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Brief Explanation of the Journal Review Process

When an article is submitted for publication consideration with a journal, the journal initiates a review of the article. The purpose of the review is to determine whether the article is a good “fit” for the journal. Each journal has a certain area of specialty, some very specific and others fairly broad. Each journal has a certain “prestige” value as well, with publication in some journals being very selective, while other journals might take a broader range of papers and styles. So, the review process is intended to see if an article would fit well with the journal’s overall goals.

The review process has at least a couple of levels. The journal editors will normally take a quick, initial look at a paper to see if it is a good fit at a very general level. For example, if an article was submitted to the journal *Urban Geography*, the editors might take a quick look to make sure the article has something to do with “geography” and “cities” (question of basic fit). If the article does not meet this kind of simple test, or is obviously defective in some other prominent way (poor grammar, an obvious lack of knowledge of the basics of the field, or some other very obvious mis-fit), then the editors can reject the article immediately. This is not very common, but it can happen. In most cases, the article has at least a “surface” level of respectability, so it goes on to the second and most substantive level of review.

The second level of review involves sending the article out to experts in the field for their opinion. None of these reviewers knew who the author is, and the author is never told the identity of any of the reviewers. This is known as a “double-blind” review process, and this process is standard procedure for review for publication in most scientific journals. Double-blind reviews are supposed to help ensure that each article receives a neutral review, where publication is not based on *who you are* or *who you know*. So, articles can’t be accepted because the author is really popular, and they can’t be rejected because a reviewer dislikes the author. This usually works, but in some fields and with some authors, it is possible for reviewers to tell who the author is (just by their writing style or thematic focus) or for authors to tell who a reviewer is (by the kinds of comments they provide). Regardless, the double-blind process is probably still the best way to go.

The “peer review” process as described above is a cornerstone of academic publication, as it is our mechanism to ensure journals publish quality work. Journals use peer review to ensure that they publish credible research that meets with the approval of experts in the field covered by each article. Journals usually do not have their internal editors, who are usually established experts in the field in their own right, review manuscripts at the second level of review described above. Why not? There are at least two good reasons:

1. It would be unusual for a journal to have editors who are experts on all possible fields represented in paper submissions, and editors are usually too busy to provide a detailed review of each article submitted to a journal.
2. Even if the editors were expert in an article’s precise field, it would not be ideal for an editor to be the only source of evaluation, since they know the identity of each author and could be biased as to whether to accept or reject an article based on this knowledge.

Obtaining outside reviews is an important way that journals can demonstrate to everyone (readers and potential authors) that they are a legitimate and credible publication venue.

Usually, a journal will solicit several outside reviews by asking experts in the field if they would be interested in completing a review. It is fairly standard in most situations for a journal to have three experts submit their comments on each article, but the number of reviews done on an individual article could be as little as two, or as many as five or six. The variation depends on the individual journal (how rigorous they are) and the situation (perhaps a controversial or difficult topic). Once the reviews are requested, the reviewers usually have a few weeks or months to read the article and compile their comments. This waiting period is one of the most frustrating things for a potential author.

Once all of the external reviews come back to the journal, the editors have a decision to make. Based on the reviewer feedback, the editors have a few options:

1. They can accept the article as-is
2. They can provide a “provisional acceptance” of the article, contingent on the author making some very minor changes
3. They can ask for “major revisions” and plan on re-evaluating the article internally once the author has made the changes
4. They can ask for “major revisions” and re-start the review process with external reviewers
5. They can reject the article

Option 1 (acceptance after the initial review) hardly ever happens. Usually there is something to fix. Depending on the severity of the problem, the editors can choose any of the other options. Some of the top journals can be extremely picky, in some cases choosing option 5 (rejection) for 80% of the manuscripts submitted. Other journals will give more of an opportunity for authors to at least respond to reviewer comments before making a final decision. A good result for an

author would be for an article to receive provisional acceptance (option 2) or major revisions with an internal review (option 3). Option 4 (re-start the process) can be time-consuming.

On our course website I have placed sample documents to show you what you might expect to happen if you were to submit an article for publication consideration to a journal. The documents are from an actual, real-world example of documents from all of the steps in the submission, review, and resubmission process (they happen to be from one of my publications a few years back). The documents include:

1. Article submission (letter to the journal editors that accompanies a manuscript for publication consideration)
2. Reply from the editors once the review process is complete (letter from the editors, accompanied by reviewer comments)
3. My comments back to the editors (compiled after I read and responded to the review comments in detail; this was accompanied by my revised manuscript)
4. Letter of acceptance from the editors
5. Article as it appeared in the journal