What Journal Editors Look for in a Manuscript and in a Reviewer

Mark Klebanoff, MD, MPH
Departments of Pediatrics and Obstetrics and Gynecology
OSU College of Medicine
Division of Epidemiology
OSU College of Public Health
Editorial Board, American Journal of Epidemiology
Objectives

Participants will be able to……………………

Understand how journals evaluate submitted manuscripts and how editors make accept/reject decisions

Assess whether to respond to previous reviewer comments when submitting a rejected manuscript to a different journal

Identify Key Findings of quality of their peer review activities by learning what editors prefer to see in reviewer comments
Conflict of Interest

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose
Caveat

These opinions are mine only

I don’t speak for the other editors or other journals

However, the basic editorial process is similar at most journals
Mechanics of the Editorial Process
Mechanics of the process—what happens to your paper?

Paper arrives at Journal

Manuscript goes to Editor-in-Chief

- EIC reads it quickly to decide which Editor should handle the paper, and whether the paper seems worthy of sending for peer review (more on that later)

Editor-in-Chief assigns the paper to me

- if it’s in my area of expertise (or nobody fits it better!)
- EIC may recommend rejection without review (more later)
Mechanics of the process—Paper comes to me

I read the paper quickly (~15 minutes)
  • Decide if the paper should be sent for review or rejected without review (more later)

I select potential reviewers, who get notified by e-mail

I keep picking people until 2 agree to review, rarely I ask for 3 reviewers
  • If I have a hard time finding reviewers, does it say something about the paper?
Mechanics of the process – Review is done

I read the reviewer comments

If both reviewers recommend rejection I usually don’t spend a lot of time on the paper

Otherwise I spend enough time on the paper to form my own judgment
  • I consider the reviewer comments but am not bound by them
Quality and Novelty Factor in the Decision

I will give wider “appropriateness” latitude to a high-quality paper than to a mediocre one.

I will tolerate more weaknesses in a “novel” paper than in one where there already is an extensive literature.
Mechanics of the process – Preliminary decision

I decide to reject or request revisions

Editor-in-Chief reviews my decision to be sure

• Decision is justified in light of reviewer comments
• Nothing in my letter or in the reviewer comments is offensive
Mechanics of the process – You submit your revised paper

This is where I spend the most time
  • I’ve spent as much as 2 days studying a paper

I re-read the original paper

I re-read the original reviewer comments (and any comments I might have written)

I read your response to the previous comments
Mechanics of the process – You submit your revised paper

After all that, I read your revised paper
• We require you to submit it in ‘track changes’ format

I decide whether you have satisfactorily addressed the previous concerns

Very rarely, I ask for a second round of review.

~ ½ the time, I ask for another round of revision
Mechanics of the process – You submit your revised paper

Occasionally (but not often) I will reject a paper at this stage

• Usually it’s because it became clear that the problems in your study are important and cannot be overcome (although I usually catch that much earlier)

I keep going back and forth with the author until I’m satisfied that every concern worth addressing has been addressed

• I’ve never rejected a paper at the second or later revision, although I’ve had to threaten to do so a couple of times!
Rejection Without Review
During that first quick reading, I try to decide

Is AJE the Right Place for This Paper?

Will our readership of research-oriented epidemiologists be interested?
Is AJE the Right Place for This Paper?

Your own references can guide me

If nearly all are from clinical journals, then maybe your paper should also be sent to a clinical journal?

If I use that test, it probably means I already suspect we’re not the best place for your paper

• This test confirms an impression, it doesn’t create one
Rejection Without Review –

An Editorial Dilemma

I can often read a paper and see that while it’s not terrible, it’s unlikely to be accepted

Do I reject without review to avoid wasting authors’ and reviewers’ time?

OTOH, without reviewer comments, how can an author improve the paper?
Primary Grounds I Use to Reject Without Review -

Combination of “Novelty” and “Appropriateness”

Quality is not usually as important at this stage

Usually I can make “appropriateness” and “novelty” decisions in a quick read-through, which is why I spend <15 minutes on the initial reading

I Reject ~20% of Papers Without Review

At my journal, most other editors reject without review more than I do (overall it’s around 50%)
Overall Manuscript Quality
Overall Manuscript Quality

Very few papers are so good that they scream “Accept me!”

Papers so bad that they should obviously be rejected are not that common either

Most papers are in the middle, and sometimes decisions seem arbitrary, even to me

Therefore, little things can matter
The First Thing I Look for in a Paper

Brevity!
The Second Thing I Look for in a Paper

Brevity!
The Third Thing I Look for in a Paper

Brevity!
Style, Appearance, and Formatting Matter

Look through several issues of the journal to which you’re planning to submit, especially if it’s a journal you don’t read regularly

Notice the “style” of articles
• Long, detailed introductions (common in social science)

Look for “preferred terms”
• “Infant formula” versus “Human milk substitute”
Style, Appearance, and Formatting Matter

Pay attention to Instructions to Authors e.g.
- Formatting of references
- Information included on title page
- Placement of tables
- MANUSCRIPT LENGTH!
- SPELL CHECK, SPELL CHECK, SPELL CHECK!!!!!

Following instructions, correct spelling show
- Attention to detail
- Respect for the Journal

Failure to do this won’t get your paper rejected, but will make an editor less tolerant of other flaws
Is English Your Native Language?

If not, then consider asking a colleague who is a native English speaker to proof-read your paper.

Unless extreme, poor spelling, grammar and/or vocabulary will probably not cause a rejection.

However, the amount of re-writing necessary to make a paper acceptable probably will be considered in making a decision to accept or reject.
“Cover Letter” for Manuscript

I used to write detailed cover letters, explaining why my paper was important

When I became an editor, I realized that I didn’t pay attention to cover letters

Now I write short cover letters for my papers!

Other editors may pay more attention to cover letters than I do
Writing a manuscript

You probably already know how to do this

There’s enough to say about it that it’s really a separate talk
Components of the Manuscript

References

Proof-read for technical correctness (becoming less of a problem due to EndNote, RefMan, etc).

Accurately portray what the articles said

Don’t cite only 1 side of controversial issues

Don’t try to create controversy in prior work if there is no controversy
Bottom Line on Decisions

I rarely reject papers because of a single “fatal flaw”

The usual reason: so many “little problems” that to become acceptable, the paper would need more re-analysis and/or re-writing than its importance justifies (more on that later)
Reconsidering a Decision to Reject

Becoming more common for authors to challenge rejection decisions

**IF** the reviewers made a clear mistake **AND** that mistake contributed heavily to the decision, then **MAYBE** it’s worth asking for reconsideration

  • Maybe the reviewers misunderstood because you didn’t write clearly

If the reviewers made a bunch of comments you can mostly address, then I’d assume the rejection was based on the journal’s interest/priority
Reconsidering a Decision to Reject

A good decision letter, rather than a form letter, can usually forestall reconsideration requests.

I try to add some specific words to the rejection letter, and rarely get reconsideration requests.

When I do get requests, I rarely reconsider, and only twice did I change my mind.

My advice—when you get a rejection, just move on and submit somewhere else.

Not all editors agree with me, however.
Sending a Rejected Manuscript to Another Journal
Sending a Rejected Manuscript to Another Journal

Should you try to address reviewers’ comments before re-submission,
or just turn the paper around with few or no changes?
Arguments for Quick Turn-Around with Few or No Changes

Peer review is haphazard and there’s a good chance that the next reviewer will not see the problems that the first reviewer saw.

If you change something, there’s a reasonable chance that the next reviewer will actually like it better the way you originally did it!

Making major changes (re-writing, re-analysis) takes time.
Arguments for Making Changes Before Submitting Elsewhere

If the reviewer was an expert in the field, there’s a reasonable chance that they will be the reviewer for the next journal too!

• Nothing makes a reviewer angrier than seeing their comments ignored
• It makes the reviewer think you’re arrogant, lazy or both!
• If the reviewer tells the editor you ignored previous comments, the editor will be angry too

Maybe the reviewer was right, and addressing the concerns will actually improve the paper!
My Recommendation for Making Changes

If 2 or more reviewers raise the same concern, it’s likely that the reviewers for the next journal will notice it too

• Do what you can to address this type of reviewer comment
• If 2 or more reviewers misunderstood what you did, then you need to explain it better!

If a reviewer makes a clear and valid point, and you can address it, then you probably should do so

If you think a reviewer’s concern is likely to be mentioned by the next reviewer, then try to address it

However, don’t twist yourself in knots trying to revise in response to every reviewer comment.
**DO NOT** assume that reviewers who don’t like your paper are stupid, even if they misunderstood everything you wrote!

Even if the reviewers really are stupid, arrogance on your part is not helpful.
Thoughts on reviewing manuscripts
Reviewing— the Researcher’s “Debt to Society”

Mike Kramer’s “2 reviews per paper” rule

• Most journals solicit 2 reviews for each paper
• Therefore, for every paper he submits to a given journal as first or supervising author, he will do 2 reviews for the journal
• He does it regardless of whether his paper was accepted by that journal
• No reason you can’t do more than 2 reviews, but this seems like a reasonable minimum
Reviewing– the Researcher’s “Debt to Society”

There are several authors who regularly submit papers to AJE, which often are accepted, but I can never get them to agree to review

• Some of them don’t even bother to respond and tell us they won’t be able to review! That slows up the review of YOUR PAPER by at least a week!

Never reviewing is selfish, and not bothering to respond is simply discourteous, and it really annoys me.

We ask that you complete your review within 2 weeks. If you can’t do that, you can ask for a reasonable extension— we will usually approve it

• But try your best to be prompt
Reviewing the Researcher’s “Debt to Society”

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!
Role of Reviewers

Reviewers are consultants to the Editor

AJE does not expect me to rubber-stamp recommendations, and I often do not follow them completely

However, acceptance difficult to justify if all reviewers recommend rejection
An Editor’s View on Reviewing

I have to cover a broad range of material, of which I have varying degrees of knowledge

The less I know, the more I depend on good reviewers
Comments to Authors

Be honest, but polite

Try to be constructive, and provide suggestions for improvement if you can (but don’t feel obligated to do so)

It’s OK to say things like “this paper makes an important contribution by…” or even “this paper does not add very much to previous publications on this topic” but please don’t make acceptance recommendations in your comments to authors (we edit recommendations out of the review anyway).
What I Like to See in a Review– A Definitive Recommendation in Confidential Comments

Don’t just repeat your comments to the author in the confidential comments section- I read the comments to author anyway!

A namby-pamby recommendation does not help me very much, particularly in a topic I don’t know well

Don’t worry about being a nice guy. I really appreciate your frank evaluation, and I can deal with a blunt assessment given in confidence
Confidential Comments to the Editor

You don’t need to write a lot

Give me the “bottom line” of your review

Bottom line = After reasonable revision, would this paper be well-done enough and important enough to justify publishing?

Noting in confidential comments a couple of reasons for your recommendation is very helpful

The detail and quality of my review for the New England Journal is the same as my review for a third-tier journal (I hope!). My recommendations, however, will probably differ.
Confidential Comments to the Editor

Don’t just consider the quality of the paper

Consider also appropriateness to the journal, and how much the paper adds to the literature

• Many very good papers add only marginally to the literature, and may be more appropriate for a ‘specialty’ audience

• This may be the hardest judgment for a young reviewer to learn
An Example of Good Confidential Comments

This study offered considerable potential as originally designed. However, the combination of lack of details, omission of key confounders and limited power preclude any firm conclusions. Whether greater involvement on the part of the presumed senior author will result in a more meaningful paper is not clear.
An Example of Good Confidential Comments

This manuscript reports on a systematic review and meta-analysis of... The subject area is important, but there are some concerns regarding the completeness of the report that make it difficult to evaluate. Furthermore, the presentation is somewhat "sloppy" with many typos, etc., which makes me wonder about the quality of the work in general. However, I think it should be considered for another round of revision, and would likely be acceptable at that point.
An Example of Good Confidential Comments

As expected from this group, the manuscript is very well done and well-written. The main problem I have is that I'm not sure how hot and exciting a question this is....
Examples of Blunt Confidential Comments,
but I Can Handle Them

This might just be the worst paper I have ever read. If there were a
license to practice epidemiology, it would have to be revoked for
these authors.

I have handled over 100 papers this year. This one probably ranks first
on the ratio of authors’ self-confidence to quality of contents...
Thank you

Mark.Klebanoff@nationwidechildrens.org