

Letter: Three thoughts on the editorial process in statistical journals



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Dear Editor

After over 20 years in the business of reading and writing papers, and over ten years in the editing business, here are some personal thoughts on the editorial process.

1 All papers may benefit from a revision but few will from a third revision

The first premise is a no-brainer: receiving feedback from expert reviewers is a gift that the author can (and should) put to good use. Nevertheless, scholars can be pedants, and a referee may insist on repeated revisions on issues that might not be core to the paper—making small changes here and there, adding more simulations, etc. At this point, the editor or associate editor should step in to unblock the situation, not only in view of publishing the paper in a timely manner but also because the third revision of a paper might actually turn out for the worse! Here is how: implementing small changes here and there typically has ramifications throughout the paper (especially a complex, theoretical paper). The author, who at the time will likely be immersed in different research projects, might not be able to catch all of these repercussions, and the referees may not either as they will not read the paper line-by-line.

2 No review should take a year but a thorough review cannot be expected in a month

Long reviews taking 12–15 months were a big concern of authors (and editors) before the era of manuscript central-type handling that has greatly increased journal efficiency. However, the pendulum may have swung the wrong way since many journals now require the referees to respond within 4–6 weeks, despite the fact that 3–4 months is perfectly acceptable by most authors. Admittedly, if a paper is an epsilon-improvement of an existing work with which the referee is familiar, then the review could be completed in a month. But if this is not the case, if the paper contains really novel ideas that the referee—although an expert in the field—is unfamiliar with, then, after glancing at the

paper, the referee will likely put it aside to revisit later at a quieter time. Finding such a time may well take two or three weeks, at which point the referee receives a nasty reminder from manuscript central that the review is expected in a week! The referee may try to comply, quickly allotting an hour or two for this review, although a thorough review might have required twice as long. The result is a timely—but superficial—review that might not do justice to a paper containing new ideas.

3 When in doubt, give the benefit

This is perhaps the most controversial of the three aphorisms. The idea is the following: consider a paper containing novel ideas that the reviewers are again unfamiliar with. The referees check the paper for technical correctness, and find it sound. However, it is always a shock to the system seeing a different approach to a problem one knows well; so, the referees may be unwilling to give a strong endorsement to such a paper, leaving the editor or associate editor with a tough decision on the potential impact of this work. Unless a journal has different (and explicit) programmatic goals, at this point I would give the benefit of the doubt to the author because a risk analysis is in his/her favor. To elaborate, if the paper is destined to have little impact in the field, there is little damage to the journal's reputation for including it since it is novel and correct; even top journals have their share of low-impact papers. If, however, the work were destined to have strong positive impact to the field but the paper is rejected, then the cost to science, and society, may be appreciable.

Sincerely,

Dimitris N. Politis

Have you got any ideas, as an author, editor or referee, about how the editorial process can be improved? Go on, write us a letter... Email bulletin@imstat.org

