

What Editors Look for in a Manuscript and in a Reviewer (or at least one editor does)

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Caveat

- These opinions are mine only
- I don't speak for the other AJE Editors, editors in general, or the Journal itself



Reference

- Alexander GR. A guide to reviewing manuscripts. *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 2005; 9:113-7
- By describing how to review papers, there's also guidance on how to write them



Overall Manuscript Quality

- Very few papers are so good that they scream “Accept me!”
- Papers so bad that they should obviously be rejected are not that common either
- Most papers are in the middle, and sometimes decisions seem arbitrary, even to me
- Therefore, little things can matter



The First Thing I Look for in a Paper

Brevity!



The Second Thing I Look for in a Paper

Brevity!



The Third Thing I Look for in a Paper

Brevity!




Unfortunately, I rarely find it!



Just because AJE allows 3500 words, it does not mean you must use them all!

I have an attention span of ~3000 words, and when I get a paper greater than ~3400 words, part of my brain just groans


After being an editor for 5 years, I still do that. I try not to, but I just can't help it.



I believe that failure to teach students how to write concise papers is the biggest shortcoming of graduate education in epidemiology in the U.S.

I'm not aware of one graduate program that offers a seminar on how to convert your dissertation into manuscripts for publication

Probably that's because few faculty know how to do it either!



You shouldn't put anywhere near the level of detail into manuscripts that you put in your dissertation

You need to convince your committee that you really know this stuff. That's not necessary for a paper-- the readers assume you know this stuff!

And if they're reading your paper, they probably already know something about the field!



Klebanoff's guide to writing papers (taught to me by Jim Mills)

- If you can't summarize the take-home message of your paper in a single sentence, then your paper is too diffuse



Is AJE the Right Place for This Paper?

- Will our readership of research-oriented epidemiologists be interested?
- For perinatal papers in particular, I often have to decide if the paper is more appropriate for a
 - Clinical (obstetric, pediatric) or a
 - Programmatic (maternal and child health, health services) journal, rather than for AJE



Is AJE the Right Place for This Paper?

- Your own references can guide me
- If nearly all are from clinical journals, then maybe your paper should also be sent to a clinical journal?
- If I use that test, it probably means I already suspect we're not the best place for your paper
 - This test confirms an impression, it doesn't create one



Is the Paper Too Narrow in its Interest?

- Should it be sent to a 'specialty' epidemiology journal e.g.
 - Perinatal
 - Occupational/environmental
 - STD
 - "International"
- Are the results of general, or just local, interest?



Quality and Novelty Factor in the Decision

- I will give wider “appropriateness” latitude to a high-quality paper than to a mediocre one
- I will tolerate more weaknesses in a “novel” paper than in one where there already is an extensive literature
- So convincing me that your paper really is “new and different” can help a lot!



Novelty?

- An uncommon analytic method
- An unusual study design or circumstance
- An understudied topic
- I might accept a paper with uninteresting results if the methods are instructive, and ask the author to revise the paper accordingly



Rejection Without Review – An Editorial Dilemma

- I can often read a paper and see that while it's not terrible, it's unlikely to be accepted
- Do I reject without review to avoid wasting authors' and reviewers' time?
- OTOH, without reviewer comments, how can an author improve the paper?



Primary Grounds I Use to Reject Without Review--

Combination of “Novelty” and “Appropriateness”

I Reject ~30% of Papers Without Review



2 Editors Needed to Reject Without Review

When the Editor-in-Chief assigns the paper to me, he might attach a note suggesting rejection without review, & giving a brief reason

Sometimes I decide to reject without review and he needs to confirm that decision

We rarely disagree on this decision but if we do the paper is sent for review



Style, Appearance, and Formatting Matter

- Look through several issues of the journal to which you're planning to submit, especially if it's a journal you don't read regularly
- Notice the "style" of articles
 - Long, detailed introductions (common in social science, uncommon in epidemiology, rare in clinical)
 - Long tables? (OK in epidemiology, rare in clinical)



Style, Appearance, and Formatting Matter

- Pay attention to Instructions to Authors e.g.
 - Formatting of references
 - Placement of tables
 - SPELL CHECK, SPELL CHECK, SPELL CHECK!!!!!!
- Following instructions, correct spelling show
 - Attention to detail
 - Respect for the Journal
- Failure to do this won't get your paper rejected, but probably will make an editor less tolerant of other flaws



Is English Your Native Language?

- If not, then consider asking a colleague who is a native English speaker to proof-read your paper
- Unless extreme, poor spelling, grammar and/or vocabulary will probably not cause a rejection
- However, the amount of re-writing necessary to make a paper acceptable probably will be considered in making a decision to accept or reject



“Cover Letter” for Manuscript

- I used to write detailed cover letters, explaining why my paper was important
- When I became an editor, I realized that I didn't pay attention to cover letters
- Now I write short cover letters for my papers!
- Other editors may pay more attention to cover letters than I do



“Cover Letter” for Manuscript

- If there is somebody who should NOT be a reviewer for your paper, let me know, and give me a brief reason why (gory details not needed)
- I will almost certainly honor this request
- However, use this only with very good reason
 - If you list 20 people, I'll get suspicious!



Components of the Manuscript

Title and Abstract

- “A sales pitch for your paper” – Leon Gordis
- Accurately represents substance and important points of the paper
- Interesting, but not needlessly provocative
- If paper is accepted, may be the only part that many in the audience will read



Components of the Manuscript

Introduction

- Clear, succinct statement of the problem
- Essential background data to put your study in context
- Short (1-2 sentence) statement of what you hope to add with this paper
- I like short (1-1.5 page) introductions if possible



Components of the Manuscript Methods

- "...a reviewer must address the question of whether there is ample detail, within reason, to replicate the study elsewhere"
- "There are grey areas between too little, just right and too much detail"
 - Alexander, 2005 (emphasis added by MK)



Components of the Manuscript Results

- Text, tables and figures should not be redundant
- Flow logically, follow order of methods
- Clearly label tables and figures
- Avoid editorializing or discussing

Alexander, 2005



Components of the Manuscript Discussion

- Concise summary of findings, relating them to hypothesis and existing literature
- Note strengths and limitations
- Don't over-do the grandiose speculation


Alexander, 2005 as interpreted by MK



Components of the Manuscript References

- Proof-read for technical correctness
- Accurately portray what the articles said
- Don't cite only 1 side of controversial issues
- Don't try to create controversy in prior work if there is no controversy


Alexander, 2005 (last point added by MK)



Specific Writing Points – (1 of 5 Personal Irritants)

ODDS RATIOS AND RELATIVE RISKS

- Just because the odds ratio approximates the relative risk or risk ratio does not mean you should use the terms interchangeably
- If you've calculated and presented odds ratios, then call them odds ratios



Specific Writing Points – (2 of 5 Personal Irritants)

JUMPING TO ASSUME CAUSATION

- Association ⑤ Causation
- It took over 15 years to go from the first study to the conclusion that smoking causes lung cancer!
- Unless your study is randomized, don't say, or even imply, that your association is causal
 - Even "may cause" is usually too strong for me!



Specific Writing Points – (3 of 5 Personal Irritants)

IGNORING STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

- Rothman did us a favor by pointing out that just because $p > 0.05$, it could still be important
- However, without significance a “positive association” can mean whatever the author wants it to mean



Specific Writing Points – (3 of 5 Personal Irritants)

IGNORING STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

- 1.5 (0.9-2.5) = suggestive, might or might not be important (or unbiased)
- 1.5 (1.1-2.0) = significant, might or might not be important (or unbiased)
- 1.5 (0.5-4.5) = imprecise estimate– nothing more!
- If (1) or (3) don't write your paper like it's a major positive study, and even be cautious about (2)!



Specific Writing Points – (3 of 5 Personal Irritants)

IGNORING STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

- If you're going to make a big deal out of a measure of risk that "differs" between strata, at least give us a sense of how significant, or close to significant, the interaction term is



Specific Writing Points – (4 of 5 Personal Irritants)

POPULATION ATTRIBUTABLE RISK OVERUSE

- PAR implies
 - Your association is causal
 - All confounding has been accounted for
 - You know exact prevalence of the risk factor
 - Risk factor acts independently (no interactions)
 - Risk factors occur independently of each other (multiple factors don't cluster in the same people)
- Unless you're very confident of all the above, use PAR sparingly



Specific Writing Points – (5 of 5 Personal Irritants)

LACK OF HUMILITY

- Be humble in your writing!
- You should be your own harshest critic, and your peers should be your strongest advocates
- If it's the other way around, you are in trouble!



A Final Point

- I rarely reject papers because of a single “fatal flaw”
- The usual reason: so many “little problems” that to become acceptable, the paper would need more re-analysis and/or re-writing than its importance justifies
- Look at your paper in a cold, objective light and ask yourself “how important is my paper to this field?”
- Unless it’s very important, keep the paper short, and make things as easy as possible for the reviewers and Journal





Role of Reviewers

- Reviewers are consultants to the Editor
- AJE does not expect me to rubber-stamp recommendations, and I often do not follow them completely
- However, acceptance difficult to justify if all reviewers recommend rejection



An Editor's View on Reviewing

- I have to cover a broad range of material, of which I have varying degrees of knowledge
- Things I know very well
 - Pregnancy complications
 - Preterm birth and neonatal complications
 - Fetal growth



An Editor's View on Reviewing

- Things I know reasonably well
 - Spontaneous abortion
 - Birth defects
- Things I know somewhat
 - Fertility, contraception and related topics
- Things I don't know (but handle anyway)
 - Gynecology, menstrual function, lactation



An Editor's View on Reviewing

- Things where I'm highly variable
 - Child health (depends on specific topic)
 - Fetal origins of adult disease ("Barker hypothesis")

- The less I know, the more I depend on good reviewers



What I Like to See in a Review-- A Definitive Recommendation in Confidential Comments

- Don't just repeat your comments to the author in the confidential comments section
- A namby-pamby recommendation does not help me very much, particularly in a topic I don't know well
- Don't worry about being a nice guy. I really appreciate your frank evaluation, and I can deal with a blunt assessment given in confidence



Confidential Comments to the Editor

- You don't need to write a lot
- Just give me the "bottom line" of your review
- Noting in confidential comments a couple of reasons for your recommendation is very helpful



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- Recommendations have become more useful since the AJE divided the category “major revision required” into 2 sub-categories
 - Paper likely to be acceptable after major revision
 - Acceptability uncertain even after major revision
 - That’s because it forced the reviewers to make a definitive statement



Thank you

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