

Editor's LETTER

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Answering Your Question About. . .

Peer review. Yes, we're talking about that again because you have questions about our process. Last year, we discussed various experiments other journals were undertaking with peer review and briefly noted how we assess papers at *ACS Chemical Biology* (1). Here we answer questions from our readers and authors about the handling of papers submitted by our editorial board members, as well as topics such as author suggestions regarding appropriate referees, the basis for evaluating papers by a second round of review, and guidance on interpreting and responding to a decision letter received from the journal.

Q: How do you handle peer review of manuscripts submitted by someone affiliated with your journal?

ACS Chemical Biology adheres closely to the *ACS Ethical Guidelines to the Publication of Chemical Research* (last revised in January 2006 and located on the web at <http://pubs.acs.org/ethics/index.html>). In so doing, we strive hard to avoid conflicts of interest and to maintain confidentiality and appropriate anonymity throughout the review process. If any of the journal editors submits a paper to the journal, the ACS Paragon Plus system automatically blinds them from the editorial prescreening and the ensuing review process. This means they as authors see information about the status of their papers as they proceed through peer review at the same level of detail as would any author. In addition, the journal's electronic peer review systems and administrative staff also shield the disposition of the manuscript from other editors who might have a conflict of interest in connection with its consideration for publication. In such situations, the appropriate Associate Editors serve in an advisory capacity to recommend a course of action. If it is agreed to send a paper out to external review, the Associate Editors suggest experts in the field, most often scientists who do not serve on our editorial advisory board (and between you and me, they are our toughest reviewers!). All authors must address the concerns raised by our referees, and so far, the majority of the papers that we have published as submissions by our editors have undergone substantive revisions postreview (and some have necessitated a second round of review). Rest assured that every author, regardless of his or her standing with the journal or in the scientific community, is treated in the same fair manner at *ACS Chemical Biology*.

Q: Do you honor my excluded reviewers?

Yes, we do. We allow authors to submit a list of scientists whom they deem to have a conflict of interest or otherwise would not provide an impartial review. Such lists are very useful, but we ask that authors please not abuse this practice. It's important to keep the list focused and short (two to four people). Excluding too many qualified expert scientists by requesting that we avoid Dr. Smith and all of his former postdocs or listing all of the prominent scientists in your field is not helpful. It makes it difficult to find suitable reviewers for your paper and compromises the intended impartiality of peer review. So exclude reviewers ethically, wisely, and sparingly.

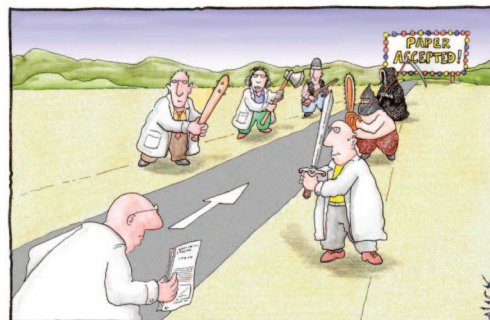
10.1021/cb700093u CCC: \$37.00 Published online May 18, 2007 © 2007 by American Chemical Society

Also, if you wish to exclude one of our editors as a referee, please provide the name of the editor (even if it's the Editor-in-Chief) as an excluded reviewer and the basis for your request, and we will honor that where justified.

Q: When do you send my paper back for a second round of review?

This depends on the extent of changes requested by the reviewers and an author's responses to the reviewer queries. If the revision includes new data or if you or your coauthors have made extensive changes, we generally send a manuscript back for a second round of review to a select few from among the reviewers who commented during the first round of evaluation. The referees receive the revised paper, your response to the original reviewers' comments, and a copy of the initial decision letter you received.

There are a couple of exceptions to this practice. If you contend that the original reviewers were biased in a specific manner and request that we send the revised paper to a new group of reviewers, then we will in most cases honor such appeals. Keep in mind that such requests will prolong the overall review process. In addition, the distinct possibility exists that the additional referees will make their own recommendations that the revised submission be improved further if it is to be published. The only other instance where we send a revised paper to an entirely new set of reviewers is when none of the old reviewers is available. In such situations, we contact the contributing authors to alert you to the situation before we proceed. We may also ask one of our editorial advisory board members to take a second look at the revised submission, in an effort to expedite the second round of review.



Most scientists regarded the new streamlined peer-review process as 'quite an improvement.'

Q: I received a decision letter, but there's no decision. Is my paper rejected or accepted?

Wouldn't it be great if decisions were easy? Most of the time, the decision on the fate of a manuscript is not that cut-and-dried, so we give you a chance to respond to the comments of the reviewers and editors. For an entertaining discussion of the different types of rejection letters sent by editors to authors, I highly recommend a recent commentary by the "Mole" at the *Journal of Cell Science* (2).

What's the best way to respond to our "not rejected, not accepted" letters? Take the Mole's advice (3) and absolutely do not respond on the day you receive the letter, especially if the reviewers were very critical. Quick rebuttals (or knee-jerk responses) are rarely well-developed responses. Remember that the editors and reviewers are scientists who interact with you in the scientific community. If you disagree with them, politely and thoughtfully explain why you don't share their opinion. Use the literature or new data to directly address the concerns. Taking the time to generate a clear response allows you to put your best foot forward and shows the reviewers that you are committed to improving your manuscript. The Mole also provides some specific and entertaining suggestions for how to frame your rebuttal letter (3).

Q: Who makes the final decision on a manuscript?

For the majority of the decisions, the Editor-in-Chief confers with the editors and makes the final call. If the Editor-in-Chief is blinded from the manuscript, an Associate Editor, in consultation with the other editors, submits the final decision.

Q: What if I completely disagree with your final decision?

If you do believe we have made an incorrect decision, you may always appeal it. The reviewers and editors are human, and we do make mistakes, so politely tell us why you think we missed the boat. Remember, we want to publish papers and you want to get published, so a thoughtful appeal letter, much like a thoughtful response to reviewer comments, will engage us and help us reconsider our decision. It will take a week or more to respond to you because we need time to reread the paper, reexamine the reviewer comments in light of your appeal letter, and, as warranted, confer directly with the reviewers about the basis for their recommendations.

As always, we're happy to answer your questions and clarify *ACS Chemical Biology's* operations, so send your emails to chembiol@acs.org. If you're interested in how other ACS journals handle their peer review process, I encourage you to check with each individual Editor-in-Chief to clarify his or her specific practices.

Happy publishing!



Evelyn Jabri
Executive Editor

REFERENCES

1. Jabri, E. (2007) Experimenting with peer review, *ACS Chem. Biol.* 1, 325–326.
2. Mole (2007) Rebuffs and rebuttals I: how rejected is rejected? *J. Cell Sci.* 120, 1143–1144; DOI: 10.1242/jcs.03410.
3. Mole (2007) Rebuffs and rebuttals II: take me back! *J. Cell Sci.* 120, 1311–1313; DOI: 10.1242/10.1242/jcs.03411.