An editor’s guide to the peer review process
INTRODUCTION

This page looks at a range of options to help you manage peer review as an editor, from understanding the editorial decision-making process, to finding, rewarding, and retaining the highest quality reviewers.

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The peer review process is a fundamental part of research publishing. It's a way of ensuring only articles of the highest quality, which describe sound research methods and results, are published.

The process involves both the journal editors and external expert reviewers, who evaluate the submitted articles. Peer reviewers can recommend whether or not they believe an article should be accepted or rejected by the journal. However, the ultimate authority to make the final decision rests solely with journal editors or the journal's editorial board.

Let's take a look at the key steps in the decision-making process.

**INITIAL SCREENING**

After an article is submitted to a journal, a journal editor screens the manuscript and decides whether or not to send it for full peer review. Only after clearing the initial screening is the article sent to one or more peer reviewers. Editors will consider the following aspects:

- Is the manuscript good enough quality to be sent for peer review?
- Does it conform to the aims and scope of the journal and has it followed the style guidelines and instructions for authors?
- Does it make a significant contribution to the existing literature?

Unsuitable articles may be rejected without peer review at the editor's discretion. If the article passes these initial checks, it will be sent for peer review.
Benefits of carrying out this initial screening include:

- A quick decision for authors – if the manuscript clearly lies outside the scope of the journal, then a rapid rejection allows the author to submit their article to another journal more quickly.
- Peer reviewers' time is not wasted – reviewers don’t have to spend time evaluating and giving feedback for a manuscript of clearly inferior quality.

**THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS**

Once an article has passed the initial screening process, it's sent for peer review. As an editor, you'll appreciate the amount of effort that goes into the peer review process. There are many people involved, including:

- You as an editor
- A team of associate editors
- An administrator
- The reviewers
- Editorial board members
- The Taylor & Francis Peer Review and Online Submissions teams
- Your Taylor & Francis Portfolio Managers

There are different types of peer review operated by different journals. But no matter what type of peer review your journal uses, there are plenty of intricate parts to keep everyone busy.

Taking care of the initial checks, assigning the right associate editor, finding enough willing reviewers, assigning reviewers, and checking for ethical issues are all key parts of the process. Not to mention the actual task of writing the review.

Editors need to be careful to select reviewers who have sufficient subject matter expertise to do justice to the article they're reviewing. You can read more about finding reviewers on the 'How to find reviewers' section below.

Given all this, it’s no wonder that peer review takes time.

**HOW LONG DOES PEER REVIEW TAKE?**

A question often asked by authors, but also important to editors, is how long does it take between submission and publication of an article. This is a hard question to answer, but often peer review is the lengthiest part of this process.

Journals usually ask reviewers to complete their reviews within 3-4 weeks. However, few journals have a mechanism to enforce the deadline, which is why it can be hard to predict
how long the peer review process will take. It’s also worth bearing in mind that highly technical papers or papers from niche subject areas could take longer to review because it often takes editors more time to find appropriate reviewers.

However, there are things you can do as an editor to make peer review more effective and efficient. Focus your efforts on good time management and supplying high-quality reviews. Being aware of the following potential delays can help you limit their effects:

- Difficulty in finding appropriate reviewers
- Delayed response from reviewers
- Unhelpful review reports – reviews that are a single sentence or paragraph are unhelpful to authors or editors. A normal review report should be two to three pages in length, sometimes longer. (Read [how to write a review report](#).)

THE FINAL DECISION

Editors have various options when it comes to making a decision on an article. The following are the most common decisions made:

- **Accept without any changes (acceptance)**: the journal will publish the article in its original form.
- **Accept with minor revisions (acceptance)**: the journal will publish the article once the author has made some small corrections.
- **Accept after major revisions (conditional acceptance)**: the journal will publish the article if the authors make changes suggested by the reviewers and/or editors.
- **Revise and resubmit (conditional rejection)**: the journal will reconsider the article in another round of decision making once the authors have made major changes.
- **Reject the paper (outright rejection)**: the journal won’t publish the article or reconsider it.
How to find peer reviewers

Finding peer reviewers is a challenging and time-consuming task. You need to find reviewers with the right expertise to assess a submitted article. And they also need to be willing to write the review to a deadline.

This can limit the reviewer pool immediately, particularly in niche research fields. But on top of that, editors also need to consider conflicts of interest, the diversity of the reviewers, and whether a reviewer has been asked too many times (leading to ‘reviewer fatigue’).

The good news is that there are some simple steps you can take to find reviewers. In brief, these are:

1. **Check the references in the article**
   The reference section of a submitted article is an excellent place to start when looking for peer reviewers.

2. **Use search tools and databases to find researchers working on similar topics**
   There are a number of different search tools and resources you can use to find reviewers. Including:
   - Publons’ Reviewer Connect
   - Taylor & Francis reviewer locator tools
   - JANE
   - Web of Science

3. **Use the editorial board**
   The journal’s editorial board is a great source for reviewers, both as reviewers themselves and via their networks.

4. **Consider previous authors and guest editors**
   Authors of previously published articles and journal guest editors could be just what you’re looking for in a reviewer.

5. **Ask reviewers who decline for suggestions**
   Invited reviewers who decline to review could still help you find alternatives.
6. **Use predefined keywords**
   Predefined keywords are part of the article submission process. When submitting an article, authors select from a predefined list of keywords that describe their expertise areas. This saves editors time on deciding which keywords to use when searching for peer reviewers.

7. **Use previous reviewers**
   Previous reviewers are, of course, obvious people to go to when you need new reviews. But beware of ‘reviewer fatigue’.

8. **Use the editor’s personal network**
   An editor’s personal network is bound to include researchers from relevant subject areas for their journal, who could make excellent reviewers.

9. **Consider using early career researchers or junior colleagues**
   Just bear in mind they might need mentoring or formal training – particularly if it’s their first time carrying out peer review.

It’s also important to keep growing a journal’s reviewer pool. Not only will this help find reviewers faster, it’ll also ensure the journal isn’t always leaning on the same people.
How to retain and reward reviewers

Without reviewers, the peer review process and journal publishing as a whole would fall apart. They provide a vital and important service that ensures the quality and integrity of published research.

While most reviewers see their work as providing service to the academic community, it’s still a voluntary service and one of many demands on their time. Yet peer review can help researchers advance their careers, that is if they have the right evidence to show the expertise they’ve built up. Journal editors can support peer reviewers by both recognizing and validating their work.

Doing so isn’t just beneficial for reviewers either. A case study produced by Publons with the American Society for Microbiology (ASM), showed that researchers are more willing to review and provide useful, constructive feedback if they know their contributions will be formally recognized.

There are a few different ways that Taylor & Francis editors can reward and retain their reviewers:

PROVIDE SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

Our reviewer guidelines provide an important source of support for reviewers about what to expect during the peer review process, how to write review reports, and ethical considerations.

In addition, it’s important for editors to take the time to provide feedback to reviewers and encourage authors to do the same. This is particularly important when supporting early career researchers, as they will undoubtedly be feeling unsure about how well they’ve carried out their reviews. Offering encouragement and tips for improvement will be invaluable to them.
PUBLISH THE NAMES OF YOUR REVIEWERS AS A THANK YOU

Many journals will publish the names of all their reviewers on a regular basis (for example, annually during Peer Review Week). This provides public acknowledgment of the service they’ve delivered.

OFFER REVIEWER REWARDS OR DISCOUNTS

We have two options for rewarding reviewers in this way:

1. Many of our journals now give peer reviewers 30-days’ free access to Taylor & Francis journal content upon agreeing to review. This provides them with resources to assist in the creation of quality reviews.

2. We offer a 30% book discount to all our reviewers when purchasing any Taylor & Francis Group books. This includes those under the Routledge and CRC Press imprints.

PRESENT A REVIEWER CERTIFICATE OR CONFIRMATION LETTER

Our certificate of recognition serves as a formal acknowledgment of a reviewer’s role. Reviewers can request the certificate from their Taylor & Francis contact. It gives them something they can present to employers or their institutions (or simply use to decorate their office). A reviewer confirmation letter is also available on request.
Use Publons

We've extended our partnership with Publons to 250 journal titles across a range of subject areas. Through Publons, researchers can showcase a complete record of their reviewing activity as evidence of their subject-area expertise. They can also earn 'merit' points for their contributions.

Find out more on [how to support and recognize peer reviewers with Publons](#)
The ethics of peer review

As there’s been a steady rise in the number of journals using electronic peer review, there has unfortunately also been a rise in ethical concerns about the peer review process. We’ve put together some detailed information on the issues editors need to be aware of. You can also read a summary of the key points below.

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR EDITORS

1. Be aware of fake reviews and safeguarding peer review integrity
   One of the most high-profile ethical issues in peer review is the increase in cases of ‘fake reviewers’. As a responsible publisher, Taylor & Francis has taken the decision to safeguard the integrity of our peer review by removing the ‘Preferred reviewers’ function from our ScholarOne Manuscripts and Editorial Manager sites. See here for more information on this.

2. Clarify peer review policies for the journal
   • State the types of peer review offered.
   • State whether an article has been peer reviewed. For example, it may be the case for a journal that editorials and letters are not peer reviewed, but original articles and reviews always are – this needs to be clear.

3. Apply consistent peer review standards
   Editors should apply consistent standards in their peer review processes, including for special issues, supplements, or where peer review has been managed by a guest editor.

4. Ensure confidentiality
   Editors should ensure confidential handling of article manuscripts. No details should be disclosed to anyone except the peer reviewers without permission from the author.

5. Be aware of reviewer bias and conflicts of interest
   Before agreeing to review an article, reviewers must declare any conflicts of interest. This includes any relationship with the author that may potentially bias their review. Editors are also responsible for checking for potential reviewer biases, rather than relying solely on declarations.
6. Manage a reviewers’ database

To ensure journals have a pool of trusted reviewers, it’s important to establish and maintain a secure database of suitably qualified peer reviewers. This needs to be compliant with data protection legislation.

7. Ensure reviewers are aware of guidelines

Our reviewer guidelines provide an important source of support for reviewers about what to expect during the peer review process.

8. Be aware of the need for co-author verification

Editors need to ensure that all co-authors listed for an article have made a genuine contribution to the research.

9. Know where to go for support

There are a variety of support sources to help navigate the ins and outs of peer review ethics.

For editors

The following ethical guidelines are also available from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE):

- Sharing of information among editors-in-chief regarding possible misconduct
- Text recycling guidelines for editors
- A short guide to ethical editing for new editors
- Guidance for editors: research, audit and service evaluations
- Journals’ best practices for ensuring consent for publishing medical case reports: guidance from COPE

For authors – read our guide on Ethics for authors.

For reviewers – visit our Guide to becoming a peer reviewer and the COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers.