Editorial Responsibility: a primer

Since the first scientific journal appeared in 1665, many things have changed in academic publishing. One change that has attracted attention lately is how the landscape of academic publishing has come under considerable strain. The major reason is that research output has grown dramatically over the past decade. Indexed research studies increased by roughly 48 per cent between 2015 and 2024[1], meaning that the total number of published papers is in the millions annually. In 2025 alone, more than 3.4 million scientific articles were published worldwide.[2] This volume is unprecedented in the history of scholarship.

The expansion exerts immense pressure on the infrastructure that powers quality control in the academic publishing enterprise. Editors and peer reviewers are the core of this infrastructure. They contribute a massive amount of unpaid labour every year. Aczel and colleagues estimated that *"the total time reviewers globally worked on peer reviews was over 100 million hours in 2020, equivalent to over 15 thousand years. The estimated monetary value of the time US-based reviewers spent on reviews was over 1.5 billion USD in 2020. For China-based reviewers, the estimate is over 600 million USD, and for UK-based, close to 400 million USD."*[3]

However, editors and peer reviewers are becoming overwhelmed. Most juggle editorial and review duties with research, teaching, grant writing and administrative work. An increasing number of reviewers report receiving more invitations than they can reasonably accept, and some editors struggle to find qualified reviewers willing to commit time to thorough assessments.[4] This capacity strain is an outcome of intense pressure to publish. The problem is compounded by predatory journals that add indiscriminate demand to a market that already suffers short supply.

In this context, the role of the journal editor (guest inclusive) becomes ever more critical. Editors act as gatekeepers and primary arbiters of academic quality, rigour, fairness and relevance. However, publishing pressures and reviewer scarcity can make these responsibilities overwhelming. In this editorial, my aim is to suggest four imperatives for editors and editorial board members in the hope that this would contribute, even if only to a small extent, to how they maintain high standards.

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR ROLE AS EDITOR

Many people think that journal editors are also pure administrators, but this is not accurate. Most, if not all, publishers employ dedicated staff to handle purely administrative tasks such as submission compliance, formatting, anonymisation checks and completeness. These processes are necessary, but they are not editorial judgements. For example, if a journal requires authors to submit a separate title page including authors' details and an anonymised manuscript, any submission that does not meet this requirement is filtered out and returned to the submitter before editors even see them. If authors make a mistake during submission and would like to make a correction, the journal administrator – not the editor – is the best contact.

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/science/2025/jul/13/quality-of-scientific-papers-questioned-as-academics-overwhelmed-by-the-millions-published (July 13, 2025)

[2] https://thehonores.com/3-million-papers-a-year-is-academic-publishing-out-of-control/ (January 13, 2026)

[3] https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s41073-021-00118-2 (November 14, 2021)

[4] https://editorscafe.org/details.php?id=124 (December 15, 2025)

Editorial responsibility begins when the manuscript passes the administrative compliance stage. As a first step, the editor must determine whether a submission fits the journal's aims and scope, whether it offers a credible contribution to the field and whether it meets baseline standards of conceptual clarity and methodological soundness. These judgements should not and must not be delegated to automated systems or passed to reviewers. A manuscript that is fundamentally misaligned with the journal's mission or that exhibits basic flaws in reasoning, design or evidence should be identified by the editor and addressed decisively. In other words, such articles may be desk-rejected in order not to waste the time of both the authors and of the potential reviewers. A fundamentally flawed paper is unlikely to pass rigorous review, anyway. Besides, if mismatch to the journal is the only flaw of a paper, then it is only fair to the authors that such be desk-rejected with a clear rationale. It is also the job of editor to manage the peer review process, including inviting reviewers and sending decisions to authors.

BE OBJECTIVE AND EFFICIENT IN DESK DECISIONS AND REVIEWER SELECTION

As already hinted above, desk rejection is an essential editorial tool. If an editor can identify clear reasons why a manuscript is unlikely to withstand peer review — be it a fundamental mismatch with journal scope, glaring errors, poor methods, lack of originality — then a prompt desk rejection is the service authors deserve. Prolonging such submissions through lengthy review cycles wastes time for authors, reviewers and editorial staff.

When a manuscript proceeds to peer review, reviewer selection must be deliberate. The scarcity of willing reviewers does not justify random or opportunistic matching. One effective heuristic is to appoint at least two reviewers with complementary strengths: one with deep theoretical or conceptual expertise and another with strong methodological competence. Practically, it is also a good idea to approach authors who currently have manuscripts under review or who have previously published in the journal. Contrary to what some

may argue, this is by no means a presumption of entitlement. it is the norm of reciprocity that turns the wheel of scholarly publishing. The invited reviewer reserves the right to accept or decline such invitation.

Editors should also recognise that reviewer willingness has declined in some regions and fields, and that securing multiple high-quality reviews can require more invitations than in the past. For instance, in some contexts, fewer than half of invited experts now accept review requests, which means that timelines and editorial workload are significantly extended.[5] In such situations, timely and transparent communication with authors about delays and options can mitigate frustration.

BE AN ACTIVE MODERATOR OF REVIEW FEEDBACK

Peer review reports are central to the academic publishing process, but not all reports are equal in quality or tone. Some reviews are incisive and constructive while some are unhelpful, unduly harsh, irrelevant to the content of the manuscript, or even ethically questionable. It is also not uncommon to find toxic remarks, careless stereotypes and even subtle but damaging undertones in reviewers' comments. I provide some illustrative examples of good and bad review comments in Box 1, all of which were inspired by my own editorial experience.

Editors have the responsibility to communicate a decision to the authors and in so doing, they have authority to moderate reviewer feedback. The areas to moderate include removing personal attacks, dismissing irrelevant critiques, resolving reviewer disagreement and intervening where comments contravene disciplinary or ethical norms. The point here is not for the editor to sanitise critique, but to ensure that feedback communicated to authors is fair and focused on improving the work.

In their communication to authors, an editor should not mechanically relay review comments. Above all, the decision letter should model professionalism and intellectual rigour; the way authors respond as well as the overall tone of the discipline is influenced by editorial conduct. Of course, it is expected that review reports are shared

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[5] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/peer-review-crisis-is-stalling-indias-scientific-progress/articleshow/123871529.cms (September 14, 2025).

Box 1: Examples of good and bad review feedback

Good examples

These comments are incisive, specific and constructive. One can find suggestions of concrete improvements and no personal commentary.

"The theoretical framing around absorptive capacity is promising, but the manuscript would benefit from a clearer articulation of the microfoundations."

"In particular, you cite Cohen and Levinthal but do not specify the routines or managerial practices through which knowledge is assimilated. Consider clarifying whether you treat absorptive capacity as a capability, a process or an outcome."

"Methodologically, the survey instrument appears sound, but please justify the exclusion of firms younger than three years. This decision may introduce survivorship bias.

"A robustness check including younger firms, even if exploratory, would strengthen the credibility of the findings."

Bad examples

The following are bad. The first one gives no explanation of where novelty is lacking or what dimension of contribution is weak. The second one is a subtle *ad hominem*. The third one seeks to impose reviewer preference (a quantitative design is not inherently deficient and what the reviewer has raised is simply outside the scope of an explicitly quantitative study). The fourth one contains an implicit stereotype. It assumes that institutional weaknesses are a given characteristic of the study context; if this comment was about the role that the context plays in the results, then that would be valuable. The fifth example illustrates a subtle bias linked to author identity. The last one is at once inflammatory and unprofessional. While it may seem unlikely, I have seen one or two such comments before as an editor. Even if rejection is warranted, the reviewer must express this in civil language. The common weakness of all of these bad examples is that they offer no guidance on how to improve the manuscript.

"The paper lacks novelty and does not make a strong contribution. The writing needs substantial improvement."

"This paper demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of entrepreneurship theory. The authors appear not to have read the key literature and the analysis is naïve."

"The manuscript should include a qualitative case study component. Purely quantitative approaches are insufficient to understand entrepreneurship."

"Given the study is based in [country], it is not surprising that institutional weaknesses dominate the findings."

"The English is surprisingly good for authors from a non-native background, though still not at the level expected for this journal."

"This manuscript should never have been sent out for review. It is a waste of the journal's time."

with authors; however, the editor must take ownership of the decision by synthesising reviewer input into an independent and clearly reasoned judgement. The decision letter should filter out hostility, bias or irrelevant demands, distinguish between fatal flaws and remediable weaknesses and explicitly adjudicate disagreements between reviewers. It must specify the decisive issues related to the conceptual, methodological or value-added aspects of the paper, clarify whether revision is realistically viable and base the final judgement in the journal's standards. This may seem overwhelming at first, but once an editor gets into the routine, they will find two things to be true: one, they will not always have to deal with many issues at once, and two, they will find their own rhythm and heuristics for undertaking the moderation.

GUARD AGAINST BIAS INHERENT IN EDITORIAL ACCESS TO AUTHOR IDENTITIES

Many peer review systems are single-blind or double-blind. Even in double-blind contexts, editors generally see author names and affiliations but authors do not always know which editors handle their papers. This is especially true about associate editors and could be a form of information asymmetry in which editors know authors, but authors do not know editors. The responsibility on the editor here is to be so disciplined as not to be swayed by knowing the authors.

One may think that this is a mundane point but there are rising cases of editorial conflict of interest across several disciplines.[6] Editorial decisions should rest solely on the merits of the manuscript. Institutional prestige, author seniority, geographic origin and prior reputation are all factors that can bias judgement if unconsciously weighted. Admittedly, it is difficult, if not impossible, for humans to maintain absolute objectivity but an editor should at least try to be as objective as possible. Practically, the editor should continually reflect on their own decision-making processes and, where possible, use systems that help to minimise bias, such as consistently using structured decision criteria.

CONCLUSION

The current pressures on peer review and editorial workflows are significant, but they also present an opportunity to reaffirm the core values of scholarly publishing. Editors who exercise high levels of objective judgement will contribute to a more sustainable, rigorous, fair and trustworthy scholarship landscape. The world is confused enough as it is in this post-truth generation; we should be able to trust editors.

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[6]
https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pbio.3001133 (November 23, 2021); https://arxiv.org/abs/2307.00794 (September 23, 2025); https://www.science.org/content/article/some-guest-editors-pack-special-issues-their-own-articles (January 16, 2026)