nature structural & molecular biology

It takes time

A look at the editorial process indicates why having your paper reviewed might take some time.

Summer is almost over and with it the height of the conference season, when the *Nature Structural & Molecular Biology* editors venture out of our office to learn about fresh-from-the-bench research and strengthen our ties to the scientific community. This is an opportunity for authors, reviewers and readers of the journal to give us their honest feedback in a less-formal setting (read: at the bar). Although we receive positive comments that are much appreciated and dutifully shared among the editorial team, most of our time is spent fielding complaints. These are discussed at length, as we are always looking for ways to improve the service we provide our readership.

Possibly the most common complaint concerns turnover time: why does the review process take so long? Because we do monthly assessments to monitor editorial flow and timeliness of decisions, we can provide some quantitative insight into the review process.

During the past 12 months, we reviewed 180 manuscripts, not including Brief Communications. Once an editor is assigned the manuscript (which usually happens on the day the submission is received), we aim to make the initial decision on whether to review the paper within 1–2 days. Being that fast, however, has incited the wrath of some authors, who argue that we could not possibly have read (and comprehended) their papers in such a short time. However, each manuscript is both assessed by its primary editor and discussed with the other editors during our daily meetings.

For the manuscripts that were reviewed, the first decision after review was made in an average of 34 days after submission, a time period consisting of the following stages:

1. *Initial assessment and decision to review*, as discussed above.
2. *Engaging reviewers*. This can sometimes be problematic, for example, during the holidays or immediately before a meeting or looming grant deadline in a particular field, when there seems to be a spike in submissions in that area. It is not uncommon to contact several scientists before finding two or three who will agree to review the manuscript, a process that can take more than a week.
3. *Waiting for the reviewers' reports*. When inviting a potential referee for an original submission, we ask for comments within 14 days. However, the actual amount of time it takes for reviewers to turn over their reports can vary from a few days to several weeks, as discussed below.
4. *Assessment and discussion of referees' reports to reach an editorial decision.* This takes place within a few days of receiving all reviewers' comments.

Clearly, obtaining referees' reports consumes most of the time in the editorial process. When things flow smoothly, a decision is made within 3 weeks after submission. When authors alert us about specific competition, we can expedite the review process to make a decision in less than 10 days after submission. On the other side of the spectrum are 24 manuscripts that required more than 6 weeks between submission and the initial decision after review. In most cases, the difficulty in finding reviewers contributed to the delay: for 17 of the 24 manuscripts in this group, at least three potential reviewers declined or did not respond to our requests. Nine manuscripts were submitted around mid-December, which undoubtedly contributed to the length of the process. But, for the most part, the comments themselves were delayed: only in one case did the reviewers return their reports within 15 days. For 16 of the 24 manuscripts, one or more reviewers sent a report 28 days or more after agreeing to review it. In the worst case, one of the engaged reviewers never returned his or her report, without any explanation, and ignored our e-mails and phone calls, and a new reviewer had to be recruited at the eleventh hour. Fortunately, such disappearance acts by reviewers are rare, and we don't give those reviewers a second chance.

What do we editors do to expedite the review process? After a scientist agrees to review a manuscript, we send a reminder e-mail a week before the review is due and a couple of days past the review due date. If a reviewer is late and has not responded to our e-mails, we consider whether we can make a decision with the reviews we have in hand. However, this is not always possible: the reviewers who sent their reports might have differing opinions with regard to the paper, or the tardy reviewer might have a particular expertise that is not covered by the other reviewers—this is increasingly common given the complex nature of many papers nowadays. We send a 'last-chance' message to late reviewers if we can make a decision without their comments. We could use only reviewers who are usually on time, but that would shrink the pool of reviewers to unworkable dimensions and overload the punctual reviewers.

Why are many reviewers late? Sometimes authors become concerned about ill-intentioned reviewers sitting on their manuscripts to delay publication. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that such unethical behavior might actually happen, it is our impression that, for the most part, scientists are just extremely busy writing grants, penning papers, teaching, mentoring and taking care of administrative duties. But reviewing manuscripts is also an essential part of being a scientist. Some scientists feel they receive more requests to review now than in the past and, given the growing number of journals, this might well be true. Many scientists also serve as academic editors or on editorial boards, which constitutes a substantial amount of work. It is to avoid wearing out reviewers that we make the initial editorial decision on whether to send a manuscript out to review, and this is a very selective filter. The 180 reviewed manuscripts mentioned earlier came from a total of 923 submissions; thus, we rejected roughly 80% of the manuscripts without review.

To make this process run as smoothly as possible, we must all do our part — authors must be realistic in the journal they choose to submit their manuscripts to, editors must carefully read and send out to review only those papers that are in principle suitable for *NSMB*, and reviewers must agree to review only those papers that they can assess in a timely fashion (that they must also review those same papers in a fair and objective fashion goes without saying). When these three parts come together seamlessly, the editorial process and peer review system are working at their best. ■