


## Incentives that Drive the Editorial Peer Review Process

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## Abstract

A research project can often take a long, circuitous route from the proposal stage, proceeding on to the Institutional Review Board's scrutiny, followed by the research project implementation, through to the analysis and writing of the manuscript. Securing grant funding often adds an extra 6-12 months to the process. For many busy health information professionals (HIPs), research projects sometimes feel like an added burden in the face of more pressing demands for their time and energy. When finally submitting a manuscript to a journal for consideration, authors might feel as if they already have been on a prolonged quest simply to produce their manuscripts.

Submitting a manuscript for publication can be a humbling experience. After all of the effort in reaching the submission stage, the manuscript needs to be evaluated critically by editorial peer reviewers. Editors consider these peer reviewers' recommendations before accepting or rejecting the submitted manuscripts. Many times, the editors might require "major revisions" based on the peer reviewers' evaluations before the editors consider the manuscript further. In some cases, manuscripts go through an additional cycle of review before the editors make their decision.

Understandably, many authors complain about the extra work required to revise a manuscript. By the manuscript submission stage, authors cannot help but feel emotionally invested in guiding their manuscripts through to publication. Peer reviewers or editors still might not be satisfied by the author's additional revisions. The editors still might reject the revised manuscript or demand even further revisions on a subsequent cycle. This column outlines why authors, peer reviewers, and editors often misunderstand each other's roles in this process.

## Peer Reviewers

The vast majority of peer reviewers are volunteers, who often perform this vital service outside of work hours. Only recently have some workplaces credited employees with providing this service. So, why do they do it?

A 2021 scoping review summarized research journals' peer reviewers' motivations for serving in this largely invisible yet vital role for journals. Internal motivations were largely idealistic: professional obligations and reciprocity, a desire to learn, "enjoyment/satisfaction", staying current in the field, assuring scientific rigor in the research enterprise, and preserving the prestige and reputation of a specific journal. External motivations that peer reviewers reported were: professional reputation, recognition as an expert, and fostering good relationships with editors<sup>1</sup>. As a long-time peer reviewer who has reviewed more than 70 manuscripts, most of the internal motivations reported in this 2021 scoping review resonate. In contrast, the three major external motivations uncovered in this scoping review did not seem to similarly ring true.

There might be other internal motivations not captured in this scoping review. As someone steeped in the Evidence Based Practice paradigm, this author wants a research article to accurately represent its findings and limitations to aid readers' critical appraisal. While in the role of a peer reviewer, this author wants to uphold sound research standards. He has no

qualms about subjecting even valid studies to an acid test that few, if any, readers will have the time or skill to pursue themselves. While in this peer reviewer role, he views prospective readers as relying on these quality assurance steps when reviewing these studies. This role does not imply that peer reviewers anonymously can offer feedback in an unprofessional manner to their well-meaning author colleagues. Anonymous peer reviewer comments should always be constructive and professional, even when rejecting a manuscript<sup>2</sup>. Peer reviewers have often published in the same journal and likely hope to publish in the same journal again, so they have a basic desire to aid the journal's continued success.

The internal altruistic motivations to serve as an editorial peer reviewer largely outweigh the external reasons. Serving as an editorial peer reviewer seems to be a largely thankless task if viewed from a solely external perspective. The aforementioned scoping review also touches on the disincentives to serve as an editorial peer reviewer: limited time, critiques not fully respected or followed, and feeling underappreciated. These disincentives have been echoed by others<sup>3-5</sup>.

## **Editors**

Editors are volunteers who perform their services mostly outside of work hours. This author has served as an associate editor for four journals and as a column editor for one journal<sup>6</sup>. Journal editors must have a far-reaching and expansive view of the entire journal rather than any one individual article, column, or issue. They have a strong, unceasing drive to guarantee the utmost quality of the content and production of their journal. Editors for health information professionals' journals are held in high regard, perhaps because this prestige implies that our editors will serve our profession well in every regard. In the larger realm of health professions journal editors, our own editors seem to form a positive personal identity with their own journals over time.

Editors care about the overall appeal of their journals for their readers and prospective readers. Editors want their journals to be read, discussed, and to have a positive influence in the lives of their readers. They seek to gauge their journals' content to the interests of their readers.

Editors recognize that their journals fill a niche in the HIP publishing ecosystem. Over time readers have come to expect the same kind of content within their journals. A more research-oriented journal, for instance, will emphasize greater methodological rigor than a more pragmatically-oriented journal. Sometimes editors will sense that they are publishing too much on the same subject. Editors might curtail publishing additional manuscripts on the same topic, delay publication of submissions on the topic, or reject submissions outright in some cases.

Editors should be professional by explicitly notifying prospective authors that their submitted manuscript will not be a good fit for the journal at the outset. Editors furthermore can be constructive by suggesting alternative journals where the manuscript might be a better fit. At the same time, if their usage data suggests that readers are drawn to certain subjects, the editors might expand their coverage of these popular topics. In these ways, editors' interests align tightly with most readers, but not necessarily with authors.

Editors sometimes point to their low acceptance rate for submitted manuscripts as an indicator of quality<sup>7</sup>. These editors do not seem to realize that they might be discouraging possible authors to submit to eligible, in-scope journals. It seems to this editor that a journal should be as explicit as possible about what it expects in submitted manuscripts rather than to succumb to a simplistic manuscript acceptance rate as a metric of value.

## Authors

Authors navigating the peer review process tend to view the process differently than the editors or the peer reviewers. Authors prioritize the acceptance and publication of their own individual manuscripts over any other article that other authors are vying to publish in the same journal. Indeed, authors are more inclined to magnify the importance of their own manuscript compared to peer reviewers or editors. Authors seem motivated largely by a desire to reach readers who potentially share an interest in the same subjects. Other incentives might complicate authors' motivations when publishing to fulfill institutional requirements for promotion. In such cases, authors might interact with editors and peer reviewers with a sense of urgency or even desperation. On balance, authors and editors alike generally recognize that readers have limited time and attention spans<sup>8</sup>, so they should avoid trying to hype the importance of their articles.

Authors need to realize the following, in light of these incentives by all involved parties in their interactions with peer reviewers and editors:

1. Editors and peer reviewers are colleagues who are concerned with the overall quality and readership of their journal;
2. Editors and peer reviewers are volunteers for these roles, oftentimes working outside regular work hours;
3. Authors should pay special attention to their choices of words when communicating with peer reviewers and editors. These words are all that the editors and peer reviewers have to form impressions, conscious or unconscious, of the author. These impressions might affect the editors' and peer reviewers' management of a particular manuscript. Personal attacks or disparaging tones should be avoided. Authors should remember that editors and peer reviewers are colleagues who are highly sensitive to language.

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