

EDITORIAL

AI and Academic Publication: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence has entered academic publication. It is already present in drafting, editing, translation, formatting, reviewing, and manuscript preparation. It is used by students, early-career researchers, senior scholars, reviewers, editors, and publishers. Some uses are minor. Some are substantial. Some are legitimate. Some are not. The task for journals is therefore not to pretend that AI can be excluded from scholarly writing. The task is to decide how it should be used, disclosed, governed, and judged. Academic writing has always involved tools. Authors use word processors, grammar checkers, reference managers, statistical software, translation programs, plagiarism-detection systems, and journal submission platforms. These tools have changed the mechanics of writing and publication. Generative AI changes more than mechanics. It can produce fluent prose. It can summarise complex material. It can imitate disciplinary styles. It can create abstracts, titles, responses to reviewers, tables, outlines, and plausible literature overviews. It can also invent references, distort arguments, conceal weak reasoning, and produce text that appears scholarly without being scholarly. This editorial offers a simple position. AI is not an author. AI is not a scholar. AI is not a source of academic responsibility. It is a tool. Used well, it can support clarity, accessibility, and editorial preparation. Used poorly, it can damage quality. Used dishonestly, it can threaten trust in academic publication. The distinction matters. A journal should not treat all AI use as misconduct. Nor should it treat all AI use as harmless assistance. The proper standard is human accountability.

The Good

There are legitimate uses of AI in academic writing. These should be acknowledged. A blanket rejection of AI would be unrealistic. It may also be unfair. International scholarship takes place across unequal linguistic, institutional, and technological conditions. Many authors write in English as an additional language. Many work without extensive editorial support. Many must prepare manuscripts for journals whose conventions differ from those of their home disciplines or institutions. In such contexts, AI can help authors communicate work that is already theirs.

AI can assist with grammar, syntax, structure, and readability. It can help an author identify long sentences, repeated claims, weak signposting, and unclear transitions. It can support translation and back-translation. It can help prepare abstracts, keywords, cover letters, reviewer-response documents, and plain-language summaries. It can check whether headings

Keywords:

AI publishing ethics, equitable academic access, inclusive scholarly communication, research integrity, global sport leadership

Recommended Citation:

Bailey, R. P., & Guinto, M. L. M. (2026). AI and Academic Publication: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. *International Sports Studies*, 48(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.69665/iss.v48i1.251>

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are consistent. It can suggest ways to organise a table. It can help authors convert notes into a structured outline. These uses are not equivalent to outsourcing scholarship. They are forms of editorial assistance, provided that the author controls, checks, and revises the output.

This is especially relevant for an international journal. Sport studies, physical education, coaching, health, movement studies, and sport policy are global fields. They involve authors working across different languages and academic traditions. A journal committed to international scholarship should not confuse linguistic polish with intellectual merit. Nor should it require authors to write like native English speakers before their evidence, argument, and contribution can be recognised. Used with care, AI may reduce some barriers to participation in academic publication.

AI can also improve accessibility. It can help authors produce clearer summaries of technical work. It can support communication with practitioners, policymakers, coaches, teachers, and community organisations. Sport research often has audiences beyond the academy. If AI helps scholars explain their findings more clearly without changing their meaning, it can serve a legitimate scholarly purpose.

These benefits depend on one condition. The author must remain the author. The author must decide what is true, relevant, justified, and properly cited. The author must check every claim. The author must verify every reference. The author must ensure that the final manuscript represents their own knowledge, judgement, analysis, and interpretation.

The Bad

The bad uses of AI are often less dramatic than misconduct, but they still matter. They can weaken scholarship while leaving no obvious trace. A manuscript may become smoother but less precise. It may become more polished but less original. It may become easier to read but harder to trust.

The first risk is unsupported fluency. AI can generate sentences that sound confident. This is dangerous in academic writing because fluency can imitate evidence. A paragraph can appear coherent while making claims that are unsubstantiated, imprecise, or false. A literature review can appear comprehensive while omitting disagreement, simplifying debates, or misrepresenting concepts. This risk is acute in interdisciplinary work. Terms such as embodiment, literacy, inclusion, wellbeing, pedagogy, participation, identity, and development carry different meanings across disciplines. AI may flatten these differences.

The second risk is generic scholarship. AI often produces prose that sounds like academic writing in general. It may include familiar phrases, predictable transitions, and balanced but empty formulations. This can create manuscripts that appear competent but lack argument. Conceptual papers are especially vulnerable. A conceptual article must do more than arrange plausible claims. It must clarify concepts, distinguish positions, engage alternatives, and advance an argument. AI-generated prose can conceal the absence of such work.

The third risk is citation failure. AI may invent references. It may attach real authors to claims they did not make. It may produce inaccurate bibliographic details. It may summarise articles that it has not read. Even when references are real, AI may misstate their relevance. In one audit of literature reviews generated across 42 multidisciplinary topics, 55% of citations produced by GPT-3.5 and 18% of those produced by GPT-4 referred to works that did not exist, frequently attached to real authors and plausible journal titles (Walters & Wilder, 2023). This is not a minor technical issue. Citations are part of the evidential structure of scholarship. If citations cannot be trusted, the argument cannot be trusted.

The fourth risk is dependence. An author may begin by using AI for editing and then rely on it for framing, interpretation, and response to criticism. The boundary between assistance and substitution can become unclear. This is not only an ethical issue. It is also an intellectual issue. Academic writing is part of thinking. When authors revise a sentence, restructure an

argument, or respond to a reviewer, they are not only improving presentation. They are refining judgement. Excessive dependence on AI can interrupt that process.

The fifth risk is inequality. AI may reduce some barriers, but it may create others. Authors with access to better tools, better institutional support, and better training may produce manuscripts that appear more professional. Others may be penalised by AI-detection systems that misclassify translated or second-language writing: one widely cited evaluation of seven commercial AI detectors found an average false-positive rate of 61% on essays written by non-native English speakers, compared with near-zero rates for comparable native-speaker writing (Liang et al., 2023). Editors should therefore be cautious. Surface style is not evidence of misconduct. Detection tools are not proof. Editorial judgement remains necessary.

The Ugly

Some uses of AI are not merely weak practice. They are unacceptable. They damage the trust on which academic publication depends.

AI must not be used to fabricate data, quotations, references, ethical approvals, participant accounts, peer-review comments, reviewer identities, or analytical findings. It must not be used to disguise plagiarism. It must not be used to create duplicate or redundant manuscripts with superficial changes. It must not be used to produce false summaries of literature. It must not be used to conceal the absence of method, evidence, or original contribution.

AI must not be listed as an author. Authorship requires responsibility. Authors must be able to approve the final manuscript, respond to criticism, account for decisions, correct errors, and accept responsibility for the integrity of the work. AI cannot do these things. It cannot hold responsibility. It cannot be accountable to readers, editors, participants, institutions, or the public. Publication ethics bodies converge on this point: neither the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) nor the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) permits AI systems to be credited as authors, on the grounds that authorship carries an accountability that AI cannot hold (COPE, 2023; ICMJE, 2024).

AI use also raises concerns for peer review. Reviewers may be tempted to upload manuscripts into AI systems to summarise them or produce reports. This should be treated with caution. Manuscripts under review are confidential documents. They may contain unpublished data, sensitive information, identifiable material, or intellectual property. Reviewers should not use external AI systems in ways that breach confidentiality, journal policy, or data protection requirements; both COPE and the ICMJE have specifically warned that processing a manuscript through external AI tools may itself constitute a confidentiality breach (COPE, 2023; ICMJE, 2024). A reviewer may use tools to improve the clarity of their own report. They should not outsource judgement.

The most serious risk is not that AI will produce bad sentences. The risk is that AI will make bad scholarship look acceptable. It can add coherence to weak designs. It can give polish to unsupported claims. It can turn thin engagement with literature into prose that appears balanced. It can help authors evade the work of revision. In these cases, AI does not support scholarship. It replaces the visible signs of scholarship with simulation.

Implications for International Sports Studies

These questions matter for International Sports Studies. Sport scholarship is not a single field. It includes empirical, historical, philosophical, sociological, pedagogical, policy-oriented, and practice-based work. It addresses bodies, institutions, cultures, identities, communities, performance, health, education, and social change. This range makes AI use both useful and risky.

In sport and physical education research, context matters. Coaching practices, school systems, movement cultures, gender norms, disability experiences, community sport structures,

and national policies cannot be reduced to generic academic language. AI may assist with language, but it cannot replace situated knowledge. It may help organise a manuscript, but it cannot know whether an interpretation is faithful to a local practice, a cultural tradition, a policy context, or an embodied experience.

The journal's international remit strengthens this point. Authors should be encouraged to write clearly. They should also be encouraged to preserve specificity. Local terms, cultural meanings, historical conditions, and practice-based insights should not be smoothed away in the name of standard academic style. International scholarship does not require uniform prose. It requires intelligible, rigorous, accountable work.

A Practical Position

A workable journal position should distinguish acceptable assistance, questionable dependence, and misconduct.

Authors may use AI tools for grammar checking, language editing, translation support, formatting, outlining, and preliminary feedback on clarity. They may use AI to identify repetition, improve signposting, or prepare administrative documents linked to submission. These uses are acceptable when the author reviews the output and remains responsible for the final manuscript.

Authors should disclose AI use when it has materially shaped the manuscript, in line with the disclosure requirements now adopted by COPE and the ICMJE (COPE, 2023; ICMJE, 2024). This includes AI assistance with drafting, rewriting, translation, literature summary, data analysis, image production, tables, figures, or interpretation. Disclosure should be specific. It should state what tool was used and for what purpose. A vague statement that AI was used "to improve the manuscript" is not sufficient.

Authors should not use AI to generate citations unless each citation is checked against the original source. They should not cite works they have not verified. They should not rely on AI-generated summaries as substitutes for reading. They should not use AI-generated prose to make claims beyond the evidence.

Reviewers should not upload confidential manuscripts into external AI systems unless journal policy permits this and confidentiality can be protected. Editors should not rely on AI-detection tools as decisive evidence of misconduct. Such tools may produce errors. They may also penalise authors who write in English as an additional language. Concerns about AI use should be assessed through evidence, not suspicion.

A disclosure statement might take the following form:

"During preparation of this manuscript, the author used [tool name] for [specific purpose, such as language editing, translation support, formatting, or outline development]. The author reviewed and revised all output and accepts full responsibility for the final content."

Where no AI has been used, a simple statement may be used:

"The author reports that no generative AI tool was used in the preparation of this manuscript."

These statements are not solutions in themselves. Disclosure does not make improper use acceptable. Non-disclosure does not prove misconduct. However, clear statements can support transparency and remind authors that responsibility remains with them.

Conclusion

AI will not disappear from academic publication. Prohibition alone will not work. Uncritical acceptance will also fail. Journals need policies that are clear, proportionate, and enforceable. Authors need guidance that distinguishes support from substitution. Reviewers need standards that protect confidentiality and judgement. Editors need to assess manuscripts by evidence, argument, method, and contribution, not by surface polish alone.

The future of academic publication should not be anti-AI or pro-AI. It should be pro-scholarship. AI may help authors write. It may help them revise. It may help them communicate across linguistic and institutional boundaries. But it cannot replace evidence. It cannot replace interpretation. It cannot replace accountability. It cannot replace the author.

AI can help scholars write, but it must not be allowed to stand in for scholarship.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors report that no generative AI tool was used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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