

Introducing Ask Athena

Athena was the Greek goddess of wisdom. Ancient Greeks would visit her temple in Athens to seek answers to their most troubling issues. Modern times are no less complicated, and lacking pilgrimage to a temple as an option, we turn to other sources for advice. This may mean a friend, a therapist, or perhaps... an advice column.

Science Editor is pleased to introduce Ask Athena, an advice column where you can bring your most challenging questions. Have a problem managing staff? Ask Athena! Struggling with your own performance rut? Ask Athena! Need ideas to make your publication the best it can be? Athena can help with that too. This column will address all questions related to publishing, whether they be about internal office issues or external journal wide challenges.

So bring us your questions. Let *Science Editor* be your temple of wisdom. All questions can remain anonymous, so you need not reveal your identity for sensitive issues. Submit your questions to scienceeditor@councilscienceeditors.org. We will attempt to answer them as quickly as we can, and post answers online ahead of print so that time sensitive questions are not delayed.

Ask Athena: How can I improve publication speed at my journal?

Dear Athena,

How can my journal improve its turnaround time: from date of submission to print and online publication? Our current process takes about 12–15 months. Once a manuscript has been provisionally accepted following peer review, a scientific editor will substantively edit the manuscript and review with the author, a copy editor will review and layout the manuscript in Word, the same scientific editor will re-review the manuscript, a second copy editor will review and layout the manuscript in galley form (PDF), the same scientific editor will re-review again, and then the day before the manuscript is sent to the printer, the editor-in-chief will review. A major complaint from authors is the long turn-around-time. This is the premier journal for the profession, is managed in-house by an association, and is a benefit to all members (>95,000) of the association. Articles are not online ahead of print.

—Need for Speed

Answers to Ask Athena questions are a group effort by members of the CSE Education Committee.



Dear Need,

The problem of slow turnaround time is one that many journals struggle with. Many authors say they want to receive decisions on their manuscripts faster, while many reviewers feel they need more time to submit their reviews. Balancing the interests of those two groups is important, but also a significant challenge.

There may be several places within your process that you could consider changes to improve your turnaround time. Common bottlenecks in the peer-review process include an editor's first look at a paper, and the time it takes to make a decision once the reviews are complete.

My first recommendation is to be clear with the editors regarding expectations. How quickly do you expect them to attend to a paper after it has been assigned to them? How quickly are they expected to make a decision once the reviews are complete? Many journals ask their editors to attend to these tasks within 48 hours.

Once you have clearly established expectations, report on them. Many journals send the editors a regular report on their turnaround times, so they can see exactly how timely they are and how they compare to the agreed standards. Some journals even show how the individual editor compares to the other editors. A little peer pressure can go a long way. No one wants to be the slowest editor, and being the fastest definitely comes with bragging rights!

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The editor-in-chief needs to make sure editors understand the priority of being timely.

Make sure that these mandates on timeliness are coming from the editor-in-chief, and not just staff. The editor-in-chief needs to make sure editors understand the priority of being timely.

If there are delays early on in the peer-review process, the difficulty may be in identifying reviewers. Luckily, there are options to help the editors with this task. If you are using one of the major manuscript processing systems, work with your account manager to see what kind of reviewer discovery programs are available to you. They may even be fully integrated with your manuscript system already.

Next, don't be afraid to nag. Again, let your manuscript system work for you, and make sure you are utilizing all the available automatic reminders to editors. Are you reminding editors to suggest reviewers? Reminding them to suggest additional reviewers when needed? Reminding them to make a decision on a paper?

Another common place papers get delayed unnecessarily is when authors submit a revised paper, and the editor sends it back to the original reviewers. Often this is necessary if the authors have made extensive changes. In those cases, the editors will want input from the reviewers a second time. However, if the requested changes were minor, and the authors have addressed them all satisfactorily, encourage editors to make a decision on the paper without sending it back to the external reviewers.

As for your postacceptance processes, it sounds like you may have some redundant steps in place. I count 4 people touching this manuscript during the editing process, over the course of 9 different steps, so make sure that each person and each step is adding value, and enough value that it is worth taking the time for it.

Also, consider how you might consolidate those steps. For example, could the first editor after acceptance take care of the substantive editing, copyediting, and layout, so that the author next sees the paper in galley form? That would allow the author a final look at the paper before publication to ensure accuracy. Also, it may be better to move any substantive editing to preacceptance, so that the paper is in its final form before copy editing begins.

And finally, consider moving to a publish-ahead-of-print model. That can reduce the time to publication significantly and has become standard in many fields. There are many things to consider when switching to a publish-ahead-of-print model, but the benefit in terms of time to publication means a lot of time saved and most importantly, happier authors.

Ask Athena: Is it ever okay to edit reviewer comments?

Dear Athena,

Is it okay for me as an editor that manages the peer-review process to remove comments regarding how well the manuscript is written? For example, reviewers will first write that the manuscript is "well-written" when it is not. Examples include nonnative English speakers using incorrect grammar or authors who ramble, or are repetitive, etc. It seems like reviewers write this before providing any criticism, as a way to soften the criticism. Is it ever appropriate for an editor to remove content from a reviewer's comments to the authors?

—Hesitant Editor

Dear Hesitant,

There are two questions at play here, and I will answer them both in turn. The first question is whether it is ever okay for journals to edit reviewer comments. The second is whether this particular use case is acceptable.

All reviewer comments should at least be given a light copyedit to make sure grammar and syntax are correct before being sent to the author. The difficult part is how much control journals should exert over the actual content of the review.

Kent Anderson wrote about this recently in his e-mail newsletter *The Geyser*.¹ He said, "Many journals [will] clean up typos, remove ad hominem attacks, tone down vitriol, smooth out bad syntax, or remove formatting problems. These types of edits are harmless and helpful, and they're typically done quickly by experienced editorial staff."

Some comments can, and probably should be, removed. One example would be comments regarding the acceptability of a paper. Reviewers should not say, "This paper should be published in this journal once some changes are made." That is the purview of the journal, and it could also leave the journal open to rebuttals if the paper is rejected. For that reason, I feel it is appropriate to remove comments regarding acceptability, especially if the journal has asked reviewers not to comment on it. Any comments regarding acceptability should be kept to the confidential comments to the editors.

In addition, journals should be careful regarding the tone of the language used in reviews. Most reviewers use language that is helpful and collaborative. They are reviewing at least in part because they have an interest in helping authors improve their papers, and the language and tone of the review should reflect that. But, in cases where reviewers may not be at their best, and their language may be unnecessarily negative, I believe it is okay for journals to either remove the comments completely (if needed) or rephrase them in a more positive

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way. As much as possible, the reviewers' intent should be preserved even if the wording is different. Journals should make the smallest changes possible so that the reviewers' intention remains intact.

Other items journals should look for in reviews include possible identifying information. If your journal uses a single-anonymous system in which the identity of the reviewers is unknown to the authors, there should not be any information in the review which might inadvertently indicate the identity of the reviewer. Those comments should be rephrased or removed if needed.

Finally, the content of a review should be in keeping with the recommendation of the reviewer. A reviewer who is recommending rejection but includes only positive comments to the authors could cause some real confusion for those authors.

And that brings us back to your original question. Is it okay for the reviewers to say the paper is well written if it is not? And should the journal remove that comment before it goes to the authors?

The answer to the first question is probably not. That seems a little disingenuous. Unfortunately, you can't stop them from saying it, even if you advise against it.

If the reviewer has said a paper is well-written when it is not, your next steps may depend on what else the reviewer has to say to the authors.

The answer to the second is perhaps not to remove it, but ensure it fits into the larger picture of the review

overall. If the reviewer has said a paper is well-written when it is not, your next steps may depend on what else the reviewer has to say to the authors. If there are additional comments regarding grammar and syntax, the journal could safely remove the "well-written" comment and change that to say the paper would benefit from language editing for clarity. In this case, the meaning is preserved, but while the first way is negative, the other is positive, and more importantly, actionable. If the reviewer says the paper is well-written but then goes on to say that it focuses on the wrong things or is lacking important information, then the tone and content of the review should reflect that, including comments about what specific changes could be made to improve the paper. Assuming that information is included, it is safe to remove the comment about the article being well written, because that idea is not relevant to the overall message of the feedback and may ultimately end up being somewhat confusing for the authors.

Consider adding some brief instructions for reviewers that ask them to focus largely on the content of the paper, and not the quality of the writing, unless they are offering the suggestion in a way that is actionable for the authors (see above).

Ultimately, it is up to the discretion of editorial staff to determine when a reviewer's comments should be removed or edited, but hopefully this advice will help you better recognize comments the authors do not need to see.

Reference and Link

1. <https://thegeyser.substack.com/p/cope-oversteps-stumbles>