

nature structural & molecular biology

Demystifying the editorial process

“What do you do with my manuscript once I’ve submitted it to your office?” This is one of the most commonly asked questions we get from authors. We understand the anxiety behind the question since we publish only about one out of every six papers submitted to the journal. No doubt some of you imagine the worst (see cartoon). Have no fear—shredding is not part of the editorial evaluation process. Nevertheless, to ease some angst and answer a few of your most common questions, we offer a brief explanation of our editorial process.

“Why won’t you send all papers out to review?” If we were to do this, we would quickly exhaust one of the most limiting resources of the peer review process—the time of the referees. Because we receive far more manuscripts than we can publish, we must be careful to ask referees to evaluate only those that are likely to meet the requirements for publication in the journal. And what is it that we’re looking for?

As editors, we first ask whether the study is within the scope of our journal. We also assess whether a study addresses questions of broad interest (and whether the results answer those questions), and whether the conclusions represent a sufficient advance in the field—that is, are the results novel. The editors meet daily to discuss the manuscripts. At the end of often lively discussions we decide whether to send the manuscript out to review and discuss possible reviewers.

“How did you pick the referees?” We look for scientists who have recent publications in peer-reviewed journals in the relevant subject area. At least one reviewer should have the necessary expertise to evaluate the technical aspects of the manuscript. Very often we also include referees who could comment on biological relevance and whether the work is likely to be of broad general interest. Finally, we strictly honor the exclusion list from the authors, provided the list is not excessive (and doesn’t include statements like ‘We would like to exclude Dr. X and anyone who has ever come from his/her lab’. By the way, we also don’t allow entire institutions to be excluded).

“How do you reach a decision?” The decision is not a simple tally of referee ‘votes’. Instead, we carefully evaluate the comments to separate scientific concerns (such as flaws in the experiments, data or interpretation, additional experimentation that may fix the flaws) from those

that are editorial opinions (such as general interest and degree of advance). We weigh the concerns of the referees against the major conclusions of the study, taking into consideration the amount of additional work that may be necessary to address the concerns, as well as the referees’ editorial opinions. Again the editors meet to discuss all of these issues but in the end a decision to accept or reject the paper must be made.

“What can I do if I disagree with your decision?” We recognize the subjectivity of the process (on the part of both the editors and reviewers) so we have a formal appeal process. It is worth saying that we set the bar deliberately high for reversing a decision; otherwise, decisions would simply go back and forth in a kind of Brownian motion. Thus, a successful appeal must convince the editors that a serious mistake has been made. A useful appeal letter should include new data or analysis, factual errors by referees or editors, disagreement with technical criticisms, evidence of referee bias and disputes over novelty or significance. On the other hand, ‘celebrity endorsements’ or insults to the credibility and/or intelligence of the referees (or the editors) are not particularly helpful.

“What do you do with my revised manuscript?” We first evaluate whether the paper has been adequately revised. When it has not, it is immediately sent back to the authors for further revisions. When it has been significantly (as opposed to incrementally) revised then we determine whether further advice from some or all of the original referees is necessary. This usually depends on whether new experimental data are included. If we send the revised manuscript back to the referees, we generally ask them to provide comments as quickly as possible. If all goes well, the manuscript is on its way to being accepted for publication.

Finally, we understand that each field of study within the scope of the journal progresses at its own pace. It is therefore important to set appropriate criteria for each individual field. Of course, what is considered significant in a field changes over time and so we are constantly re-evaluating those criteria so that they reflect the current thinking in the community. We do this by reading and discussing the papers sent to us, keeping up with what is published in other journals, and actively soliciting feedback from our authors, referees and readers.

So while some authors see the editorial process as an ‘us against them’ proposition—it really isn’t. Think of it instead as the ultimate continuing education program for all of us. ■

