



## EDITOR'S NOTE

## The Obligation of Editorial Independence

Journal editors and editorial teams play an important role in the publication of scientific research. They evaluate the work of authors, organize reviewers, evaluate the work of reviewers, and provide an overarching perspective to help authors prepare, if not improve, their work.

The essence of the editorial mandate is to determine which submissions should move forward for publication and which should be turned away. The processes and effort involved can vary widely. The most aggressive position is the no-flaw approach: any submission that fails to meet all submission formatting requirements will not be considered. The decision can be delivered as an unforgiving summary rejection or as a potentially more flexible disqualification from review.

Content flaws are more subjective, but effectively, it is possible to employ a 2-category evaluation system in which any manuscript that cannot be accepted in the initial review is automatically rejected. This approach would eliminate reviewer and editorial time spent considering revisions, but it also makes it likely that some manuscripts that could be made ready for publication will be rejected.

Most journals employ a more flexible 4-category evaluation system: accept, minor revision, major revision, and reject. A hard line can still be taken with this approach, such as declining to further consider any manuscript that requires any more than minor revision, but greater editorial flexibility is usually maintained.

Adjusting the cutpoint for consideration is a natural response to changes in the number or quality of submissions received. It is typical to assume that a higher submission rate of good-quality work should lead to more demanding standards, but caution is warranted in deciding how to best achieve enhanced rigor. It is possible that a manuscript requiring major revision has greater fundamental value than a manuscript requiring minor or even no revision. This is where the skill, insight, and commitment of reviewers and editors is essential.

The critical hurdle is to ensure that both the strengths and flaws of a manuscript are appropriately identified. The value of the current form must be assessed, along with the potential for the work to be improved through reasonable efforts of the authors. This is complicated because the chief limits on improbability can be either the material or the authors. Work that is unlikely to be salvageable with

realistic effort is fairly easy to reject. Work that has the potential to be salvaged is more difficult to adjudicate. The skill and commitment of authors is important, but so is the guidance of reviewers and editors. The best authors can take minimal feedback to address real or possible areas of deficiency. Less skilled authors, however, need more explicit guidance to achieve what might be possible.

The best reviewers bring both subject matter expertise and writing experience to the table. They can identify issues and offer solutions to them. The job of reviewers is not to rewrite manuscripts, but to provide sufficiently clear guidance for authors to effectively direct efforts to develop the work. Multiple reviewers are typically used because it is rare for any two to see all the same problems and possibilities, and even when they do, the way they communicate them to authors can differ.

Editors direct the appointment of reviewers and curate the reviews that are delivered. They may contribute more by flagging additional issues and providing perspective for reviewer comments. This can involve prioritizing issues, clarifying comments, recasting comments as “must do” and “consider” as appropriate, and removing irrelevant, inappropriate, or problematically conflicting comments. Editors may also move some of the confidential comments made to them by reviewers into the public field for authors to see.

Editors should always be acting to strengthen the value of reviews, but reviewers need to be mindful of any editing in their reviews. All modifications should be evaluated carefully to understand why they were made. If changes reflect correction of sloppy or unclear comments, it should be a reminder to spend a little more time with the next review. Authors generally do not have the luxury of asking for clarification in a timely manner, so it is important that what they receive is clear and unambiguous.

Edits made to correct lapses in diplomacy should be a red flag for reviewers in terms of their performance. Authors are at a disadvantage in the peer-review process; they know that making reviewers and editors unhappy can result in rejected manuscripts. It is incumbent upon reviewers and editors to ensure that disrespect is not shown in the process. Anyone can have a momentary lapse, and efforts to correct them should be appreciated and stand as a reminder of what to watch for in the future.

Editors should also be sensitive to the fact that conflicting comments can confuse and frustrate authors. They can make it difficult for authors to develop revisions with confidence or can make them question whether revision is needed. Removing comments that go against journal standards in format or practice is usually easy for reviewers to appreciate. Reviewers would best address these problems by refreshing their knowledge of author guidelines for journals they might review for again. Edits made to correct erroneous observations (eg, resulting from misreading) are also likely understandable and a good reminder of the caution needed in writing reviews. Edits made to avoid conflict when a different perspective is favored at the editorial level may not please reviewers, but if the justification is reasonable, they should be taken in stride.

The problem to look for carefully is any effort by editors to subvert or deflect meaningful and appropriate reviewer comments without solid justification. Opinions can differ, but there is a line beyond which edits could undermine the peer-review process. Reviewers should not subject themselves to repeated disenfranchisement if this occurs. They should decline to conduct reviews for any journal that obscures or removes legitimate commentary. This situation is most likely to arise with predatory journals for which the priority is to push material forward without delay.

Reviewers do not have to agree with editorial changes, in the same way that authors do not have to agree with all reviewers' comments, but the justification for edits to reviews should be clear and understandable. Both the rationale for any changes and the context of the disagreement need to be appreciated to preserve credibility and to minimize the likelihood of repetition in future reviews.

The critical piece is transparency. It is reasonable to expect that minor editorial corrections will not be flagged unless they occur at a rate that prompts a reminder of expectations. Material changes, though—those affecting content—should be delineated for reviewers. The price of having the freedom to edit reviewers' comments is the

responsibility to clearly document changes. If changes go beyond simple spelling or grammatical corrections, I include notes to the reviewer that contain the text removed or the passage edited (with original and revised forms), along with explanations for the changes. These are sent out with decision letters so reviewers can see the comments of all reviewers and editors for perspective.

Direct editorial action is an important tool to ensure that authors get the most useful input to guide their efforts. This can help them bring out the best in their work and to generate revisions more likely to be well received by reviewers. The documentation of editorial action is essential both for transparency and as an investment in our reviewer pool. Although editors may overrule reviewers, it is important that such actions are made soundly, for the benefit of the authors and the literature record. Reviewers may not agree with editorial decisions, but understanding the reasons behind them can preserve respect for everyone involved in the process.

Our goal is to guide authors to complete their best work. Insightful comments delivered in a clear, concise, and actionable format can make even extensive revisions easier to make. Minimizing extraneous text, that which is not instructive or actionable, can reduce conflict when the comments of one individual must coexist with those of others. Putting in the extra effort to give editors nothing to be concerned about helps reviewers retain control over their work and benefits authors.

My challenge to authors is to deliver manuscripts so well constructed that shortcomings cannot be found. My challenge to reviewers is to find the shortcomings that the authors miss and to document them with clarity, objectivity, and relentless diplomacy. My challenge to section and associate editors is to look not only for what was missed, but also for what might be, to make it impossible for me to find anything further when my efforts follow theirs.

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