COMPETING INTERESTS AND TRANSPARENCY

Like most academic journals, we ask authors to declare if they have any competing interests. But understanding when to declare competing interests can be a tricky. Many researchers think that if they are involved in any way with a private company, then they need to declare competing interests on a manuscript; this is not always the case. Take for example if you are working at a commercial research lab and find a quicker way to purify DNA. If your company and you have no interest in commercializing the discovery and only seek to publish the technique, then you do not have to declare a competing financial interest when publishing your study.

On the other hand, if you intend to commercialize the purification method, then it is important that you detail this in the Competing Interests section of your manuscript. The purpose of the competing interests statement is to make it clear to editors, reviewers, and readers that this is situation where someone could perceive a bias based on the author’s interests. Competing interests statements or conflict of interest statements are about being transparent and ensuring the credibility of a manuscript.

What about a study funded by a private company? It is best practice to list private funding or honoraria in the Competing Interests section. Of course, this could be listed in the Acknowledgments section, but it is advisable to disclose any commercial funding sources clearly.

While financial competing interests tend to be most common, there are other instances where competing interests should also be reported. Authors who are members of an advisory board or lobbying organization should mention this in their competing interests statements. Reviewers themselves should announce competing interests when a personal relationship exists with an author, or personal convictions make it difficult to provide an unbiased decision. Reviewers should also note if they have any commercial interests that compete with what is being reported in a manuscript. In these cases, a reviewer needs to decide if the conflict is significant enough to recuse themselves from reviewing duties, or the editor needs to step in to ensure a fair and transparent peer-review process. And editors should do the same when it comes to any conflicts that might arise on their end as well.

Competing Interests statements are an important part of proper conduct in academic research, something all parties in the process should take seriously. If you do have questions on whether or not to declare a competing interest, e-mail or call an editor for advice. If you have any comments on this topic, please send them to bioeditor@biotechniques.com.