

EDITOR'S NOTE
BE RESPONSIVE TO GET IN PRINT FASTER

ABSTRACT

The vast majority of questions received by peer-reviewed journal editors revolve around one repeated and sometimes frantic theme: when will my article appear in print? Manuscript authors sometimes forget how many different procedural and sequential steps must occur before even the most scholarly and well-conceived “print-ready” article makes it into print. However, the most important steps where timelines seem to get unexpectedly extended are not actually those phases controlled by the publishers or the reviewers or the editors, but the critical steps related to the responsiveness of the authors themselves. The bottom line to helping publishers get scholarly work you can be proud of published in a timely matter is for authors to posture themselves in rapid response mode, replying promptly to correspondence from the journal.

Keywords: Publishing; Science Education

The vast majority of questions received by peer-reviewed journal editors seem to revolve around one repeated theme: when will my article appear in print? This question makes sense. Authors are often trying to get a completed and accepted peer-reviewed manuscript finalized and available for community consumption for a particular deadline. Among many, the most common author pleas for expediency that come across my desk are either that they are trying to meet an “end of the calendar year performance evaluations” or a “deadline for promotion or tenure dossier package submission.” While these are understandable predicaments to which I am quite sensitive, my experience is that most of the delays related to getting work into print are usually those that the author can control.

Manuscript authors sometimes forget how many different procedural and sequential steps must occur before even the most scholarly and well-conceived “print-ready” article actually makes it into print. I am using the word “print” liberally here because few articles these days are actually ever printed, but instead appear online in a PDF format that can be readily printed if the reader desires. Once a manuscript is initially submitted, it is logged and sent to the editor-in-chief for an initial review. That initial editorial review is primarily looking to see if the theme of the paper matches the scope and mission of the journal, and to see if it is in the correct format. You might be surprised to learn that if the journal you submitted your manuscript to uses citations in APA format and the manuscript submitted is a perfectly good manuscript but in MLA or Chicago format, the manuscript will usually be returned to the author without review because such manuscripts almost always fail most peer review processes out of hand.

If a manuscript is formatted correctly (is it single-spaced PDF when it should have been a double-spaced .doc?), and it matches the journal’s mission and scope listed on the journal’s webpage, then the lead editor solicits reviewers from a pre-existing pool of volunteer, peer reviewers who have sufficient expertise and experience to constructively criticize the appropriateness of the study-design to the question posed, the evidence-based conclusions, and the study’s overall presentation. What you might not know is that an editor’s pool of reviewers is the most valuable part of a journal, for it is the skill and timeliness of peer-review that makes a journal great. Reviewer pools are usually nurtured as being precious entities by forward looking editors.

Initially, I usually ask four reviewers with closely aligned interests if they have time to provide a constructive and evaluative review of the manuscript, hoping to get two useful reviews in the end. Sometimes this is easy, and sometimes, depending on the time of year, this can be quite challenging. I also take time to remove authors’ identifying information from the manuscript before distributing it to help make the review process as fair as possible. Fortunately, the *Journal of Astronomy & Earth Sciences Education* has a robust and extensive stable of enthusiastic and responsive reviewers I can call upon who are usually quite prompt in getting reviewer’s reports back to our office.

Once I get the external reviews back, then I can use those reviewers' reports as expert recommendations to supplement my own personal review of the manuscript. In this way, authors can get several perspectives on the extent to which their work is sufficiently mature for publication. I usually ask JAESE reviewers for two core pieces of information:

1. Something written politely that is public in nature, which I can share directly with the authors, and
2. Something frankly confidential that I do not share with authors.

My experience is that reviewers are often considerably more polite when speaking to authors, and considerably more direct when writing to me confidentially. Between these two perspectives, I am usually able to glean a clear course of action for what to do with the manuscript: reject, reject but encourage resubmission, accept with major revisions, or accept with minor revisions. Actually, there is also an outright "accept" category, but I've never used it. This information is used to provide a 'Decision Letter' to the authors.

In my experience, what usually drags out publication is not the review process itself, but the surprisingly long length of time authors seem to take to respond to a Decision Letter. A response to the decision letter should be a point-by-point "here is what we did to the manuscript to align it with reviewers' stated concerns." I hope that authors get back to me in 48 hours or, at most, a week, with how they are going to handle the Decision Letter. But, sometimes, authors take months to get back to me. Delays are incredibly frustrating for everyone involved.

Once the authors and the reviewers and I all agree on the changes that need to be made to the manuscript and the manuscript has been altered appropriately, then the manuscript goes to production. In production, the manuscript is formatted to match the other articles in the journal and returned to the author for final approval. This is the second place where authors sometimes extend the length of time of publication. Again, we ask that final formatted manuscripts be reviewed and returned within 48 hours – a week at most. Unfortunately, my experience is that authors too often drag their feet at this step. Usually, this step requires less than an hour's worth of effort, but for some reason, too many authors seem reluctant to finish this final, critical step.

In the end, authors and publishers both want high quality work to be published in the fastest time possible. However, the most important steps where timelines get extended are most often not actually those phases controlled by the publishers or the reviewers or the editors, but the steps related to the responsiveness of the authors themselves. This generalization, like all generalizations, is fraught with exceptions. For certain, many authors are highly responsive. However, the lesson here is that if you wish to be published without delay, the first step is to be highly responsive and return requested materials quickly so that the broader community can learn about your work as soon as possible.

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