

EASE-Forum Digest: December 2014 to March 2015

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Desk rejection

Karen Shashok raised the topic of desk rejection, ie rejection without peer review. She feared some papers were rejected unfairly and referred to a *PWAS* article.⁴ She had experienced rejection of papers for errors in English when there were none and the journal had published other papers with errors. Andrew Davis commented that the *PWAS* article had not shown that manuscripts were desk rejected unfairly, rather that some subsequently published elsewhere had been cited more often than manuscripts that had not been initially rejected. Andrew set out reasons for desk rejection, apart from apparent bad science: outside the journal's scope, not appropriately written for the journal, not well written, and topic already covered. Journal editors Helle Goldman and Ivana Štekinová said they would not reject for minor formatting and English errors. However, as Ivana's journals uses the ScholarOne peer-review online system, which charges for every paper entering the review process, account is taken of the number of papers published a year and the "worse" papers are withdrawn before review to save costs.

Karen advocated more transparency to avoid the impression journals were implementing their policies in different ways depending on where the researchers are located. Some publishers outsource desk rejection to editorial service companies, to which Karen provided links. No information about the outsourcing is given on the journals' websites, and the individuals making the desk rejection decisions are not accountable. She had received a rejection from an assistant editor's whose name was nowhere to be found on the journal's website. Journals should explain their criteria for rejection on their website, the name and email of the person who made the decision should appear in communications with the authors, and the appeals process should be transparent or the journal should state that appeals are not allowed.

Tom Lang thought it inevitably some authors would feel discriminated against. Both he and Andrew queried whether journals are obliged to be fair and rational in their editorial decisions and whether authors have a right to have their manuscript considered by a journal. Andrew thought a problem arose only if manuscripts were desk rejected without reason in a way prejudicial to sections of science or scientists. In his experience, reasons are usually given, and, when they are not, authors should request them. Unless there was compelling evidence of a major problem, he considered the editor's prerogative to make decisions should be jealously guarded.

Angela Turner described Elsevier's technical screening service. Initial submissions are checked for technical

problems such as incorrect formatting, missing sections and poor English and returned to authors for resubmission if they do not meet minimum standards. Manuscripts are never rejected at this stage.

Is there something not quite right about a publisher offering copy-editing services for a fee?

Aleksandra Golebiewska asked this question with reference to Elsevier: "Karen considered it important to keep the peer review arm independent from the pre-submission editing arm. Authors should perceive that they are free to decide whether or not to use the publishers' recommended services as advertised on their websites, not to mention that many researchers in poorer countries cannot afford publishers' editing fees. She provided a link to Phil Davis' article in Scholarly Kitchen⁵ from which Aleksandra quoted, "Just to be clear, I have no qualms about commercial editing companies. What I do object to is the semblance of a profit-sharing relationship with publishers." As Davis had been referring to companies listed on a publisher's website, Aleksandra wondered how great the conflict might be when the publisher and editing service were one and the same. Anna Sharman did not understand why this would be a conflict. Publishers were merely charging authors rather than readers as they had done in the past when publishers had copy-edited papers in-house. It becomes problematic if editors base decisions on whether a manuscript has been edited by a service owned by the same publisher.

Valerie Matarese saw another ethical issue. Elsevier's Language Editing Plus service seems to offer substantive editing for €536 per paper. Institutions can purchase discounted packages for 10 (€5000?) to 100 (€50,000?) manuscripts. She suspected all this tax payers' money was going out of the country. Should state institutions send large amounts of public money outside the country when they could spend it locally and by creating in-house editing positions? Indeed, the University of California Press is doing exactly this^{4,5} and Anna saw no reason why European Universities should not follow suit.

Yet another unethical aspect would arise if the individuals who judge the quality of the English, ie whether it needs to be edited or not, are the same as those who decide to publish or not and are associated with those who publish and profit from the decision that the English needs editing. What if the manuscript does not need editing? Karen expanded her argument, returning to the desk-rejection topic. She had seen desk rejections alleging "the English is not up to the journals' standards" that also included information about the publisher's own editing service or editing service companies "suggested" by the journal. She found this practice questionable, especially if the manuscript had been edited before submission. She posted: "What if the same editorial service company provided pre-submission manuscript editing and pre-peer review screening for journal-tagged manuscripts that they had already handled for pre-submission editing. Thus when a manuscript is submitted

to a journal that is their client, the editing company may be biased in favour of allowing those manuscripts to pass screening as "evidence" that their pre-submission editing was good, and also to increase the chances that they will get another bite of the cherry if the manuscripts are accepted and sent to them for post-acceptance copyediting?"

Providing certificates of editing and agreeing acknowledgement

Aleksandra noted some authors had started sending certificates of editing, presumably to discourage desk rejection because of poor English. Valerie asked if this practice was common and whether it could replace acknowledgement. Tom asked whether journals request such certificates and if they are associated with publishers who also offer language-polishing services, which could constitute a conflict of interest.

Andrew had never been asked to provide a certificate but would refuse if asked. He feared the authors would make subsequent changes to the manuscript below his editing standard thereby damaging his reputation. When editors ask him to confirm that he has edited a manuscript he sends a copy of the manuscript as edited directly to the journal. With regard to acknowledgement of writing assistance, he considered this meant only that assistance had been given, not that the manuscript was entirely the result of such assistance. By contrast, Tom did not like to be acknowledged because he equated his contributions to those of reviewers' comments, which are still largely anonymous. However, the understanding when reviewers are named is that the article may or may not reflect their input, whereas author's editors will be held responsible for any copyediting errors, even though they have no control over which of their edits are accepted or the manuscript's final quality. Tom maintained that authors' editors have the right not to be named in a manuscript because publication ethics require that anyone named in the acknowledgements must give written permission to be named.

Joy Burrough and Sylwia Ufnalska suggested solutions to avoid an acknowledgement of writing assistance being interpreted as indicating that the manuscript is the copy-editor's completed work. Joy encourages authors to acknowledge her but for editing "a near-final draft". Sylwia suggested the phrasing "Editorial help of ... is gratefully acknowledged", which she thought would imply no more than the provision of a service and avoid blame for any errors. She felt acknowledgement was also important for psychological reasons because more acknowledgement would help scientists not to feel ashamed that they need the help of language professionals. Rather than pretending to be perfect she urged authors to take heed of Sir Tim Hunt's advice at the EASE conference in Split: "It doesn't matter if you get it slightly wrong... and if it's important, the next people will correct you."

Asking editors if a manuscript is within a journal's scope, and does accepting a review request create a contract?

Andrew asked how editors responded to authors who asked whether a manuscript was within the journal's scope. None of the answers indicated that such a query would affect the final decision. It's probably advisable to accompany the request at least with the abstract. He also asked whether individuals who accepted a request to review a manuscript entered into a contract. Most Forum participants answered "No", but Andrew's research revealed that, although reviewers have no legal obligation to the authors, they do enter into a legal contract with the editor or the journal.⁶ Although this was true predominantly for legal systems based on English Common Law, he thought it broadly true for other systems as well. In any event, the position is poorly understood and needs clarification, especially, Andrew thought, as the repercussions will become more important with publishers increasingly willing to offer rewards to reviewers. Tom was sceptical that reviewers are bound contractually, except for maintaining the confidentiality of the authors. He had not heard of a reviewer being sued for breach of contract.

Other forum topics

The forum also discussed references on slides, a universal form of references and a potential conflict of interest for those involved in more than one journal. Space does not allow me to report on these topics but anyone interested is welcome to contact me for a copy of the original contributions to the discussions.

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Discussion initiators

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