

Getting published: How journals decide

Harold C. Sox
Editor

Annals of Internal Medicine
July 2001-July 2009

Professor of Medicine and of The Dartmouth Institute
Dartmouth Medical School

Outline

- Getting inside the head of an editor
 - Description of a journal's processes
 - Decision criteria
 - When things go wrong
 - Rejection
 - appeals
- General principles about good writing

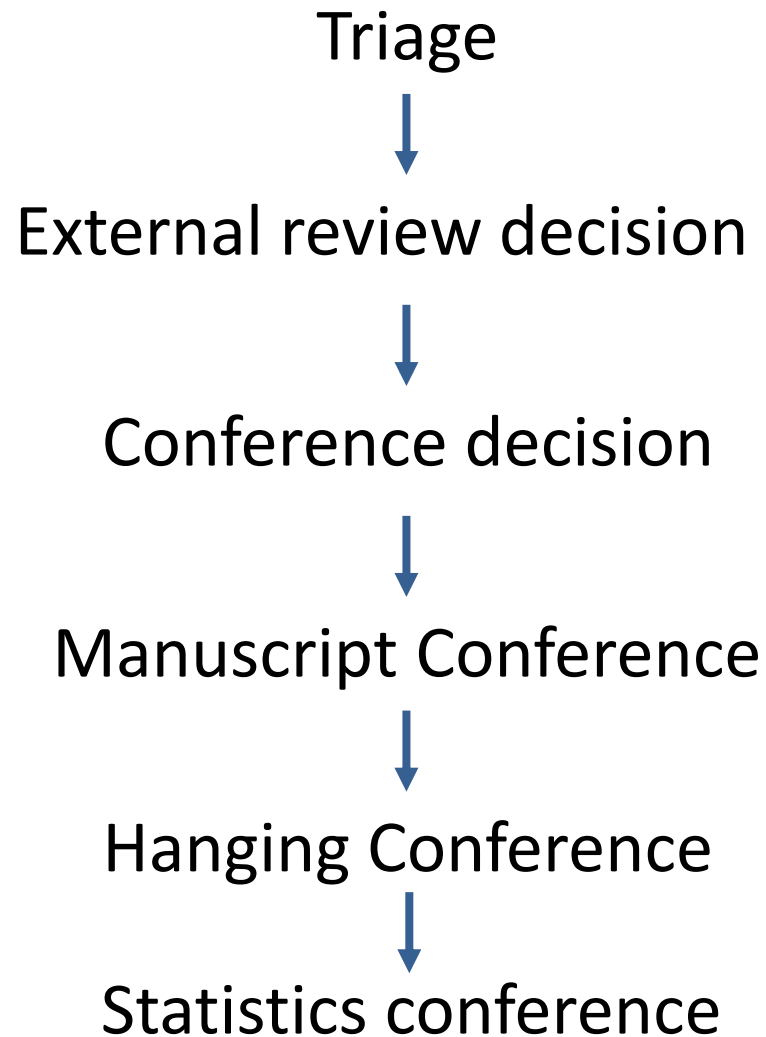
Annals of Internal Medicine

- 87,000 subscribers
 - The largest specialty journal
 - International readership
- Impact factor 16.25:
 - Ranks fifth among all clinical journals (NEJM, JAMA, and Lancet lead)
- 3000+ manuscripts per year
 - 30% from abroad
 - Accept 6% of original research articles

Annals editorial staff

- Senior Editors: 5.5 FTE
 - Editor-in-chief 1.0
 - Executive Deputy Editor 1.0
 - Deputy Editor for e-publication 0.6
 - Deputy Editors 2.9
- Associate Editors: 10 x 0.15 FTE
- Statisticians: 5 (1.6 FTE)
- Managing Editor
- Manuscript representatives: 3
- Others: 2
- Editorial Budget: \$2M

The review process at Annals



Two types of acceptance

- Provisional (PR)
 - PR letter (+ statistician's letter)
 - Revision (extensive but mild) → final acceptance
- Reject and Re-invite
 - Officially a reject
 - 80% eventually accepted
 - Extensive revision and re-analysis

How editors decide

Key editorial decision criteria

- Potential to change patient care
 - “is it true?”
 - “is it new?”
 - Will it affect patient care...and how?
- Conference discussion centers on these three issues

What makes a manuscript easy to review?

- It specifically addresses these questions
 - “is it true”
 - Validity: internal and external
 - Does the evidence support the conclusions?
 - “is it new”
 - How does it advance the field?
 - How will it affect patient care?

Discussion at Manuscript Conference:

Factors that lead to acceptance

- Hot topic → many articles written → more citations
- High impact disease
- Unexpected but believable findings
- First report
- Large effect size, narrow confidence interval
- Complements recently accepted article → publish back-to-back.
- A good vehicle for an editorial
- High level of public interest in topic

Rejection

- Positive reviews..... but rejected. Why?
 - Reviewers tend to be constructive and kind
 - Negative comments to editor
 - Upbeat comments to author
 - Reviews are only part of the decision to accept an article

Discussion at Manuscript Conference:

Factors that lead to **rejection**

- Fatal flaw → conclusions not supported
- Many non-fatal problems with study design and execution
- Report of secondary outcomes in a major study; adds little
- Nothing to distinguish it from previous work
- Small effect size, wide confidence interval
- Huge amount of editorial work required.
- Narrow topic; recent Annals article on the topic

Rejection happens

- Alternatives
 - Revise and submit to another journal
 - Ask for reconsideration...in writing
- When to consider an appeal
 - Error in handling MS
 - Data to counter a major objection

General Advice

- Appealing a decision
- Responding to the provisional acceptance letter
- Dealing with disagreement
- How to write better

Appeals

- Don'ts:
 - Call the editor and rant and rave
 - Don't simply say “you made a mistake in judgment.”
 - Address the issues in the reject letter and reviews
 - Don't file the appeal within 24 hours of getting the rejection letter (many do!)

Appeals

- Do's:
 - Write a point-by-point reply to the editor's and reviewers' criticisms
 - Do suggested re-analyses or data gathering
 - Revise the manuscript
 - Be respectful of the editors' time

How to respond to a provisional acceptance letter

The provisional acceptance letter

- “We’ll publish your manuscript if you respond satisfactorily to these comments.”
 - Some are a few paragraphs and pretty general
 - Some are six pages long and quite specific

The editor-author relationship

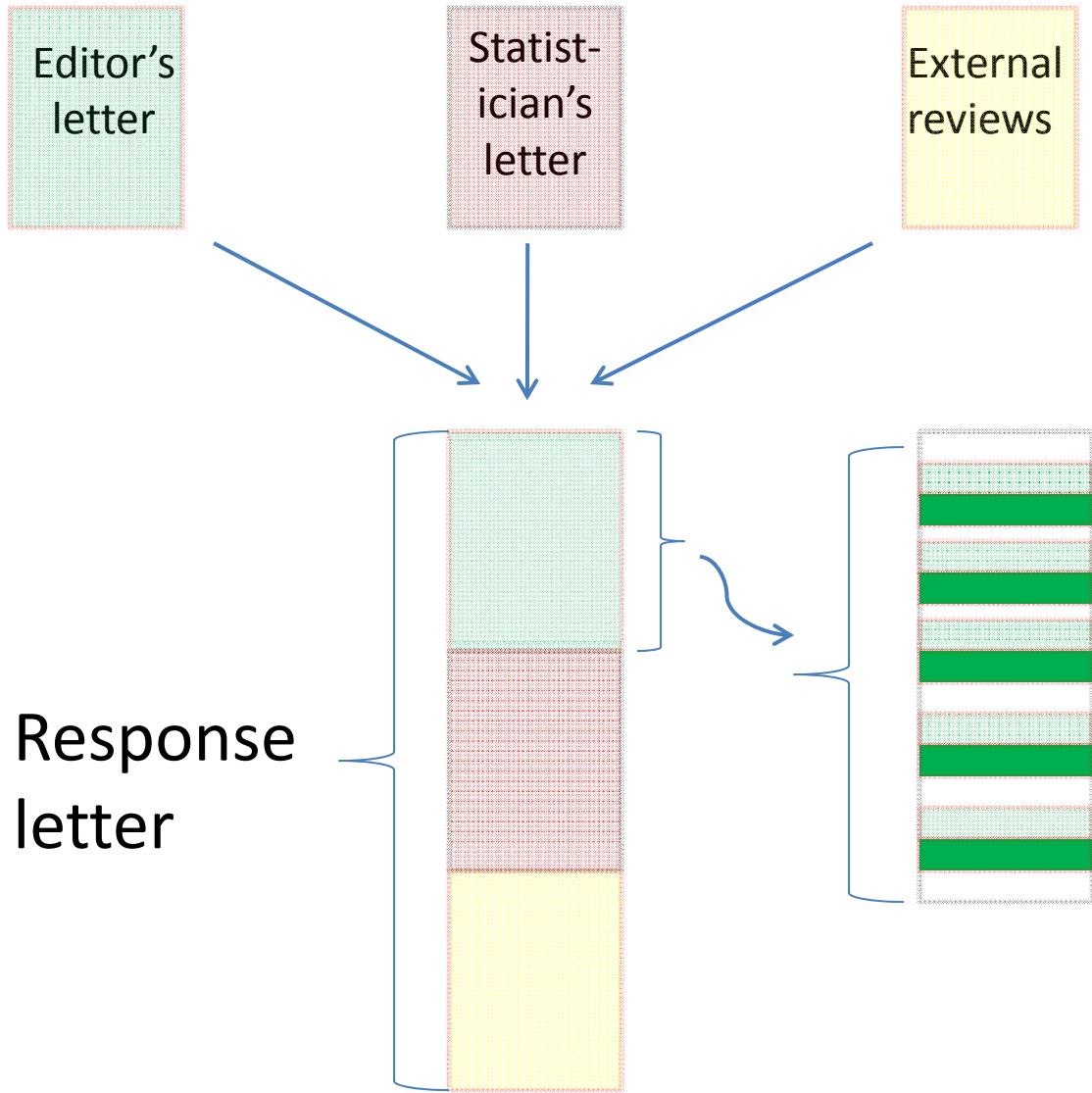
- Think of it as an invitation to engage in a brief but intense relationship with an experienced mentor.
- Most Annals articles got a lot better in the revision process
- It can take awhile...3-4 letters typical
- Editors push hard, but most authors seem grateful
- Think of it as a learning experience!

Preliminary acceptance letters

- Annals sends
 - Editor's letter
 - Statistician's letter
 - Reviewers' comments to the author
- We send them electronically
 - Quicker
 - Using the editor's letter as a template organizes the response letter

Answering the editor's letter

- Respond to each comment
 - Using the editor's letter as a template organizes the response letter
 - Merge electronic copies of each of the letters
 - Insert your response after each point



Answering the editor's letter

- Respond to each comment
 - Using the editor's letter as a template organizes the response letter
 - Merge electronic copies of each of the letters
 - Insert your response after each point
- Give detailed rationale when you decline to make a requested change
- Be polite (“we respectfully disagree....”)
- Length of response letter
 - “just as many notes as required, your majesty” – WA Mozart to Emperor Joseph II, who complained that The Abduction from the Seraglio had “...too many notes.”

Dealing with disagreements about analysis

When you disagree, remember...

- Step 1: If you didn't have a statistician, get one.
- Having lived with the analysis for months doesn't necessarily mean that you are right.
- Just because your study protocol specified a analytic method doesn't mean that the method is correct
- Do the analysis both ways and see if it makes a difference.
- Journals like to be consistent in applying their standards, so they may insist.

When you disagree, remember...

- A telephone conference often resolves a disagreement.
- You can always walk.
- So can the journal
- Threatening to walk is risky and it's probably not good science.

A few general remarks about good writing

General points about writing

- Sentence structure
 - Use active voice
 - Be positive, concrete, specific
 - Cut words that don't matter
 - No long sentences (≤ 3 lines); divide long sentences
 - Vary sentence length/complexity
- Paragraph structure
 - Topic sentences
 - Bottom line/transition sentences
 - One topic per paragraph
 - Avoid long paragraphs

General points about writing

- Article Length
 - Keep it short and to the point
 - Observe the journal's word limits
- Reducing article length
 - “any article benefits by being 20% shorter.”
 - Can usually accomplish this just by eliminating unnecessary words.

General points about writing

- Read The Elements of Style by Strunk and White
 - It's short, leaving you wanting more.
 - The prose is pithy and a model of what it preaches
 - Mostly examples (of good and bad practice)
- Keep it near your workplace for handy reference