

MEDICAL EDUCATION

Selection of Medical Articles for Publication How is it done?

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“The tragedy of science is the slaying of beautiful ideas by ugly facts” (TH Huxley).

Editors are often asked how they would select an article for publication from the case numbers of papers submitted to them. Their job is difficult as in only few instances does the scientific value shine out completely clearly. While most articles have unnecessary words, inaccurate grammar, imprecise expressions and abbreviations that distract the readers from the authors message. The editor's job is to ensure that those manuscripts are of acceptable standard both in form and content. He is responsible for seeing that the authors say what they have to say clearly and honestly. It involves a good deal of work on the manuscript, and this is done while editing is usually a part time job as they continue their clinical and academic work.

The Refereeing System

Most journals are firmly based on a policy of refereeing articles to outside assessors, as even expert editors cannot be expected to know all aspects of their subject. Referees help editors to evaluate the merits of any given papers. However journals differ greatly in subject matter, size, degree of specialisation, frequency of appearance,

circulation and readership, editorial policy and prestige. Some journals are highly specialised others are more general; some have an international reputation others are purely local. Standard that are too high can divert contributors to less fussy competing journals. Many marginal journals cannot afford to be choosy and are glad to receive contributions that have an acceptable content even if badly expressed while prestigious journals receive large numbers of manuscripts and have a correspondingly high rejection rate that may exceed 80%. The attitude that refereeing delays publication is wrong.

In considering an article for publication editors and referees try to answer the following questions. Why did he start? (in the introduction section), what did he do? (in the method section), what did he find? (among the results) and what does it mean? (in the discussion). They also need to know the following:

1. Is the article original (for the country or the world)?
2. Does it have an important review or a reminder of neglected but curable condition?
3. Is it scientifically sound? (The method, the logical, statistical and ethical aspects).

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4. Is it suitable for this journal or more appropriate to another?
5. Is it well written and as brief as possible?

The role of the referee is an advisor and the editor is the one who decides whether to accept or reject an article for publication. Editors usually realise that there is strong tendency of referees to find little faults. They must monitor and control their referees. A man may have been a good referee once but ceased to be so because he does not keep up with his subject or take on many other commitments. Referees must be reliable and punctual.

Should the editor transmit the referees comments verbatim to the author? Some editors fear that rude comments such as "waste of time" or "useless work" will offend the authors. Obviously there is no need to pass them on. Editors can reject papers politely without giving specific reason, unless there is special reason such as that the paper would be better in another journal.

Famous men can do bad work and write a bad paper and papers from famous departments may be badly prepared and may not even have been read by some of their authors.

During my five years of editorial experience I concluded that most referees tend to err on the side of recommending rejection and the editors may have to put on a slight bias to compensate for this. On the other hand a referee who recommends acceptance of a paper which is then criticised or demolished in a correspondence, should probably be dropped in future.

Why are some articles rejected

Authors are often surprised that editors can reject many articles after few minutes study because they fall in one of the following categories.

1. Review articles
The clinical manifestation and management of brain tumours are well and adequately described in several neurosurgical textbooks and it is unlikely that an enthusiastic young surgeon will write a better account.
2. Hypotheses only: If the author believes that his idea is sound he should find some data to support it, or try to prove it by a well designed experiment.
3. Retrospective surveys: Reviewing the case notes of all patients with a particular clinical problem admitted in a four years period is unlikely to reveal valuable

findings as the records cannot be expected to be complete.

4. The scientific method may be deficient, or the statistical analysis is wrong either through ignorance or by an attempt to cheat.
5. For a largely clinical journal the article may be too laboratory oriented or vice versa and in a subject that is split into many aspects (such as paediatrics) another journal may well be more suitable.

Borderline Articles

Here the editor and the referee may be put off by some non scientific aspects of the article, such as excessive length, repetition, poor flow of ideas, careless inconsistency among tables, figures and text.

Editors regard some articles as a patient who may need surgery. This involves deletion of unnecessary words, simple substitution and transposition of word, phrase or clause. The task of the editor in these articles is to help the author say what he wants to say, and to say it better than he did originally. The goal is improvement and not perfection. Common faults in those borderline articles are:

1. The misuse of words, technical or otherwise
2. Making firm conclusions from inferences only
3. Order of presentation
4. Missing one or more of the references
5. Overbold conclusions
6. A technique that needs description

Finally remember that unlike speech, writing cannot be forgotten, hence it needs great care in its preparation. Those who write best probably spend most time in criticising and revising their prose, making it clear, concise and ensuring logical flow of ideas. Each author however eminent should learn to do this subediting himself by a thorough and repeated revision of his article before submitting it for publication as this would certainly reduce the chance of rejection.

Further Reading

1. Barras R. Scientists must write. London: Chapman and Hall, 1979.
2. Lock S. Thorne's better medical writing. London: Pitman, 1977.
3. Calnan J, Barabas A. Writing medical papers. A practical guide. London: Heinmann, 1973.