Going pro

Professional editing can be a rewarding career. Here we discuss what the job entails, highs and lows, how to prepare for this career, the interview process and more.

Scientific editing comes in many forms. It can involve improving the writing of manuscripts or grants, copyediting pieces for language and grammar, and serving on editorial boards for research journals. The editorial structures of journals can also differ. Some are made up of academic scientists who are responsible for the scientific vision of a journal and work closely with managing editors to handle manuscripts. At *Nature Methods* and other Nature Portfolio journals, there is no editorial board; instead, teams comprise full-time, PhD editors. The latter career is the focus of this piece.

Our team of editors has full control over the scientific vision of the journal, and we take responsibility for what is published. Our overarching job is to curate the journal such that the content is consistently high quality, engaging, and in service of the communities covered by the journal's scope. To achieve this goal, we handle diverse tasks. A major part of our job is considering submitted manuscripts. We then choose referees, assess referee reports, make decisions, and see papers from submission through acceptance. We also write content, including highlights and editorials, and commission and help develop pieces like Reviews and Comments.

Being an editor is, at its heart, a people-facing career. We engage with authors, referees and the scientific community on a daily basis via e-mails, phone calls, in person visits, social media, talks and conferences. This outreach is also indispensable for another crucial aspect of the job: keeping abreast of cutting-edge research. In the case of *Nature Methods*, this also includes understanding the methods needed by our broad audience of biologists. To meet these goals, we each typically travel four to six times a year and, more recently, participate in many virtual events.

Editors also spend time thinking. We think daily about how we can improve the journal, but we also ask how we can improve publication. Can we better serve our authors? Can we make papers more robust? Can we make the methods we publish more reproducible? We also think about how we can improve science. Are there things we can

do to promote diversity? Equity? When the answers to these questions are “yes,” we take steps to move forward. For many of us, these diverse and tiered tasks keep us enthusiastic about our work.

Professional editing has many highs. We get to stay on top of rapidly changing fields and read new and exciting research. Editors are constantly learning. For many, the switch from being an expert in a niche area to keeping up with a broad area of research space is appealing. And we get to stay in science without the stresses of benchwork or grant writing. The job also offers a good work–life balance, a relatively standard work week and opportunities to work from home as well as in an office. We take pride in the journal we build and our roles in the community.

With the highs come lows. For many, rejecting papers is the hardest part. This discomfort, however, keeps us careful with our decisions. Beyond sending disappointing decisions, working with unhappy authors and referees can also be a point of stress. Other downsides include being busy. We have monthly deadlines that must be met and are constantly juggling papers at different stages. In addition, while traveling the world has its perks, it can be challenging to balance travel and family life.

Although we come from many walks of life, there are some traits that are common among editors. Successful editors are able to apply both scientific and editorial criteria when reading manuscripts and reviews. They are also able to multitask, manage deadlines, make decisions, and speak and write effectively. Effective communication, though, does not mean that English must be an editor's first language. Beneficial traits also include enjoyment of reading manuscripts, enthusiasm for science and science communication, open-mindedness, a strong sense of fairness, a good memory, and discretion with confidential information.

An editorial career can be a steppingstone to other many other careers. Within Nature Portfolio, there are opportunities to move among the journals or to be promoted to chief editors, team leaders and other management or policy development

positions. Outside of publishing, many editors move into science writing, grant management or foundation management.

No previous editorial experience is required to become a professional editor. Nevertheless, it should be clear that a candidate actively seeks an editorial career. For instance, showing an interest in scientific writing or editing, peer review, and journal clubs can set a person apart. Candidates should be able to state why they want to work for the specific journal and come to an interview familiar with the journal and what they publish. Successful candidates typically show a broad understanding of the landscape of scientific publishing. Finally, while most editors have done at least one postdoc, postdoctoral training is not essential.

When hiring, we tend to focus most on the ability of the candidate to assess manuscripts. Therefore, part of the interview involves asking candidates to read, summarize and critically assess papers and then discuss whether those papers might be a good fit for our journal. We try to gauge a person's interest and enthusiasm, both for the job and for the journal, and their understanding of cutting-edge research in their areas of expertise.

When looking for editorial jobs, it is best to cast an early net because openings can be sporadic and often journals are seeking a candidate with specific expertise and/or in specific geographic areas. One good way to get a foot in the door and test the waters can be through temporary positions, like covering for an editor on family leave.

We hope to have given readers some insight into what we think are satisfying careers in professional editing. To learn more, it can help to follow editors on social media, reach out to an editor for an informational interview, or attend career seminars and networking activities at conferences. For more, see our editorial on [how editors edit](#). For advertisements, see [Nature Careers](#). □

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