

Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals: Guidelines for Good Practice. Irene Hames. Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell. 2007. Soft cover, 312 pages, \$42.

One way to judge the quality of a garment is to roll up its sleeve to examine the workmanship of the seams. This review is a rolling up of the sleeve, of sorts. The Journal decided to invite a staff member to evaluate this book on peer review and manuscript management; in doing so, it also examined its own peer review process.

Early on, under the heading “What is This Book Trying to Achieve?”, Hames observes that science journals usually rotate editors to ensure freshness of vision. Thus, many editorial offices are often in flux, starting out as somewhat ad hoc operations, with most staff learning “on the job.” Once computers and file cabinets are in place, the staff needs to set up its own protocols, tailored to the individual needs of the editor and readership. For many academic editors, editorial tasks are only a small part of their professional activities, performed in addition to their research and clinical duties—all the more reason for setting up protocols that can protect and make best use of scarce, valuable time.

The publishing industry, like many trades, has a “medieval” aspect, in that skills are transmitted via daily interaction between apprentices and more experienced members of the guild. You can start with a degree in journalism or technical editing, but you learn most of the skills you need from those who have been honing them for years. The house style that keeps a journal appearing the same from issue to issue—an aspect of publication that takes considerable time and effort to achieve, but that most readers take for granted—can be considered the “guild secret.” Hames is indeed a master in this trade, and this is her handbook, with practical advice obviously gained from long experience.

The cover bears the logo of the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, which endorses the book as a vital resource for any small or beginning office. It can serve also as a reminder of good practice to the staffs of large established publishing houses. Hames advises that, regardless of pressure from management to produce immediate, tangible results in setting up an office protocol, a period of careful thought and planning is vital and pays off in the long run.

According to the book’s foreword, Hames set up the editorial office for *The Plant Journal*, for which she still serves as managing editor, and she is also a knowledgeable and popular speaker at professional meetings. In draft the book itself was reviewed by professionals with similar backgrounds (the author’s peers), including 3 anonymous reviewers. A book on peer review that has undergone its own peer review makes for a satisfying specimen of a dragon swallowing its own tail, an ancient symbol depicting a closed cycle of development.

Hames places peer review in proper perspective, noting that when thorough and rigorous it serves as the foundation for scholarly publishing, on whose integrity depend grants and promotions in the academic world, best practice in the clinical world, policy formulation in the political world, and sometimes (and more controversially) financial reward in the commercial world. Thus, its charge to maintain standards and to ensure transparency, fairness, and “that reporting is as truthful and accurate as possible” (page 3) must be taken seriously.

By this book’s standards, RESPIRATORY CARE’s requirement of 3 reviewers for most submissions places it in a minority group (17%) among sister journals. Most journals (75%) require only two. (Professional hearsay has it that a journal with a highly technical subject such as drug efficacy can require that a single submission be reviewed by a broad spectrum of specialists, numbering up to 100 people.) Hames describes reviewers as a precious resource that should be treated with respect and care. Because of increasing financial and time pressures, researchers, academics, and clinicians are less available to perform the review task for “the good of science” or the profession. Most reviewers undertake the task with quid pro quo in mind, understanding that the tradition will serve them well in their turn as authors.

The standard way of thanking reviewers is with an honorary annual roll call, but Hames also mentions the move toward offering continuing medical education credits for manuscript review, based on the fact that reviewers, who are always kept in the correspondence loop between authors and editors, inevitably learn a lot in the process. (RESPIRATORY CARE recently initiated a program that offers Continuing Respiratory Care Education [CRCE] credits to respiratory therapist reviewers, beginning with all reviews completed as of July 1, 2008. Credit

will be provided only for reviews judged acceptable by the editor: an initial review is worth 2 CRCE credits; review of a revised manuscript is worth 1 CRCE credit.)

A growing challenge to all journals is that ease of access to the Internet and thus to online programs is increasing submissions, including by authors from less developed countries. Hames faces this challenge head on; she remarks that these submissions from the larger international community are sometimes substandard and sometimes—because of different cultural standards for original work—have problems of plagiarism. But she notes that the most common flaw of such submissions is poor English, and she offers graceful solutions to this delicate dilemma that requires careful handling. She suggests that such papers be returned to authors “for language improvement and the reminder that this is being done in their best interests, as it is felt that [the paper] cannot receive a fair review in its current state” (page 39). The book uses 2 types of graphically highlighted sidebars to drive home its main points: one dedicated to guidelines that can be considered “golden rules”; the other dedicated to aspects of peer review that may be problematic and about which to be especially careful; these “beware boxes” provide clear (and, in my experience, true) warnings, such as “Beware! Sending manuscripts to reviewers in which the standard of language is very poor is unfair and may frustrate or anger them” (page 38).

The book’s timeliest chapter is on the conversion from paper-based to online submission and review. At a recent professional conference, such conversion was referred to as a time of “creative destruction.” Anyone who has experienced this test of one’s abilities can appreciate this expression, and anyone who is facing such conversion would do well to read this chapter. The book cites 16 months as the average time to go from paper to online, from initial configuration to launch day. RESPIRATORY CARE’s fairly recent conversion took 2 years. One challenge to small offices, not fully articulated in this excellent chapter, is that of undertaking this conversion *while also* meeting publication deadlines and retooling all supporting documents (eg, review packets, author instructions, Web site text). Hames covers all the crucial aspects of the conversion, from the choice of system, custom configuration, and data transfer, to dealing tactfully with “grumbling” users. I have heard the editorial role after electronic conversion described as that

of “cyber-shepherd,” a job description amply and well detailed here.

In reading this solid instructional manual, my attention was briefly galvanized by 2 remarks about the Impact Factor. The first mention (on page 113) of this citation metric was a casual one, in the context of budgeted page allowance:

If a journal is trying to increase its Impact Factor, which virtually every journal is trying to do, introducing greater stringency for acceptance in the range where there are many manuscripts of similar quality can help achieve that objective . . .

The second mention (on page 159) was an admonition to editors against using unethical means to manipulate a journal’s Impact Factor. I was hoping that Hames, a veteran insider of the scientific publishing world, would offer a candid assessment of the pros and cons of this powerful index that many in the profession see as an alien tool of evaluation that distorts science reporting and has far too much power.

The only reservation I had with the book overall is attributable to Hames’s *déformation professionnelle*, a French term that translates as “professional bias” or “vocal idiosyncrasy”—the tendency for one’s viewpoint to become warped or distorted according to the practice of one’s daily work. The *déformation* here is Hames’s tendency to be all-inclusive and hyper-organized. She covers every possible eventuality in the peer review process, from varieties of conflict of interest (dual or competing commitment), to personal animosities between research groups, to examples of reviewer reminder messages that grow with increasing insis-

tence from a gentle reminder to a note “with perhaps the suggestion that they abandon the review” (page 69). How can these traits be a fault? They can’t, but many veteran editors, with a sigh of recognition, will recognize these joyless and sometimes oppressive traits (the “Miss Grundy syndrome”) as their own.

On the other hand, workers new to the profession can only be thrilled at finding such a detailed book at the beginning of their careers. Especially interesting in this regard is the appendix of exemplary editorial documents (such as a change-of-authorship form and a reviewer-guidance form) borrowed with permission from journals such as *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* and *Polar Research* (the journal of the Norwegian Polar Institute). These examples of working documents offer rare and enticing views into the idiosyncrasies of other editorial offices, and are much more interesting than the generic templates that are usually included in such manuals. The final appendix is devoted to alternative models of peer review (pre-submission peer review, post-publication peer review or commentary, open public peer review, author-initiated peer review), most of which have been made feasible by the move toward open-access publication. Some of these innovations will be incorporated into the classic publishing process, but from a brief review of their drawbacks the reader can better appreciate how the traditional peer review process has lasted as long as it has.

Hames discusses aspects of editing that should resonate with many of her colleagues who take the time to read this valuable book, including: the challenge of writing concise yet comprehensive author instructions that

do not overwhelm the author in minutiae or alienate the user with demands; the “comfort cushion” of clinging to a paper record in a digital world, in case of system or network failure; and the advantages of hard copy over computer screen for some tasks. The book is extensively and valuably referenced, and many of the listed sources are available online; it sent me source-hunting for, among other things, a “good exposition on the usefulness or otherwise of key words in scientific journals” (page 49).

Publishing has long been known as “a gentleman’s profession.” To read **Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals** is to appreciate that this is literally true in the publication of scholarly scientific articles, where the integrity of the enterprise depends on the good faith of all concerned: authors to undertake studies that conform to ethical standards and to submit reports that are not manipulated; reviewers to give freely of their own time, to pay attention, and to discern flaws; editors to have not only extraordinary powers of discrimination but also to keep confidentiality and to ensure that all involved in the review process are treated fairly and given due credit. The book offers all “grubs” toiling away with nose to paper (or to computer screen) a keener appreciation of their minor but real role in the scientific tradition. RESPIRATORY CARE’s staff is presently considering implementing several of the book’s suggested protocols. The editing and index are, as one would expect, impeccable.

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