Getting published:

How journals decide

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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

1. Triage
2. External review decision
3. Conference decision
4. Manuscript Conference
5. Hanging Conference
6. Statistics conference
Two types of acceptance

• Provisional (PR)
  – PR letter (+ statistician’s letter)
  – Revision (extensive but mild) \(\rightarrow\) 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 $\rightarrow$ 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
Editor’s letter

Statistician’s letter

External reviews

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

• 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