Best Practices for the Editorial Office

A Training Resource of the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors and Aries Systems
How to improve the quality of reviews: Matching manuscripts and reviewers

In this article you will learn about:
• The importance of an effective reviewer-selection process
• Implementing a search-term process for selecting reviewers
• Assessing your process to ensure efficiency

Peer-reviewed journals rely on their reviewers to assess the quality of submitted manuscripts, using the reviewers’ expertise to determine if the manuscript will contribute something substantive to the existing literature of the field or, conversely, if the manuscript lacks originality, displays weak methodology or, in rare cases, shows evidence of research or publication misconduct.

Editors place a substantial portion of responsibility for the quality of their journals in these (usually) volunteers’ hands, asking them to help identify the most appropriate submissions for publication. The editorial office can facilitate better reviews by evaluating and streamlining the peer-review process, which includes carefully considering how manuscripts are matched with reviewers.

“Reviewer selection is one of the most important aspects of the peer-review process, arguably the most critical” (Hames, 2007).

To start, journals need reviewers with a range of specialties. Journal editors should be well connected in their fields and able to identify and recruit these individuals. Quality reviewers are the key to quality reviews.

Next, an editor’s personal knowledge about the expertise of specific reviewers is invaluable to matching a manuscript with the most qualified reviewers. However, such personal knowledge is not exhaustive and may be susceptible to bias, intentional or otherwise. For many journals, the editor cannot personally know the expertise of each reviewer or know reviewers with the expertise needed for each manuscript. Therefore, a well-established process for matching reviewers and manuscripts based on search terms is one method for complementing an editor’s personal knowledge. This is easily done in an online system.

Three steps are needed to implement a search-term process for matching manuscripts and reviewers.

1. The editorial office staff should compile a comprehensive list of the relevant search terms for the journal’s specialty focus and review it often. (See Roberts, 2008, March, for a description of the difference between keywords and search terms.) Ask reviewers to choose the search terms that describe their expertise carefully and thoroughly (too many, and they may not really be “experts” in that field, too few and they will not be considered for some manuscripts for which they are a good match [Roberts, 2008, March]).

2. The editorial office staff should ensure that reviewers are choosing search terms from the pre-selected list and adding them to their accounts in the online system. Staff should also encourage reviewers to update their selections on a regular basis (e.g., at the beginning of each calendar year) and send a system-wide reminder e-mail annually.

3. The editorial office staff should ensure this same list is maintained for manuscript submissions so authors choose search terms for their manuscripts that match those on the reviewers’ list.

The beauty of an online system is that it can be used to prepare the list of reviewers who match the manuscript’s search terms very quickly. Remember, however, that “human specialist knowledge” (Hames, 2007) is also important. Those responsible for inviting reviewers from the list of matching search terms must pay attention to important details such as (a) when each reviewer last reviewed, so as not to overload them, (b) how each reviewer performs (e.g., timeliness, quality of reviews; Roberts, 2008, June), (c) the existence of conflicts/competing interests, and (d) ensuring the reviewer is in actuality a good match for
the manuscript content (e.g., through PubMed search or personal experience).

Finally, reassess your process for matching reviewers and manuscripts annually. Find out what other journals are doing and incorporate their ideas in your process.

• Do you send a thank-you note to your reviewers? Is it automated or personalized? Personalized, positive feedback can be very effective in promoting desired behavior/results.

• Do you send reviewers a copy of the decision letter? Do you allow reviewers to see each other’s comments? Doing so can be educational for new reviewers and motivating for lazy reviewers. This can be done without revealing the reviewers’ identifying information.

• Are your instructions to reviewers clearly written and up-to-date? Do they include information about creating an account and submitting a review in the system, the editor’s expectations for the review, and reminders about ethical issues?

Strong reviewers and an efficient review process lead to quality reviews, which, in turn, lead to quality publications which will increase the quality and raise the reputation of a journal. A well-established review process is the responsibility of the editorial office staff, and the maintenance and improvement of that process is a goal to work toward constantly.

References


Users with proper permission may also set up Batch E-mail, which can be sent to an entire Role Group (all Reviewers), or specific Roles (Statistical Reviewers). This is an opportunity for a message to be sent out periodically reminding users to make sure their Classifications and Keywords are up to date.

**Select Classifications**

Authors are able to select classifications for defining the subject area of their paper from a predefined list of keywords, index terms, or subject areas created by the publication.

At any point, Editors with permission may modify the list of Classifications selected by the Author, for example if they feel there are better matches.

When ‘Search by Classification Matches’ is selected the Editor can search for Reviewers based on matches between the Manuscript Classifications and Reviewers’ ‘Personal Classifications’. The Editor is delivered to a page that lists all Classifications associated with the manuscript and the number of Reviewers associated with each Classification.

When ‘Search for Reviewers’ is selected from the search mode drop-down box the Editor is delivered to a search interface. The Editor may search for Reviewers using criteria of Personal Classifications or Personal Keywords.

In addition to these search methods, Editors have the ability to set up further search criteria referred to as “Suggest Reviewer”. The Suggest Reviewer feature in EM allows an Editor to ask the system to ‘suggest’ qualified Reviewers based on a predetermined set of criteria defined on a ‘My Suggest Reviewer Preferences’ page. There are two parts to configuring the ‘My Suggest Reviewer Preferences’ page:

1. Identify what kind of people should be excluded from the list of possible Reviewers

   *Top portion of the ‘My Suggest Reviewer Preferences’ page:*

   - Exclude the following from the list:
     - People from the same institution
     - People from the same city
     - People with unavailable dates within the next 30 days
     - People with more than 0 pending reviews
     - People with fewer than 0 matches to manuscript classifications
     - Reviewer statistics that are older than 120 months
• Identify how the people in the list of possible Reviewers are sorted and displayed

Bottom portion of the ‘My Suggest Reviewer Preferences’ page:

After executing the search for Reviewers, the results return in a grid, allowing the Editor to see any Classification matches as well as key Reviewer Statistics such as number or completed reviews, number of outstanding reviews, etc. Editors may then Invite the Reviewer, select them as an Alternate, or Propose this Reviewer for another Editor to invite.

Partial page display; Reviewer results:

If the Editor clicks on the Reviewer’s name, a pop-up window opens presenting the Editors with even more detail about the Reviewer and their statistics. This page is divided into sections of information, such as Personal Classifications, current Review statistics, historical invitation and performance statistics, a Recommendation Summary, and a detailed list of all submissions that the user has reviewed.

Reviewer Recruitment

If an Editor cannot find a potential Reviewer in the database, or if the Editor knows that a particular person is not currently registered on the EM site, the Editor can proxy register that person.

The Editor can: register a person, even if he has limited contact information; send a custom letter or no letter to the registrant; assign a Reviewer role; and immediately invite the registrant to review the submission. This can all be done without leaving the ‘Select Reviewer’ interface.

Partial view of Reviewer Selection page; Editor may Register a New Reviewer, or Request an Unregistered Reviewer:

Create Automatic Thank-You Message for Reviewers

EM can be configured with a number of pre-selected letters to be sent to recipients at specific steps in the Editorial process. One of these steps, “Review Assignment Completed”, allows the publication to configure letters to automatically be sent to the Reviewer to thank them for submitting the Review.
Send Reviewers a Copy of the Decision Letter

In addition to a Thank You letter at the time a review is submitted, a Reviewer can be sent a custom letter when a Decision Letter is sent to the Author. During the ‘Notify Author’ Step, the Editor has the option to send out a ‘Reviewer Notification’ to the Reviewer(s) of that submission. After the ‘Author Notification’ letter is sent, the Editor is given the option to customize each Reviewer letter before sending those letters. The Author Notification Letter (‘Decision’ Letter) can be inserted into the Reviewer Notification Letter using a merge field that pulls in a blinded or unblinded version of the decision letter, depending on the permission of the Reviewer recipient.

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