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# Editor Role: Manuscript Decisions Early On

## What Does an Editor Actually Do: Decisions about Manuscripts at the Point of Submission

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**NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2018, 28(3), 3**

You are writing a scholarly article, alone or with co-authors. Perhaps one of your faculty was impressed with your academic work and suggested that you pursue publication. Maybe your employer has a promotion ladder in place that encourages publication. Some authors write about once-in-a-lifetime experiences that occur in their practice, knowing that many readers may never encounter a scenario so rare. There are many good reasons to pursue scholarly publication as a nurse. But what happens to your submission once you hit that submit button and it is in the hands of the journal editor?

From another perspective, you are beginning a new position as a journal editor. Very quickly a number of manuscripts will cross your desk, and this time at least part of the decision rests with your expertise. Likely you have authored and published multiple articles by this point. You have well-honed writing and revision skills. But now, the call is yours. You receive a school paper as written. The next submission is well-written, but did the author even check what type of articles are published in this journal? This article is not a good fit, and you wonder whether or not you, as editor of a refereed journal, are obligated to send every submission for peer review. What are your options? What are your responsibilities?

Both authors and editors benefit from a clear understanding about how decisions are made throughout the publication process. For example, if an article is well-written, but not a good fit, the sooner that the editor communicates that to the author(s), the sooner this article may become published in a more appropriate venue. A poorly written manuscript may have important content, and great potential with additional work. In this article I will briefly highlight a few existing competencies for editors that apply to early editorial decisions, review early considerations and options in the process, and offer some common practices from experienced editors.

## **EXISTING COMPETENCIES**

Mait (2013) noted that, “An editor is part of the review process as a matter of procedure” (p. ED8). Most of the time, the editor is the first person to evaluate a submission, and is thus the first peer reviewer. Blind peer review is the gold standard for scholarly journals, but the editor has additional responsibilities beyond those of a peer reviewer. Peer reviewers offer help by providing content or methodological expertise about a given topic, as the editor cannot know everything. The editor needs to determine specific qualifications of the author(s)

that exclude the possibility of blind review, such as credentials, practice area, or academic and clinical affiliations.

Challenges such as unethical authorship and publishing practices are increasing (Oermann et al., 2018), as is the opportunity to disseminate scholarly work much more quickly in a fully or prepublication online format. Editorial groups are working to determine and formalize appropriate competencies for journal editors. While an extended discussion of editorial competencies is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that these competencies are evolving and now found in the literature. Galipeau et al. (2016) conducted a scoping review of competencies appropriate for editors of biomedical journals. This detailed review of journals ( $n = 225$ ) and editorial groups such as the Council on Publication Ethics (COPE) resulted in 203 unique statements describing areas where journal editors should be competent. These were divided into actions dealing with authors, peer reviewers, journal publishing, journal promotion, editing, ethics and integrity, qualities and characteristics of editors, and other.

Examples of competency related statements appropriate to early decisions for manuscripts included accountability and fairness to authors; constructive criticism; mentorship and education of authors to produce best work; clear communication of publication decisions; critical evaluation of manuscripts; active encouragement for revisions; and proficiency related to publication ethics. Editors are expected to evaluate submissions for quality, clinical relevance, journal suitability, and meaningful content (Galipeau et al., 2016; Moher et al., 2017). They should be able to form preliminary opinions about manuscripts and make both fast and appropriate decisions using excellent judgment, even with difficult decisions. Helpful characteristics to this end included strong interpersonal skills and decisiveness (Galipeau et al., 2016). Galipeau and colleagues (2017) further investigated editors' perceptions, training needs, and competency related

statements in preparation for development of core competencies. The 148 study participants reached at least 90% consensus for 23 competency related statements, further supporting their earlier work. Three of these statements are particularly applicable to early decision-making and included accountability to authors to include fairness, courtesy, and objectivity and the ability to assess the quality and suitability of submissions (Galipeau et al., 2017).

## **EARLY CONSIDERATIONS**

With these select competencies in mind, I will briefly describe early considerations in the decision-making process for a journal submission. The first is the timeline process. It is important for editors to confirm receipt of the submission. Sometimes this takes the form of an electronically generated confirmation, other times a personal email. If you are an author and have not received confirmation of your submission within a week, it is reasonable to email the editor to query whether or not your work has been received. Glitches do happen. When I respond to offer this information, I typically include the tentative timeline to the next decision. The amount of submissions can vary at any given point and impact my timeline. For example, faculty authors may use the summer to write extensively, and I receive a larger than usual number of submissions in late summer and early fall.

Another consideration is the type of submission. If the journal includes both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed features, you can likely expect submissions that will undergo peer review to require a longer turnaround time. If the journal accepts opinion pieces (e.g., op-ed or letters to the editor) often the editor can determine interest and acceptance shortly after submission, without peer review. The typical disposition of peer-reviewed manuscripts is immediate rejection without peer review; immediate request for revisions and potential resubmission and possible peer review; or assignment of the manuscript to journal peer reviewers.

## COMMON PRACTICES

New editors sometimes struggle to determine an appropriate disposition for submissions. Even seasoned editors can wonder about the best choice at hand. Authors may be curious about why a submission was immediately rejected or conversely, why the process is taking so long. Editors who are members of the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE), a collective group of editors with many years of experience and others just beginning their roles, often discuss editorial quandaries on a mailing list. Recently in response to a member query, we discussed the process of rejecting a submission without review. This led to a lively dialogue about the various choices for disposition of a new submission. The section will consider the dispositions noted above and describe what the editors who responded actually do in their practices.

### *Immediate Rejection Without Peer Review*

One reason to reject a manuscript without peer review is to protect journal resources. The time of the editor and peer reviewers is valuable and should be directed toward manuscripts with a reasonable chance of publication. Manuscripts that are not a good fit with the journal mission or target audience rarely make it past the initial submission review by the editor. Sometimes the author(s) did not perform due diligence to select an appropriate journal. An example of this is an article with a good topic that is written as an opinion piece, submitted to a scholarly journal with an expectation of evidence-based discussion. There may be an accepted manuscript in the pipeline that is too similar in content and the timing is just unfortunate. Manuscripts may have flaws that cannot be fixed. Examples of these flaws are serious methodological limitations to research; ethical concerns such as no evidence of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval; or plagiarized content. In general, these rejections are made with no suggestions for revision and no invitation to resubmit the manuscript.

## ***Immediate Request for Revision Without Peer Review/Resubmission for Possible Review***

Many times the editor recognizes potential in a given submission, and suggests revisions that may positively impact the feedback from peer reviewers. This is an article with very good content, and fixable flaws, such as lack of clarity, poor grammar and syntax, inappropriate formatting or length, inadvertent breaches of confidentiality, or missing parts. The editor typically responds with feedback and an invitation to revise and resubmit for possible subsequent peer review.

Often these submissions are promptly returned with a brief recommendation to consult journal guidelines and make appropriate revisions. Some journals have electronic submission systems with preset criteria that will automatically reject manuscripts missing an abstract or above/below page requirements. Editors may recommend that authors who speak English as a second language seek editorial assistance from a native speaker. If a submission seems an exceptionally good fit, the editor may offer more detailed recommendations to improve clarity or develop content prior to evaluation by peer reviewers.

## ***Assignment to Peer Reviewers***

Assignment of a submission is the early outcome that every author awaits! Barring the concerns discussed above, submissions typically are sent to peer review for further evaluation and a final decision regarding acceptance. However, sometimes editors receive submissions that do not easily fit into the categories of immediate rejection or revise and resubmit. Many journals have more than one editor or an editorial team. For these cases, several INANE discussion participants noted that if they were uncertain of the decision, especially an immediate rejection, they often ask another editor for a second opinion or place the article on the team editorial

review agenda. Most editors want to work with authors, so articles with interesting content and no fatal flaws may receive this in-house, second-level screening.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR AUTHORS AND EDITORS**

In sum, there are steps that both authors and editors can take to impact early decisions in the submission process. Authors need to carefully review available information, preferably prior to writing a manuscript. This includes the mission and target audience for a given journal; any call for articles on a certain topic; and review of recent publications to determine typical style of successfully published articles and potential duplication of content. If you are submitting a research report, use established, familiar headings. A brief query to the editor may also be helpful to determine suitability of content. It is especially important to carefully read the author guidelines. One editor who receives a very high volume of submissions estimated that approximately half are rejected immediately, and half of those because they did not adhere to author guidelines. Simply put, a journal that receives many submissions will choose to invest time in the highest quality manuscripts. Finally, if offered the chance to revise and resubmit, make sure you complete this opportunity in a timely fashion.

As they make early decisions in the publication process, editors can take steps to support authors. Recommendations noted in the mailing list discussion included providing a timely response to allow authors to pursue submission elsewhere and offering a brief rationale for the rejection if at all possible, much as you might with a rejection decision after peer review. One editor suggested an open mind to the creativity of authors, especially in the context of research reports, to include recommendations for revision and resubmission in a slightly different format. Preliminary research may not warrant a full article, but might instead be structured as description of a beginning level project that emphasizes outcomes and value to nursing or perhaps a manuscript that focuses on a given problem with the early

research briefly included as an exemplar within the larger article. If an article offers good content and new insights, but needs work, it may be appropriate to send to peer review, selecting reviewers known for clear recommendations for improvement.

Review of these recent discussions provided clear evidence that most editors give careful thought to early decisions for every manuscript. The goal of most authors and editors is to reach as many readers as possible by publishing the best final product in the most appropriate journal. A clear understanding by all about what happens in the process, or what the editor actually does with an article, can inform and support that worthy goal.

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2018 28 3 3 Owens

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