are directly related to their earlier published work. At Nature Chemical Biology, the Addendum format serves this purpose. Though addenda are published infrequently, they can sometimes be useful to link new information directly to the original study (see, for example, p. 192). We request that authors first contact us to determine whether an addendum, rather than a follow-up research paper, is an appropriate way to communicate these insights or clarifications to the community. Publication of an addendum does not imply that the data or conclusions in the original study have been called into question; it simply presents new information that may be important for interpretation or application of the original results. In cases where the original study is found to be truly compromised, the scientific literature is best served by a Retraction of the paper, as we have previously discussed (Nat. Chem. Biol. 4, 381, 2008).

A final format for discussing a Nature Chemical Biology paper is our Correspondence section. Though we have outlined our editorial criteria and processes for Correspondence in a previous editorial (Nat. Chem. Biol. 4, 323, 2008), it is useful to note that Correspondence differs from correction formats in that the process is initiated by a reader who raises questions about a paper published in our pages. In general, we urge authors to be open to criticism of their scientific work and to work with other scientists in a more informal fashion to resolve specialized debates in the literature. However, correspondences remain a useful forum for comment-response exchanges when concerns related to the central conclusions of a published paper are raised (see, for example, p. 136–137).

Although the literature may give the impression that science advances in discrete steps, researchers know that the process is more akin to ascending a ramp than climbing a staircase. As they participate in the steady incline of scientific progress, authors must do their best to ensure that their publications stand the test of time by being engaged in the subsequent discourse that their work inspires.