Writing and Publishing Scientific Papers

A Primer for the Non-English Speaker

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The manuscripts are handled in a systematic way by the editorial office. This process is usually lengthy and involves several people, with repeated correspondence between the corresponding author and the editorial office. It is important to know, however, that correspondence is always between the editor and the corresponding author, and that the editor will not contact anyone else from the author team. It is even more imperative that, if you are a corresponding author, you correspond only with the editor or handling editor, and no one else. Everything goes through the editorial office: revisions, enquiries, complaints, etc. Breaking these rules will result in the immediate rejection of your manuscript. Do not risk it.

The manuscript will make its way to publication through the following steps:

1. When the manuscript is received, the first task is for the publisher to register it in their editorial database. This administrative process will include entering the arrival date, authors’ names, corresponding author and their address; the manuscript will then receive a reference number. This reference number is important as this is the identification tag for the manuscript during its further processing. When submitting electronically, authors must perform these tasks themselves.

2. After this, the manuscript is briefly checked: does it fit the theoretical scope of the journal? This leads to the first decision. If the topic does not fit the journal, it will be immediately sent back to the author without further consideration. In theory, the authors can appeal against this
decision, but it is not usually worth it. Editors typically have a very firm perception of what types of papers they want in “their” journal.

3. Next, the format of the manuscript is checked. Does it conform to the required format? Is the text appropriately structured? Are word limits observed? Is the recommended position of the tables and figures indicated? This leads to decision no.2: manuscripts that deviate grossly from the expected format are also sent back with a request for correction. This should never happen to a carefully prepared manuscript.

4. This is followed by a quick reading of the manuscript, usually by the editor, to decide whether, or not, the manuscript should be sent for detailed review. Many submitted manuscripts are rejected at this stage. The editor’s decision is often based on non-scientific reasons, editorial policy, etc. — it rarely rests on detailed scientific scrutiny.

5. If the manuscript passes this stage, the editor usually assigns it to a sub-editor (or handling editor). The sub-editor’s (or handling editor) task is to find suitable reviewers, send the manuscript for review, and keep track of its progress. Once reviewers have been found, the handling editor sends them the manuscript, indicates a deadline for the review, and receives (or, if necessary, solicits) the reviews.

6. Once the written reviews are received, the handling editor evaluates them, and makes a recommendation to the editor (or decides herself) whether the manuscript should be accepted, rejected, or revised. In cases of seriously divergent reviewer comments, additional reviewers may be asked to give their opinion on the manuscript.

7.1. If the decision is to reject, this must be accompanied by the written reviews. It is the editor’s right to make final decisions about acceptance or rejection but she is also obliged to justify the decision. Never accept a simple decision without justification.

7.2. If the decision is immediate acceptance (which is rare), the editor will ask you to submit the final version. You should do this promptly.

7.3. Usually, even accepted manuscripts will have to be revised. The authors are typically given a deadline to submit their revised manuscript. Once the revision is returned to the editorial office (or re-uploaded on
the website), the handling editor will evaluate the revision, sometimes sending it out again to reviewers.

8. The handling editor now decides more quickly about acceptance, rejection (yes, it still is possible), or indicates a need for further revision. There may be further rounds of correspondence between editor and the authors at this stage, not usually involving the reviewers further.

9. Once the manuscript is accepted, the handling editor will normally send everything to the editor, who manages the final version. She will notify the authors of the acceptance, invite them to submit the final version of the paper and, when received, check the format, language, figures, and send the now-accepted manuscript to the printer.

Contact with the Editor During the Review Period

Authors are not normally expected to engage in follow-up correspondence after submission. They should be aware, however, of how the process runs, and there may be a reason to contact the editorial office. Firstly, the author should hear about the outcome of the first two screening processes: covering the topic fit and the format evaluation. Many journals do not send out a notification before the manuscript also passes the third screening, and is sent to reviewers. This should not take more than one month, so if you do not hear about your submission by then, it is acceptable to contact the editorial office. Something may have gone wrong.

When the submitted manuscript is sent to reviewers, the editor usually indicates a tentative deadline for review. Note that this deadline is only tentative, as most individuals involved in the review process work as unpaid volunteers and, thus, the editor has limited powers to convince them to keep to these deadlines. The period of review can vary between 6 weeks (which only the fastest journals can keep) to 5 months.

If you do not hear about your manuscript ca. 4 weeks after the indicated review deadline, it is acceptable to send a polite message of enquiry. You can unearth a problem, prompt an editorial action, or get clarification as to which stage the manuscript has reached in the process.

If, after repeated attempts, you do not receive a reply, remember that until you sign a copyright transfer form, the manuscript belongs to you,
the authors. You can withdraw the manuscript, which means the journal in question does not have the right to publish it. If you decide to do this, do it in writing, sending a registered letter. It is sufficient to write that you intend to withdraw the manuscript — you do not have to give a reason. Try to be polite, even in this case. Withdrawal is also advised if an error, or worse, suspected data falsification is found in the work; this is better than having to publish a retraction or correction.