Peer Review (https://www.elsevier.com/authors-update/story/peer-review)

How reviewers look at your paper – your top 9 questions answered

During a recent online webinar, Publisher Jaap van Harten explained how an understanding of the peer-review process can help authors be more successful

By Dr. Jaap van Harten   Posted on 12 November 2014

Print PDF (http://www.printfriendly.com)

Share story:

As a scientist by training, Dr. Jaap van Harten has written and reviewed many papers and as a Publisher he knows what it's like to sit on the other side of the fence.

This dual perspective makes Jaap ideally placed to help authors develop their publishing skills via the Publishing Connect (http://www.elsevier.com/early-career-researchers/training-and-workshops) training workshops he hosts at institutes worldwide. One of the topics he regularly covers – how reviewers look at your paper – formed the basis of a Publishing Connect webinar (http://view6.workcast.net/?pak=2958403320179233&cpak=4790597993496526) Jaap presented online in October 2014.

The 792 attendees asked more than 200 questions. In this article, we explore the answers to some of the most popular queries and Jaap shares his top tips for publishing success.

Q1. How do editors choose the reviewers for my paper?

Editors select reviewers based on their expertise on the topic of the paper. Most journals ask authors, at submission stage, to suggest potential reviewers which can really help the editor. However, you need to make sure that the reviewers you

suggest are truly independent people, i.e. not your friends or close colleagues. The obvious researchers to suggest are the authors you cite in your article, or authors who have published on a similar topic. However, editors will never rely entirely on your suggestions and will also use their own networks. A popular editor resource is Elsevier's Find Reviewers Tool (http://editorsupdate.elsevier.com/short-communications/finding-reviewers-ees-just-got-easier) . If, for whatever reason, editors get really stuck, they often approach members of the journal's Editorial Board to help them out.

Q2. What is a reviewer looking for?

First of all, reviewers see whether the paper is within the scope of the journal, whether the science is good, and whether the paper meets the "conceptual novelty" standards of the journal. Concerning conceptual novelty: it can be very useful for other researchers if you publish the melting point of a newly synthesized molecule, but such research is not conceptually novel; a totally new method of determining melting points would be.

At a manuscript text level, one of the reviewer's priorities is to check the article's internal consistency. By that, I mean do the method and results match? Do the results and conclusion match? A common weakness is that the different sections appear to have been written independently of each other. If the paper is cohesive it is elevated to a whole new level. Do you know the expression "can't see the wood for the trees"? The way I often describe it is that authors have a tendency to look at the trees when they prepare a paper, whereas reviewers almost parachute into an article and can soon spot whether the wood is missing.

Other items they look for are appropriateness of the title, abstracts and conclusions, and references. They are NOT asked to act as copy editors of the manuscript.

While reviewers are not responsible for detecting plagiarism, fraud and other ethics issues, in practice they often pick them up. The majority of papers submitted in EES (Elsevier Editorial System) are now also automatically loaded to CrossCheck (http://www.ithenticate.com/products/crosscheck) , which uses iThenticate software to check for textual overlap with the rest of the published literature ("plagiarism") back to the early 1990s. It also happens that fellow scientists spot plagiarism or fraud in published papers, and then they contact the journal.

Q3. Why does it occasionally take so long to get my paper reviewed?

Sometimes the editor has a problem finding reviewers, either because the researchers they approach are too busy or the field you work in is quite niche making the pool of reviewer candidates very small. In other cases, the reviewer who originally agreed to review does not deliver and the editor has to start again. It's worth remembering that editors may sometimes need to invite 10 reviewers just to get the two usable Reviewer Reports they need.

Q4. English is not my first language. Will that affect my chances of publishing success?

I do understand – it's not my mother tongue either and I sometimes struggle with that in my own job. But "language" remains the responsibility of you as the author. If there are flaws in the language of a paper but the editor sees there is great science, then your paper will still make it into the review process. However, you may be asked to address the language later on in the process. The Elsevier WebShop (http://webshop.elsevier.com/languageservices) can help you.

Q5. My paper shouldn't have been rejected. What can I do?

Although editors and reviewers can make mistakes (after all they are human!), manuscripts are not rejected without a reason. In the case of borderline rejections, at least three pairs of eyes (the editor and two reviewers) have had a look at your paper, and there was a convergence of opinion. On average, reviewers spend four hours reviewing your paper – that is eight hours' free, expert consultancy, something hard to ignore! The problem, and I do understand this, is that authors are often too close to the text – it's their baby. However, you need to be able to take a step back.

If you really think you have a case and that your paper should have been accepted, you can go back to the editor. But in the majority of cases, the reason authors do this is because they simply can't emotionally accept the rejection. If you do go back to the editor, be careful not to be personal in your comments – ensure your rebuttal is polite, scientific and fact-based.

Q6. Can I resubmit my paper to a journal that has already rejected it?

Generally, I'd suggest you do not; otherwise the editor would have invited you to resubmit in the non-acceptance letter. If the editor felt a revision would have helped your paper, they would have indicated that the first time around. Unless you have made substantial changes to your submission, it would not be worth the effort.

Q7. Well, can I submit that rejected paper to another journal in the field?

Yes, after rejection you are free to do with your manuscript whatever you want. Unfortunately, some authors submit their paper to another journal without making any changes, which is not smart: the new editor may send your paper to the same reviewers, who will not be amused if they find that you haven't made any of the changes they deemed necessary. The way to go is to look at why your paper was rejected, and to address those issues before resubmission.

Q8. Will the editor tell me the names of the researchers who reviewed my paper?

No, the reviewers remain anonymous. In rare cases, authors have come to us and have said that the reviewer improved their paper so much that they would like them listed as a co-author. Then the editor can approach the reviewer to find out whether they are happy to become known to the authors.

Q9. Why are the reviewer's comments to the editor not shared with the author?

Well, the reviewers need to be able to tell the editor what they recommend. What if the recommendations of the two reviewers clearly differ? It's then down to the editor to make the final decision. Having said that, it's not good if those confidential comments differ from the tone of the feedback contained in the Reviewer Report.

About the webinar

Publishing Connect (http://www.elsevier.com/early-career-researchers/training-and-workshops) is Elsevier's ongoing and popular researcher skills training program. This year marked the launch of Publishing Connect's first online webinar series. The webinar 'How reviewers look at your paper' was held on Thursday 23rd October, attracting almost 800 attendees worldwide and more than 200 questions. The archive version (http://view6.workcast.net/?pak=2958403320179233&cpak=4790597993496526) of the webinar is now available.

The other two webinars in this series were 'Options in article publishing: open access (http://view6.workcast.net/?pak=8517921960511269&cpak=4790597993496526)' and 'Ways to get your

published paper noticed' (http://view6.workcast.net/?
pak=7177744168076255&cpak=4790597993496526) . If you did not originally
sign up for these webinars, these links will ask you to register your details.
Please note, you will only need to register once to gain access to all three
webinars.

For information about future Publishing Connect webinars, please visit the
Training and Workshops (http://www.elsevier.com/early-career-
researchers/training-and-workshops) section on www.elsevier.com/earlycareer
(http://www.elsevier.com/early-career-researchers/home) .

Contributor biography

Dr. Jaap van Harten is Executive Publisher for Pharmacology &
Pharmaceutical Sciences at Elsevier in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
He trained as a pharmacist at Leiden University, The Netherlands, and
got a PhD in clinical pharmacology in 1988. He then joined Solvay
Pharmaceuticals, where he held positions in pharmacokinetics, clinical
pharmacology, medical marketing, and regulatory affairs. In 2000, he
moved to Excerpta Medica, Elsevier's medical communications branch, where he
headed the Medical Department and the Strategic Publication Planning
Department. In 2004, he joined Elsevier's Publishing organization, initially as
Publisher of the Genetics journals and books, and since 2006 as Executive Publisher
Pharmacology & Pharmaceutical Sciences.

comments powered by Disqus (//disqus.com)

Share story:

Back to top