

Reviewing appeals

Constructive dialog on manuscripts and publishing decisions ultimately improves manuscript quality.

At *Nature Immunology* we receive far more manuscripts than we can publish in our pages. This situation, unfortunately, forces the editorial staff to make many more negative than positive decisions about submitted manuscripts. Like the editors of other Nature Publishing Group journals, the editors of *Nature Immunology* undertake an initial 'triage' of submitted manuscripts in which we select those manuscripts that we consider to be of sufficient interest and insight to put forward for external review. We carefully weigh the novelty of each manuscript, determining how large an advance it represents over previous work, as well as its appeal to a broad section of our readership. We attempt to make a 'good-faith' assessment of the manuscript and to communicate to the authors in the 'decision letter' the realistic prospects of the work for our journal. Typically we attempt to evaluate and reach a decision within 48 hours of submission. By doing so, we believe that we are helping authors of those manuscripts that receive a negative decision by not causing further delay of the eventual publication of the work elsewhere. Yet it is not easy saying "no" most of the time.

Likewise, many manuscripts do not pass external review. Referees might pose technical concerns about experimental design or suggest alternative valid hypotheses or interpretations for the data presented. Referees are asked to comment on the manuscript's novelty and suitability for a diverse range of immunologists. Often referees rank the order of their concerns (for example, 'must-do' experiments) and voice an overall recommendation for the manuscript in the confidential comments to the editors. Indeed, we use this candid advice as a feedback response for where the 'bar' should be set for manuscripts under consideration at the journal. As various fields advance, what might have been considered suitable for publication in earlier days (such as creating a knockout animal model without providing a fuller functional description) might not be sufficient on its own today. Editors use both confidential comments and those voiced to the authors to reach decisions on these manuscripts.

So when does 'no' really mean 'no'? Clues can be found in the 'decision letters' returned to authors. Manuscripts that lack the requisite novelty beyond previously published work, whether this issue is raised by the editors or the referees, often are not reconsidered unless the authors can provide compelling evidence of the new insight presented by the work. Those that might be relevant to only a small segment of the community or that may not be of direct interest to the wider immunology community generally would fare better if submitted to another journal. Manuscripts deemed too preliminary but that investigate an important issue are sent back to authors with the invitation for further development. Reconsideration of such manuscripts is likewise subject to novelty issues in that during the interim, other

publications (including those 'splitting off' some of the story) might compromise the manuscript.

When would it benefit authors to appeal for reconsideration? After receiving a negative decision, the natural inclination is to telephone the editors to voice dismay, but it is often better to convey an appeal in writing. Such appeals are appended to the manuscript file and can thus be reconsidered by the editorial team at a time when the appeal is discussed, with the authors' concerns being conveyed in their own words. Given that manuscript editors are often handling many manuscripts at various stages in the review or production cycle, this means of officially documenting an appeal will 'queue' an editorial review of the manuscript decision. Editors can then initiate a telephone conversation for further discussion of the manuscript with the authors. The appeal process is described online in our guide to authors (http://www.nature.com/ni/authors/ed_process/index.html#appeals). Appeals that indicate serious factual errors or evidence of bias pose a relevant basis for reconsideration, as does the addition of data in certain circumstances.

We realize a negative decision is a disappointment. The manuscript evaluation process should not be viewed as an adversarial situation that impedes publication. At times (thankfully, rarely), we receive harsh comments voiced against the editors, referees or both as to whether they are sufficiently qualified to judge the work. Such comments do not help the manuscript. Instead, both editors and referees strive to strengthen the findings reported in the manuscripts under consideration. Concerns posed during review are likely to be voiced by other readers; thus, it would be beneficial to authors to make a 'good-faith' effort to allay such concerns. Many times authors have data on hand that address the concerns posed by the editors or referees or can do the requested experiments relatively quickly. Dismissing such concerns or suggesting that the additional experimentation is beyond the scope of the manuscript often does not help the manuscript's prospects. Authors should note that individual track records do not play a substantial part in the reconsideration of appealed manuscripts, as the focus is on the manuscript content. Likewise, 'celebrity endorsements', such as favorable comments from colleagues or after presentation at conferences, do not sway editorial decisions, as we evaluate manuscripts based on the concerns outlined above.

We believe that constructive critiques made during the review process improve manuscript quality, whether the manuscript is ultimately published in *Nature Immunology* or in another journal. Clarification of the review and appeal processes, as provided here, should assist authors in their preparation of manuscripts. We hope that by offering this advice to authors we can lessen frustration should a negative decision be rendered.

