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Most authors are very familiar with the process of academic publication. After a researcher has prepared their manuscript and selected a suitable journal, it is time to submit the paper. First, the paper will be reviewed by one of the journal's editors. If the editor thinks the paper has potential, it will be [sent to a board of peer reviewers](#).

[Peer review](#) is a crucial part of [the publishing process](#). It could even be said to be one of the foundations of scientific integrity. Peer reviewers are experts in their field. Their role is to [check that papers are original](#) and contain valid, high-quality science. There is prestige attached to the role of peer reviewer, just as there is prestige in getting a paper published in a top journal.

Naturally, authors hope to have their paper published as soon as possible. At the same time, reviewers need time to prepare their review. How can the needs of authors and reviewers be balanced?

What Do Authors Want?

Besides the impact factor and scope of the journal, a short publication time was the third most important factor to be considered while [journal selection](#). For the author, a paper is only really useful once it is published. Published articles can be added to the author's resume, cited by other researchers, and used to support grant or job applications. This is why, understandably, authors [hope for papers to be published](#) as quickly as possible. A large global survey found that 43% of authors would ideally like a paper to be published in less than three months. Almost 70% authors want papers to be published in less than six months.

Another survey in 2011 found that many authors are unhappy with the speed of the publication process. Over 40% of respondents rated the [peer review process](#) as slow or very slow. Most recently, in a 2018 study, 29.1% of respondents said that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the peer review process. In fact, when asked what improvements could be made to the publishing process, many authors said that speed of publication was most important. Taken together, these studies clearly show that speed of publication is very important to authors.

What Do Reviewers Need?

On the other hand, speed of publication is not a priority for reviewers. Reviewers normally have very busy work lives, and often use their free time to write reviews. Also, most journals do not pay reviewers, so there is no financial incentive to complete reviews quickly.

How long a reviewer needs to complete a review seems to vary greatly. One survey found that 14% of reviewers normally return a review within one week. Around 30% needed two weeks, while 23% said three weeks and 18% said four. A relatively low 57% of reviewers said that they always returned reviews on time. Around 1 in 10 admitted that they never submitted reviews by the deadline.

Like all academics, reviewers [have many demands on their time](#). In the same survey, 12% said that they had declined reviews because the time allowed was too short.

Different studies have given similar results on the time needed to write a review; however, generally it is around 5-6 hours. However, the median time between being invited to review and submitting the review is a little over 16 days. Globally, millions of hours are dedicated to peer review every year.

Clearly, journals must try to balance the wishes of authors against the needs of reviewers, since both are essential for the survival of the process of academic publishing.

Are Authors and Reviewers the Same People?

Many authors are reviewers and most reviewers are authors. This should mean that the two groups have a good understanding of the pressures each faces.

Apparently, the overlap between the two groups is about two-thirds. This seems quite high. So why are so many authors [unhappy with the review process](#)? After all, there is a good chance that they will be a part of it themselves, for another researcher's paper.

Part of the problem could be that the process is sometimes unclear. For example, an author might see that their paper is "Under Review." This could actually mean different things. The paper might be out for peer review or under review by the journal's editors. Also, it only takes one peer reviewer to submit their review late for the whole process to be delayed.

What's the Solution?

The only solution will be to strike a balance that both satisfies authors and eases the pressure on reviewers. One way could be for editors to ensure that authors from outside the US and Europe are not

ignored as potential reviewers.

In recent years, there has been a large increase in papers submitted by researchers at Chinese universities. However, many journals use few reviewers from China. The statistics show this imbalance. US researchers supply 32.9% of reviews but only 25.4% of articles. On the other hand, China provides 8.8% of reviews but 13.8% of articles.

Research has found that editors tend to pick reviewers from their own region, and most editors are from the US and Europe. Journal editors should consider recruiting more reviewers from other regions. This would [ease the pressure on reviewers](#) and ensure that researchers from other countries have the same chances to review.

More reviewer training could also help. However, this would be another demand on the time of busy researchers, and take-up could be limited.

From the author's side, journals can help by setting expectations. Journals should have a clear timetable of the review process. There should be clear communication with authors when there are delays. Journals should also share the expected timetable with reviewers. Reviewers should let journal editors know as soon as possible if they will not be able to submit on time.

With some small efforts from journals, authors, and reviewers, the publication process might be improved for everyone.

What are your experiences as an author or reviewer? Do you think the publication process could be improved? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

Category

1. Publishing Research
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