

## Want Your Paper Published Faster? Read on...

Donna J. Petersen

Published online: 23 September 2008  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2008

**Abstract** After nearly 5 years and 24 issues, the editor offers some tips to authors seeking the fastest route to seeing their work in print.

**Keywords** Publishing · Manuscript reviews · Submitting manuscripts

Serving as the editor of a journal is like suddenly being thrust backstage during a performance and finding yourself responsible for the audience's enjoyment of the show. It's an experience every writer of scientific papers should have at least once, if not for the thrill of seeing your name on the masthead, then for the insider knowledge you will gain.

Rather than make you all wait for that rare event to occur in your professional lives, it occurred to me that it would be to our mutual benefit if I provided you with a clearer understanding of the process of journal editing from behind the scenes, so to speak. I believe it was Mark Twain who once said you never want to see how laws or sausages are made. The same may be true for publishing but in the spirit of improving the process and helping you understand your role in speeding that process along, I offer the following insider's step by step tour of journal editing and publishing.

1. You submit your manuscript through the Editorial Manager system <http://www.editorialmanager.com/maci/> (that was easy!).

2. First delay—it does not come directly to me, it is first processed by staff at Springer who make sure you have submitted the manuscript according to their specifications (no identifying information; tables, references in order; etc.). If they have to send it back to you, please respond quickly, or follow the instructions at the time you submit the paper so they do not have to send it back to you at all.
3. Once cleared by Springer staff, I am sent an e-mail notifying me that a new submission has been received. I would love to tell you that I open these notices immediately, but I do not; thus the delays grow. I do have a regular job that keeps me rather busy, so I usually wait until I have a few free moments and then review the most recent batch of submissions in the queue. I do this through the Editorial Manager system which lines them up nicely for me in the order they were received.
4. Next source of delay—I do not have the time or the expertise to read every submitted manuscript, so I send each article to one member of our Editorial Board for a first reading. If upon that reading the manuscript appears inappropriate for our readership, scientifically fatally flawed in some way, or not sufficiently edited for an English-speaking audience, it may be rejected without further review. This is a step we added upon the death of our co-editor in 2007. While this extra step delays the process slightly if we ultimately do elect to send your paper out for review, if the paper is to be rejected, you will learn this very quickly. Note that we will also reject a paper that is too clinically oriented or is not on a topic of interest to maternal and child health.
5. If the manuscript is deemed appropriate for peer-review, I must then identify suitable reviewers.

---

D. J. Petersen (✉)  
College of Public Health, University of South Florida,  
13201 Bruce B. Downs MDC 056, Tampa, FL 33612, USA  
e-mail: dpeters@health.usf.edu

Sometimes authors suggest reviewers, which should be helpful, but often becomes another source of delay if those reviewers are not in the reviewer data-base. If they are not already in there, I have to go into the system and invite them to be a reviewer for the journal and then invite them to review the paper. Many never respond to either invitation.

6. The classification choices you make for your article in the Editorial Manager system at the time of submission are very important in the selection of reviewers. If you have not specified particular reviewers, or if I do not hear back from those reviewers you suggested, I then select reviewers who have identified themselves as having expertise in those same classification categories that you chose from. It is important that these actually reflect the content of the article; if a reviewer turns down my invitation because the paper is not in their area of expertise, we have added more time to the process (and annoyed a reviewer who may not be so quick to respond next time). We have several hundred persons in the reviewer data-base and most have very specialized expertise and interests.
7. Unfortunately, the numbers of reviewers in any given area do not match the numbers of submissions, i.e., I have lots of reviewers in areas in which we generate few manuscripts and few reviewers in areas in which we generate many manuscripts. So depending on the subject matter of your paper, I may have a large pool or a small pool from which to draw reviewers. While hunting in the data-base for reviewers, I also have access to data on their review history, which alerts me so that I do not send an invitation when someone is in the middle of another review, or send an invitation when they have just submitted a review, or send an invitation to someone who takes, on average, 73 days to get a review back to me. I also have to be careful not to overburden my good reviewers, and I have to give new registrants to the data-base a chance.
8. So, after all this muddling around, I send invitations to three, sometimes four, persons to review your manuscript. The invited reviewers are sent the abstract and are asked if they will accept the invitation to review the manuscript or decline it. And here is where it gets really interesting. It is routine for one or two to decline the invitation almost immediately; it is equally common for one or two or sometimes all three or four to not respond to the invitation at all. And occasionally someone accepts the invitation and lets me know right away.
9. So after I have sent my three or four invitations, I have to wait to see what happens. We like to have at least three reviews per manuscript. If a reviewer declines the invitation, I can invite new reviewers. Note though that the same process ensues with every reviewer I invite... If you (we) are lucky, one or two will accept the invitation. The invitation encourages them to get the review back to us in 3 weeks. Some reviewers (the ones destined for sainthood) review the manuscript and get the review back to me within a few days. Others never get around to even cracking the thing open. While the system helps me monitor the responses, it does not tell me if someone who accepted the invitation is actually reviewing the manuscript. If they are tardy in responding, I may send a gentle reminder. This sometimes prompts them to act, or it may make them mad... so I try to be judicious.
10. Remember, some reviewers never respond to the initial invitation. Again, I can send gentle reminders, but sometimes, after considerable time has passed, I will go ahead and assign new reviewers (though remember the process... more delay). And this explains why some of you get four, five or even six reviews back on your submitted manuscript—it is because someone who did not respond to the initial invitation suddenly submitted a review when I already had several in the works.
11. Weeks, sometimes even months go by before I have the desired three reviews in hand. Once I do, I try to find a few free minutes to read over the reviews and then read the manuscript (to make sure we are all on the same page). Amazingly enough, it is not uncommon for all three reviewers to disagree—wildly disagree. I often get papers back with one recommendation to reject, one to accept with minor revisions and one to send back for major revisions and re-review. Sometimes the system lets me know that there is another review in the works, in which case I will wait for it to see if it helps me break the stalemate. Sometimes I will invite another reviewer, typically someone I know who will give the paper (and sometimes even the reviews) a thorough and fair review so that I can be sure I am being fair to you. Of course, this further delays my responding to you (remember that old process). I have noted that the stronger papers, and the papers that have been thoroughly edited, are more likely to have similar (and generally positive) reviews.
12. Okay, so now months really have gone by and you are starting to send me polite but curt e-mails along the lines of “what is going on?” because of course you can look at the system and see that “reviews are complete” for your manuscript. But all that means is that two have been received—I set up the system to

- flag me when two reviews are in, to make sure I do not drop the ball on any of those declines, or non-responses, or acceptances that have never materialized. I try to write you nice notes back, but this just means I am not looking at new submissions, or assigning reviewers, or tracking down your reviewers because I am busy writing notes to you. While we prefer three reviews, occasionally I will decide with two reviews if they are similar; I in essence, act as the third reviewer.
13. Once I have all the reviews I need, I re-read the manuscript together with the reviews and render a judgment based on their (and my) assessment. If all the reviewers recommend “accept as is”, I can do that, though I have only done it once or twice. If two or all three recommend rejection, the decision is usually always to reject. I rarely reject a manuscript if only one reviewer recommends rejection, unless it is a regular reviewer and I happen to agree with their assessment. A fatal scientific flaw, inappropriate conclusions, too many errors, or nothing new to add to the literature will generally result in a rejection. The rest are either provisionally accepted pending your response to the reviewers, or sent back for revision and resubmission. If the decision is to reject, we’re done. If it is to respond to the reviewers or to revise and resubmit, it goes back to you for response or revision. The ball is now in your court; until I get the manuscript back from you, I can do nothing for you. Some of you respond fairly quickly, others never do (I think I still have outstanding manuscripts from 2004...)
  14. Okay, so your revision is in and you are eagerly awaiting my response. Oops—more delay. When you submit a revised manuscript, my assistant prints it out, along with hard copies of the reviews, and puts it in a manila folder and literally stacks them up on the sofa in my office. Why? Because I take them with me on airplanes. I am serious. It is the only place I can read the reviews, your response and your revised paper in one sitting with no distractions and no interruptions. And this is what you want—a thoughtful review of your response and your re-submission. Depending on my travel schedule, I may get through them quickly or the stack on the sofa may grow quite large. Where you are in that queue is entirely dependent on luck.
  15. Here’s the most important tip I will give you to speed up the process at this point: send me a revision that thoughtfully responds to the recommendations of the reviewers and is thoroughly proofread and edited (this means no typos, no misspellings, consistent style and format throughout, and written for clarity) and I will accept it immediately. You do not have to do everything the reviewers ask; indeed they often give you conflicting advice, or they may ask for additional analyses that you either are unable or unwilling to perform. You do need to consider their recommendations and use them to strengthen the paper. Your response to me needs to thoroughly document how you handled each of the reviewers’ recommendations. Did you make the change suggested? Did you decline to make the change? Tell me why. Sometimes you may want me to weigh in on whether or not to change a title, or redo a table or insert a figure. Include that in your response and I will let you know in my response back to you. Note that I rarely send a revised submission out for re-review. Unless the reviewers concerns were highly technical in an area I am less familiar with, I handle the reviews of the revisions myself.
  16. Even if you have thoroughly responded to the reviewers concerns, documented this clearly and improved the paper to my satisfaction, if the paper needs editing, and unfortunately most do, then you have to wait for me to have another few free moments to actually type all the corrections into the body of the standard letter in the system. We have no copy-editing support from the publisher because of our small size, so I do all the editing myself and then have to type, into the letter the system sends to you, all the corrections you need to make. Yes, me, myself. (I might as well apologize right now for the typos in my corrections of your typos—I am not perfect either, but you really should have had someone proofread your paper before submitting it to me).
  17. Why? Because if all I have to do is go in to the system, call up your manuscript and click “accept”, I will do that right away and you will be assigned the next available print slot. Your accepted paper is also “published” immediately on-line and can be referenced as such. If I have to go in and type up all of the corrections, you will wait. If I have asked you to shorten a paper or to have it thoroughly edited by someone for whom English is a first language, I mean it. I have rejected revised manuscripts that have not followed these instructions.
  18. Okay, so now your re-revised manuscript is back and I have to read that to make sure everything is now in shape. If you have made all the corrections I noted and/or addressed any particular concerns or questions I had, the paper can be accepted, published on line and sent to the print queue. Finally!
- I hope this has provided you some insight into why the process seems to drag on interminably. Hopefully you’ve also seen where you have the power to influence the process in some positive ways:

- Get your colleagues to go in and register themselves as reviewers. Then you don't have to wait for me to do it, they are already in the system and they can be invited to review your manuscript immediately.
- Enter classification codes that make the most sense for your work so that I am able to select the best qualified reviewers for your manuscript. Remember, I will choose reviewers who have identified themselves using those same codes.
- Proofread your submissions, have someone else proofread your submissions and then proofread your submissions again.
- Get your revision back to me quickly with a clear statement of how you did or did not choose to respond to the reviewers comments, oh, and proofread, proofread, proofread.
- If you are invited to review a manuscript, please respond right away, even if your answer is "no".

I apologize to anyone who has waited beyond reason for a response from this Journal. Knowing where the time-losses occur may help us work better together to create a smoother process with fewer delays. Of course, we share the goal of getting the best scientific knowledge out to our colleagues where it can be put to good use to improve the health of mothers, children, and families in communities across the globe. With that goal in mind, I ask for your patience and assistance and I thank you for your important contributions to our field. I also thank the members of the editorial board for helping speed this process along and to all the dedicated reviewers who ensure the integrity of the journal.

Here's to healthy, stress-free publishing! I look forward to your next submission.



<http://www.springer.com/journal/10995>

Maternal and Child Health Journal

Editor-in-Chief: Dye, T.

ISSN: 1092-7875 (print version)

ISSN: 1573-6628 (electronic version)

Journal no. 10995