



Editorial

Letter to our authors, or how to read and interpret your reviewers' comments



Scientific journals classically publish Instructions to Authors and Guidelines for Reviewers. *Orthopaedics & Traumatology: Surgery & Research* (OTSR) is no exception, with Instructions to Authors updated in 2018 on all of our websites (OTSR, *Revue de Chirurgie Orthopédique et Traumatologique*, EM Consulte, EES: <http://www.em-consulte.com/getInfoProduit/OTSR/instructionsAuteurs/OTSR.pdf>), and an article analysis help page published by Elsevier. Producing the final version of an article that has been accepted for publication, however, involves a supplementary step: understanding and interpreting the contents of the comments sent to the corresponding author by the reviewers and the article's designated editor. We thought it important to share with our readers the various aspects and issues involved in this decisive phase in the production of the final article.

Before going any further, a few details need to be given about the reviewing process, which is easily consulted in our Instructions to Authors.

The decision to accept or reject is rarely taken by an editor alone, but results rather from a peer-review process in which it is the reviewers' opinions that count [1]. In exceptional cases, as stated in the Instructions, an editor may directly reject a submission without consulting any reviewers, in case of serious format issues, malorientation of an article not concerning orthopedics and traumatology, major biases, plagiarism or very weak scientific contribution. Ever-increasing scientific output and easier detection of plagiarism by dedicated applications combine to increase the rate of direct rejection [2], which may lead to increasing author dissatisfaction [3].

In the vast majority of cases, however, the editor will submit the article for review. It is important here to point out that OTSR reviewing is not blinded. This may seem anomalous, if not aberrant, but in point of fact we all know that anonymity, however well-intentioned, is in many ways hypocritical, as it favors the major teams (which can easily be recognized, notably via their auto-citations in the reference list) at the cost of authors who are, in every sense, truly anonymous. And indeed, many journals have about-turned on this idea of anonymous reviewing.

The editor thus collates the reviewers' comments and comes to and explains a decision to reject or to accept with revisions (it being very rare to accept without any) [1], which is sent to the authors in a letter including all or a part of the reviewers' comments and suggestions. Usually, the editor will not merely list the reviewers' remarks, but analyze them in detail so as to give a balanced opinion as to the validity of the study and its interest for the community [4]. For example, if 4 out of 5 reviewers recommend publication

but the fifth points out a major methodological lapse, this will be highlighted rather than just averaged out [1,4].

The decision and, even more, the reviewers' suggestions are very often well accepted by authors, who make good use of them to improve the clarity and thus the message carried by the article. But they may sometimes be taken badly or misunderstood, resulting in exchanges that stray far from strictly scientific concerns, resembling rather a showdown in the OK Corral [5]. This led some editorial boards to publish reviews non-anonymously, in the hope of nudging the reviewers toward more truly impartial and scientific analysis, but also of unmasking possible conflicts of interest and finally enhancing their journals' scientific quality [6]. OTSR has yet to take such a step [7].

To respond to authors' remarks about some of our "decision letters", we felt it could be useful to clarify certain points and provide some food for thought concerning articles either accepted or rejected but in either case on the basis of an explicit argument.

What advice can we give to authors who are disappointed or annoyed by the decision?

- Don't shoot back from the hip: take the time to think, and read over the comments and suggestions several times.
- When changes are asked for before acceptance, take the reviewers' advice as an opportunity to improve your study: this, after all, is the whole point of peer review. The editor plays an essential role as a filter selecting the reviewers' suggestions and comments so as to avoid any personal attacks (which, fortunately, have become exceptional, following the recommendations for "scientific fair-play" [8]). The aim is, obviously, not just to torture the authors, but to optimize presentation, highlight internal validity and strengthen external validity so as to promote communication and citations. It is true that suggestions are sometimes numerous, and that this can be irritating; but this in fact is the reflection of the interest the reviewers have shown for the work. It is, finally, normal that a study, if it is original and the topic is an important one, should be the subject of detailed analysis: poor articles are the ones that get the least commentary. And we know that peer-reviewing always enhances quality [9]. Some comments may seem "unrealistic", and in that case they need to be taken for what they are: questions raised in the reviewer's mind to which no clear answer was found in the article. These are legitimate questions. Some may seem incongruous or inappropriate, but this just means that the reviewer or the editor in charge of the article, who are experts in the field, have misunderstood a

point, which therefore cannot have been sufficiently clear. The editor does not have access to all of the possible responses: further investigations that could be undertaken or have not been published, data that have not been used, alternative measurements that may be preferable to those used in the article. In such cases, the authors have several ways of responding in a constructive spirit: a) they have a response (and so much the better!), or b) they don't, or don't agree. Obviously, there can be no question of "cheating" and coming up with a score or results with the benefit of hindsight to keep the reviewers happy. The authors certainly have a right to reply, in a letter accompanying the revised version, and may decide that such and such a request is unfeasible or that such and such a modification seems inappropriate or unlikely to improve the article – so long as they can argue their point of view. The corresponding author's response letter is important: when the revised version is submitted, it enables the editor to judge whether the authors have fully examined all the requests and made every possible effort while respecting scientific integrity. It is essential that the argument should also appear in the revised text: usually in the Materials and Methods section and in the Discussion where study limitations are presented; the reader will thus better grasp the significance of the study and also its limitations (which are only natural), and finally its message.

- If the article is rejected, we advise authors to make use of the reviewers' suggestions in submitting to a different journal: the chances of acceptance will be better if the suggestions of the first panel of reviewers have been taken on board, and a better impact factor may thus be achieved [10].
- In case of direct rejection without peer review ("desk reject"), a letter of "justified direct rejection" is sent, containing the editor's comments (unsuitable journal, format error, correctable bias, linguistic shortcomings), which can help for submission elsewhere, usually at the cost of a lower impact factor – unless, that is, the article is beset by "insurmountable" errors, such as major bias, plagiarism or poor scientific quality.

Peer review is like democracy: the least worst of systems. It is, we are fully aware, a subjective process, but this can be countered by means of standard reviewing formats and calling on several reviewers. Complete author satisfaction is impossible to guarantee, but for more than 70 years [6] peer reviewing has ensured high-quality science, despite its limitations [8,9]. Other systems have emerged in open-source journals without peer review or with post-publication review, although the validity of these approaches remains to be determined [11]. There are also other solutions such as non-anonymous peer review [6], which seems to have certain advantages and gets around the biases of the "recommended reviewers" system, which leads to poorer selection of articles and has been abandoned by several journals which had adopted it [12].

Disclosure of interest

P. Beaufils is Editor in Chief of *Orthopaedics & Traumatology: Surgery & Research* and, outside this article, is a consultant for Smith & Nephew. H. Migaud is a deputy editor of *Orthopaedics & Traumatology: Surgery & Research* and, outside this article, is a consultant for Zimmer-Biomet, Corin, MSD and SERF.

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