

# Dispatches from a Black Box

## Jonathan Schultz

For authors, the scientific editing process has always been a bit of a black box: Authors submit a manuscript, wait a few weeks, and then receive a decision. *Science Editor* and many, many others over the years have tried to shed light on the peer review and editing processes, and a good editorial team will be as transparent as possible, but it's a process that all but invites speculation.

So inspired by an article in *Publisher's Weekly*,<sup>1</sup> I have started a list of 5 things many science journal editors and staff wish authors knew about editors and the editorial process. Of course, these aren't universal truths, but I think they address common misconceptions many authors share:

1. **Editors are not publishers.** Especially on social media, I have seen a number of people write that peer review is done "for the publisher." I guess this is true in a sense because the editor works for a journal or publication that may be owned or published by a publisher, but in another sense, it's misguided. There are thousands of science journals and publications and the editors at those journals don't necessarily embody the priorities and values of the handful of publishing companies. Likewise, editorial independence allows for very little, if any, meddling from publishers in the work of editors, so while both are important components of the scientific publishing process, they are by no means in lockstep or interchangeable. Not convinced? Just ask an editor to give their thoughts about their publisher off the record...
2. **Editors typically work with a team and a staff.** Even midsize journals receive hundreds, if not thousands, of submissions a year, and while it is flattering that authors many times assume that the Editor-in-Chief personally handles every aspect of every manuscript, it's simply not possible. Behind every EIC can be dozens of deputy, associate, consulting, managing, copy, and production editors (and more) all working on various aspects of a manuscript as it moves through the review process and beyond. So while a good EIC will be aware of the process and engaged with most aspects, at least on some basic level, they can't personally respond to every author query. So authors: Please don't email EICs personally when you have a problem with your submission.
3. **Editors make decisions, not reviewers.** This feels like a classic—and it seems like something that should be common knowledge by now—but many an author still will base a letter of appeal on the assumption that the job of the editor is to impassively take an average of the reviewer feedback. Two out of three reviewers liked the article, so it has to be accepted, right? A good editor is doing much more than that: taking into account the quality of the reviews, any confidential comments to the editor, the scope and priorities of the journal, and much more. Reviewers are a vital part of the process, no doubt, but in the end, the editor is the person making the tough calls.
4. **No editor wants to reject a revision.** As an author, it's tough to have spent the time to address all of the editor and reviewer concerns raised during first review, only to have a manuscript rejected at the revision stage. However, authors should know this is never an easy decision. Editors, and reviewers too, have taken the time to review multiple versions of the manuscript, so there is no joy in not being able to take it across the finish line. Ideally, a rejection of a revision should not come as much of a shock, as a good editor will have laid the groundwork in the initial decision letter, explaining exactly what needs to be in a successful revision.
5. **Editors want to see and publish great science.** I would hope this is self-evident, but it's worth repeating that editors are editors not because they enjoy sending rejection letters, but because they want to publish great science. Authors and editors may disagree about the merits of an individual article, decision, or even word choice, but in the end, everyone from the EIC to the copyeditor wants to be part of a process that publishes groundbreaking research; that discovers that next big thing; that helps promote unheralded researchers or labs; that improves the quality of scientific literature; that, even in a little way, helps to improve the world.

This list is mostly focused on Editors-in-Chief, but I'm sure there are many other things, from a range of editor types, that journal editors and staff wish authors knew. I invite our readers to send the common misconceptions they encounter in their work to [scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org](mailto:scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org) and we'll publish the best ones we receive.

## CONTINUED

As with every issue of *Science Editor*, many of the articles in this current issue fight common misconceptions by addressing them head on, by providing new information, or by sharing tips and techniques for others.

In her Perspectives article, Brooke LaFlamme, Chief Editor of *Communications Biology*, describes her transition from bench scientist to full-time editor and provides a succinct rebuttal to the myth of the professional editor as a “failed scientist.” Since most PhD students will not find a career in academia, I hope this article will inspire others to consider science editing as an option.

In another article, Nancy Gough, a professional associate editor at *Science’s STKE* (now *Science Signaling*), gives her insight into detecting and addressing plagiarism. It’s clear that some authors are unaware of the standards regarding plagiarism—particularly self-plagiarism—which makes sense considering the standards can shift over time and between disciplines and countries. As she notes, similarity detection software works well, but many instances require the keen eye and nuanced mind of an experienced editor.

One seemingly prevalent assumption is that as the United States and many other countries become more diverse, and traditionally underrepresented minorities and women assume more leadership roles, it is simply a matter of time before the makeup of editorial boards, and scientific publishing in general, reflects these changes. However, a growing body of research is beginning to show that time is not enough, and things will stay the same if active action is not taken. In their Case Report, M. Rivera Mindt and co-authors describe the work it took at *The Clinical Neuropsychologist* to develop a strategic plan to increase the diversity and inclusion of its editorial board, ad hoc reviewers, and manuscript submissions, and the progress they have made in a relatively short period by making diversity a priority.

In the November edition of the monthly *Science Editor* Newsletter (which you can subscribe to<sup>2</sup>), I discuss the

assumption editors have that manuscripts are submitted in good faith, and that the data and images provided for every paper are what the authors say they are. As I wrote, the push for increasing transparency and availability of data is helping to make it easier for editors, reviewers, and readers to trust authors. In the article by Stall and coauthors you’ll find a great example of an initiative to create “New Author Guidelines Promoting Open and FAIR Data in the Earth, Space, and Environmental Science.”

Also in this issue, Rashid Ansumana and Annette Flanagan provide a summary of the most recent African Journal Partnership Program (AJPP) Annual Review and Planning Meeting and discuss the unique, and not so unique, challenges facing African-based journals. Likewise, Barbara Gastel provides highlights for science editors from a recent science editing workshop and a medical communication conference. Her article also includes a brief overview of the changes to the *AMA Manual of Style* that were presented in one of the sessions; one change of note, the “death dagger” has met its demise.

As always, I hope readers will find plenty of articles of interest in this issue, including a “disruptive” Gatherings of an Infovore, a “killer” book review, and more.

Finally, as a reminder, we are also always looking for new submissions or article suggestions you may have, along with any illustrations or helpful resources you want to see featured in these pages. For more details, please see our Information for Authors page<sup>3</sup> or send an email to [scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org](mailto:scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org).

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1. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20180723/77564-what-authors-and-editors-wish-they-could-say-to-oneanother.html>
2. <https://visitor.r20.constantcontact.com/d.jsp?llr=ejuawadab&p=oi&m=1102755942692&sit=7jt5wereb&f=17dccaaf-8c24-4796-b94d-75336138183d>
3. <https://www.cscienceeditor.org/for-authors/information-for-authors/>