



## COMMENTARY

### Dear Author—Advice from a Retiring Editor

Jonathan M. Samet

This commentary, detailing the handling of a manuscript by the editor and guiding authors on preparing manuscripts and responding to reviews, provides parting advice to authors from a retiring editor. A close reading of this commentary will give some insight into the editorial process at the *American Journal of Epidemiology* through the observations of one of its editors. *Am J Epidemiol* 1999;150:433–6.

manuscripts; peer review, research; periodicals; publications; publishing; writing

After two 3-year terms and a few extra years, I have been retired as an editor of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. With time now on my hands and no official accountability, I wanted to write to the many authors whose manuscripts I have handled, those whose manuscripts I did not handle, and those still to come whose manuscripts other editors will handle. It is my hope that a close reading of this commentary will give new and needed insights into the editorial process at the *American Journal of Epidemiology* and the thinking of one of its editors. I am going to answer candidly and even honestly all of those questions that authors have been asking about what happens to manuscripts when they are sent to Baltimore.

#### What does an editor do?

Imagine responding to a job advertisement that reads:

Please add to your already impossibly busy professional life by taking on the editorial processing of 100 manuscripts per year. Must be prepared to cajole reviewers, respond to authors (sometimes hostile), and make difficult (sometimes impossible) decisions. Pay will not cover even one college course credit, and you will volunteer the time of your office staff.

Received for publication March 22, 1999, and accepted for publication April 8, 1999.

From the Department of Epidemiology, School of Hygiene and Public Health, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

This is my translation of the initial contact with Moyses Szklo when he approached me about becoming an editor of the *Journal*. I had placed myself into this seemingly enviable position by being a “good reviewer,” one who compulsively and quickly sent back lengthy comments (reader hint: If you do not ever want to be an editor, then be a “bad reviewer”). Of course, once asked, I immediately said, “Yes.”

What *does* an editor do? With my load of around 100 manuscripts per year, a new manuscript arrives about twice a week on average. Looking for reviewers, I quickly scan the newly arrived manuscript and its bibliography. Selection requires thought as I search for the balance of expertise and viewpoint needed. The *Journal* asks for 4–6 reviewers, and sometimes I stretch for the right reviewers. I try not to overassign and burn out my stable of “good reviewers.” This step is usually not too trying except for the rare manuscript on some orphan topic; then I scan the bibliography again or even ask for advice from the authors.

With reviewers assigned, the manuscript goes into a file drawer, sometimes coming out again prematurely if reviewers refuse (reader hint: Say, “yes,” to requests for review). This is the main reason for delay in manuscript processing. Within several months, the reviews arrive, or only one review may arrive with a query from the *Journal* office as to whether a second is needed. This is now the demanding point, as a decision is needed. Typically, I read the full manuscript, focusing on Materials and Methods and Results; after all, if the

data are not solid, the introduction and Discussion matter little. In general, I classify manuscripts into three groups: 1) excellent-quality work that makes a contribution, 2) satisfactory-quality work that may make a contribution, and 3) poor-quality work that makes no contribution. Categories 1 and 3 are dealt with quickly, with the majority of manuscripts in category 2.

This group of manuscripts takes time and reflection before a decision can be made. I consider the reviewers' comments, which address the manuscript in hand and to an extent its larger contribution. I see the editor as a gatekeeper, judging the quality of the manuscript and assessing its contribution to the literature. Replication is needed in epidemiologic research, but how much? Does the report contain a new element to a previously covered theme? Will rewriting and some further analyses be sufficient? Can good data be rescued from a bad manuscript? Rarely, the decision to be made is initially unclear and a third review, as a tiebreaker, may be helpful. With experience, I learned to make these decisions more quickly and comfortably. Nevertheless, a truly difficult decision may need several readings of the manuscript, a long airplane flight, or a reminder from the *Journal* office to get on with it.

For each manuscript, I write a letter giving my decision and its basis. I add my own comments and give guidance on responding to the reviewers' comments. I try to be directive but not proscriptive. I eschew form letters, always preparing a specific response. Typically, I see a manuscript at least once more, to judge that comments have been addressed and revisions satisfactorily made. Usually a decision can now be made for final acceptance. Particularly noteworthy, informative, or controversial manuscripts may warrant soliciting an invited commentary.

For the letters of rejection, some suggestions may be made about improvement to the manuscript but always with the caveat, "should you choose to revise for another journal" (reader hint: This closing phrase should be interpreted literally).

### What should an author do?

Yes, authors can help (and hurt) the possibility of acceptance. Here are some key "dos" and "don'ts" for preparing a manuscript for submission:

#### Do

- Review the manuscript compulsively before sending it to the *Journal*; make sure that it fits *Journal* specifications and that there are no embarrassing problems—forgotten tables or figures, for example.
- Run a spell-checking program; it takes minutes and avoids embarrassing sloppiness.

- Describe the study population in at least one table.
- Write an informative, but not grandiose, cover letter.
- It may be useful to suggest reviewers, but it is distracting to indicate persons who should not review, unless truly warranted.

#### Don't

- Write a lengthy introduction that compulsively reviews all studies previously published. For example, a remembered manuscript cited 100 references by the end of the introduction.
- Repetitively describe results in the text that are already in tables and figures.
- Offer tables that may consume an entire issue of the *Journal* through their length.
- Provide only model results without at least a peek at the data.
- Repeat findings in the Discussion. Use the Discussion to integrate new findings, to draw out implications, and to address limitations.

### Reading and responding to the reviewers' comments and the editor's letter

Months have passed and you receive an envelope from the *Journal* office. It contains a letter from the editor and at least one set of comments from a reviewer (the *Journal* infrequently rejects without any review). The possibilities are three: acceptance (generally with further revisions), a request for revisions without a firm acceptance, or rejection. A rare fourth possibility is outright acceptance of the manuscript as submitted. For authors whose manuscript is rejected, I recommend accepting the bad news and revising for another journal, unless you are certain that an incorrect decision has been made. As an editor, I have not welcomed resubmitted, already rejected manuscripts that are returned with a combative letter, at best forgiving my stupidity in rejecting the paper. Editors are not vengeful, but . . .

Given the opportunity to revise, then start with a careful read of the reviewers' comments and the editor's letter. Of course, reviewers' styles vary, ranging from sincere and helpful to arrogant and biting. The editor should expurgate such truly damning and inciting comments as "more poorly analyzed data from a third-rate group" or "a truly egregious exercise in data-dredging." Put emotions aside, if possible, when reading the comments, even though the analogy might be made that reviewers' comments are akin to teachers' remarks about your children.

Most reviews do offer valuable comments, and the review should be read to find those kernels. The letter

from the editor should be a guide for interpreting the comments, which may provide conflicting suggestions. I try to tell authors which comments need response and how to deal with discordant advice from the two reviewers (e.g., more adjustment and less adjustment). I may also add my own comments, particularly if I see issues unaddressed by the reviewers.

My letters often contain more general comments, often related to style. Generally, the remarks are polite: “This manuscript is in need of general editorial revisions” (translation = this manuscript is badly written; rewrite or else), or “Editorial tightening and reduction in length are needed” (about the same translation but shorten as well). There may be weightier guidance: “The Discussion fails to address limitations” (translation not needed), or “You failed to cite relevant studies by others” (translation not needed).

Time passes and the revised manuscript is completed; writing the letter for resubmission deserves attention. A “good” letter might begin by politely acknowledging the reviewers’ “helpful” or “thoughtful” comments. The core should be a point-by-point response to all of the reviewers’ comments *and* to those from the editor. You may want to number the reviewers and their comments for organizing the letter (e.g., “reviewer 1, comment 2”). Don’t overlook the editor’s suggestions; if I offer my own additional comments, then I consider a response to be mandatory.

The point-by-point responses should address the concerns directly, offering a description of the changes made or an explanation as to why the comment was set aside. There should be reasoned disagreement and not just disagreement. For example, an unsatisfactory response to the comment, “Uncontrolled confounding may explain the association,” would be, “We disagree”; a satisfactory response might be, “The association persisted with inclusion of other potential confounding factors in the model. The additional models are included in table 2.”

Generally, I can make a final decision with the revised manuscript and the response in hand. I read the letter and check to make sure that the key points have been addressed. Rarely do I send the manuscript for further review, generally by the original reviewers. At this point, I try to make a final decision, but poorly edited manuscripts may be returned without acceptance as a veiled threat (“Your manuscript is improved but ...”). I infrequently reject manuscripts for which revisions have been requested. One such manuscript resulted in an angry phone call telling me that I occasioned the “worst event” of the lead author’s career.

If your manuscript is accepted, there is still work to be done as the *Journal’s* technical editors will inevitably find problems to fix.

## A few last comments

Here is just a little more advice on some things to avoid to keep the editor on your side:

- Avoid priority comments—almost no study is “the first”; the priority claim is more likely to indicate failure to review the literature. This problem has only been made worse by a recent trend of reviewing only the most recent electronically accessible papers. Of course, molecular biology has brought new opportunities for real priority claims, but avoid temptation. How many times should the editor be subjected to comments such as, “This is the first study to assess metabolic genotype as a risk factor for ...”?
- Try not to call the editor directly, unless invited. Inquiries should be made to and through the *Journal* office. I do not like to receive calls, particularly the hostile ones, about manuscripts without a prior letter or e-mail. There are too many authors and too many manuscripts.
- Also, try not to approach the editor personally at the annual meeting of the Society for Epidemiologic Research (or elsewhere) with questions, comments, or rejoinders about a particular manuscript. When so approached, I typically find that my brain cannot retrieve the details of the manuscript from the many that I am handling.
- Watch that last paragraph. This is where authors often lose control, offering sometimes naive policy recommendations or generic calls for more research (possibly in support of their next grant). Manuscripts do need an ending but go out with restraint.

## Last, last comments

Being an editor *is* rewarding. For nearly 10 years, I have been privileged to have a continually refreshed picture of contemporary epidemiologic research. To an extent, I have been able to shape the literature in some areas of research and to provide guidance to junior (and even some senior) researchers. I have kept up with the literature through the brute force needed to read hundreds of manuscripts. My last advice: When Moyses Szklo calls, say, “Yes.”

*Editorial note: This commentary describes the valuable views of an esteemed ex-editor of the American Journal of Epidemiology, resulting from his own lengthy involvement as editorial board member. The issues that he discusses in the commentary are clearly relevant to all prospective authors and editors. However, the*

*Journal does not have a uniform policy pertaining to how to handle the kinds of problems aptly discussed by the author. Thus, it should not be assumed that all of our editors will handle problems in the same way. For example, both the editor-in-chief and the editor-in-chief emeritus feel that, if authors believe that there has been a mistake regarding a negative outcome of the review*

*process, they should be encouraged, not discouraged, to ask for editorial reconsideration. As usual, we would like to encourage the readers of the Journal to submit letters to the editor describing their views about this manuscript or other manuscripts that we publish.*

The Editors-in-Chief