

Frustration With the Submission Process/System: Results From Survey Data

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Abstract

With the constant technical upgrades and changing policies and practices for journal article submission platforms, it is no wonder that authors, editors, and reviewers are all frustrated. Editorial staff need to assess all aspects of these systems to determine how to help alleviate the stress and streamline the process while maintaining the integrity of scholarly publishing. Editorial staff must step back and view the editorial process through the eyes of the authors, editors, and reviewers to fully understand their frustration. For this study, authors, reviewers, editors, and publishing professionals were surveyed to determine their frustrations with current systems and processes, and survey data were analyzed to make recommendations for mitigating user frustration in the submission process.

Introduction

Authors want to publish their research in a respectable journal without having to spend hours of their time in the submission process. Trying to figure out all the different formatting rules and submission guidelines, in addition to figuring out how to operate within the platform, takes time. One author described the submission process steps in a piece written in *The Scholarly Kitchen* as follows, "Negotiate a misleading and counterintuitive third-party platform, read, and try to absorb several pages of arcane (and sometimes self-contradictory) format guidelines, categorize my article according to a rubric that did not make sense and finally, follow an uploading process that left me, at several points, unsure of whether I would have the opportunity to include essential figures."¹ Why is it so difficult to submit? Are the instructions unclear, hard to find, or simply too long? In addition, reviewers, and editors

express frustration with inputting comments and making decisions in the submission system. There are many culprits, and publishers should be working to streamline the process. To find some answers, I surveyed 7 publishing professionals who work on various article submission platforms.

Study Design

To determine what the main problems are for authors, editors, and reviewers, I surveyed 7 publishing associates who work directly with all aspects of the submission process using a variety of submission systems. These 7 publishing associates work within the following 4 publishing companies that cover a wide range of subject matter: American Society of Clinical Oncology (company 1), American Urological Association (company 2), American Society for Microbiology (company 3), and American Society of Civil Engineers (company 4). They provided their insight on what frustrates authors in the submission process, along with concerns or difficulties editors and reviewers have during the review process. I also reached out to 34 chief editors at American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) to obtain their perspective on article processing, not just as a chief editor, but also as an author who submits to a variety of publishers. The findings are discussed in this article and the raw, anonymized survey results are in the appendix.

Authors

Some of the results that I gathered from the 4 organizations pertaining to authors fall into just a few categories, with the time it takes to submit an article being the number one complaint. This includes, but is not limited to, multiple steps that must be completed before the article can be submitted, such as entering individual author information, answering a multitude of questions, and then re-answering the same questions at revision and adhering to limits on word count, references, figures, and tables. The time complaint is not just related to the submission of the article, but also to the wait time on a decision. Regarding time-to-decision, a company 2 associate stated, "We aim to be quick, but this can be hard for authors, particularly if they are rejected and

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Table 1. Sources of author frustration.

	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3	Company 4
Wait time between submission and decision	X	X	X	X
Revision submission process to include answering multiple questions, uploading different file types	X	X	X	X
Formatting files; which can only be in certain formats, word counts, figure, and table sizes			X	X

must resubmit somewhere else.” The next most-common complaint concerned technical issues. This included not being able to log into the submission system and the system timing out or being slow when moving from one step to the next. Publishers’ survey responses listing common author frustrations are included in Table 1.

Reviewers/Editors

It is not only the authors who have dislikes and heartache when working in submission systems. Editors and reviewers have their own set of frustrations provided by the publishing associates (Table 2). Two frustrations that top the list and go together are finding reviewers and reviewer overload. It often takes many days or weeks to find reviewers on the thousands of papers in review each year, so editors tend to turn to the same reviewers

each time because they know the reviewers will complete an honest, in-depth, and fair review. But this practice can lead quickly to reviewer burnout. As company 1 stated, the goal is, “finding enough reviewers to review a given manuscript without overtaxing the same pool of reliable experts.”

Reviewers also deal with frustration during the review process. Having to decline reviews due to multiple invitations and then fitting in the time to complete in-depth reviews while staying committed to their other responsibilities is a significant challenge. Their available time is taxed further when there are technical issues with logging in or not being able to find the needed files to complete the review successfully. Also, it certainly does not reduce the reviewers’ stress when authors inquire regarding the review status week in and week out.

Table 2. Common editor and reviewer complaints.

Publishing Role	Frustration	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3	Company 4
Editors/ Associate Editor	Finding multiple reviewers so as not overload a small percentage with papers	X	X	X	X
	Multiple step processing when working in the system: assign submission, invite reviewers, make decision; technical issues	X			X
	Selecting Associate Editor with the correct expertise		X		
Reviewers	Finding the time to complete several reviews	X	X	X	X
	Fatigued/overworked	X			
	Technical issues when submitting the comments/attachments; not being able to log in			X	X

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Chief Editor

Continuing with the survey, I reached out to chief editors to get their opinion on using submission systems both as editors and authors. The feedback I received correlates with the responses from professionals working in the field of publishing. The top 4 complaints on the list are as follows: 1) prescreening process of submission, 2) reviewer databases, 3) lag time, and 4) formatting issues. In most cases, all portions of the full review process are completed by volunteers. One exception is when a chief editor or other type of editor is paid for a portion of their time. With the majority editors and their teams being volunteers, publishers should be looking at ways to decrease the stressors without decreasing the value of the research materials to readers.

Discussion

Reducing Stressors in the Submission Process

Based on the survey results, I recommend the following to reduce the stress presented by the authors, editors, and reviewers. This begins with the submission process starting with the authors submitting an article to the journal that best suits the field of study. To reduce stress, publishers need to provide clear, concise instructions for the authors from start to finish, but in a way that authors do not have to search hundreds of pages to find the formatting protocols. Once submitted, the review process, which can be lengthy and require hours of a volunteer's time, begins. The companies surveyed for this section vary in scholarly publishing fields, and so do their types of review and processing; however, all follow the same general process of authors submitting their papers, editors assigning reviewers, and reviewers making recommendations for the editor.

The publishers surveyed were followed up with how they are reducing stressors for authors, editors, and reviewers. These steps are being taken by the publishers, and whereas only a small fraction of how frustrations in the submission process can be reduced, these actions can certainly improve the process.

ASCE is working to reduce the stress for authors by adding quick links to the author submission page. This allows authors to quickly find the submission information or instruction. On the author questionnaire, ASCE now provides drop down lists for data availability questions so

that the authors can select an answer instead of having to complete a free text field, which can become wordy. In addition, ASCE has partnered with a language service that allows authors to pay for English language assistance.

The American Urological Association is working on updating their corresponding author questionnaire to reduce the amount of time it takes an author to complete it. Condensing the questionnaire will decrease the time coauthors take in completing the questionnaire later in the process; additionally, the corresponding author only needs to confirm information at the revision stage.

The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) provides EZSubmit: a "format-free" initial submission. ASCO has also partnered with outside companies to assist authors with the submission process. To reduce the time associate editors must spend searching for reviewers, they have incorporated the Publons/Web of Science Reviewer locator. ASCO provides 2 expedited review processes called Rapid Review and Fast Track resubmission programs: more information about these two programs is available on the ASCO website.²

Conclusion

There are many avenues publishers can take to help reduce workloads, submission time, and reviewer frustration. But to do this, they first must understand what those issues are and how the issues affect each aspect of the process. Gathering regular feedback from parties who work with the system on all fronts allows publishers to keep current with problems and frustrations. Incorporating new technologies, like artificial intelligence, can both shorten the time frame to complete a task and enhance capabilities that already exist. Each publisher has different processes and systems in place, so one solution will not fit all; however, publishers can collaborate to find ways to reduce stress and save time.

References and Links

1. Anderson R. (June 15, 2015) The manuscript submission mess: brief notes from a grumpy author. [accessed September 13, 2022]. The Scholarly Kitchen. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2015/06/15/the-manuscript-submission-mess-brief-notes-from-a-grumpy-author/>.
2. <https://ascopubs.org/jco/authors/author-center>.

The Appendix is available for download here: <https://www.csescienceeditor.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Appendix.pdf>