



Guidance

for fair and fast desk
assessment of submitted
manuscripts during times
of crisis



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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated the key role that academic journals play during times of crisis as they sought to disseminate new knowledge about the virus, the epidemic and clinical care rapidly. Submissions to academic journals increased significantly at a time when editorial teams were already overstretched and working under increased pressures. This guidance focuses specifically upon the first stage of review, often undertaken by then editorial team, to identify manuscripts that either meet or do not meet the threshold criteria for peer review. It suggests ways of streamlining the processes in a manner that is fair.

The guidance addresses both the process for identification of manuscripts that meet the threshold criteria for peer review and the criteria against which the submission can be assessed.

Editors and publishers might use this information to improve consistency, efficiency, and transparency of the desk assessment process.



Introduction

Given the urgent need for research evidence during crises to ensure that decision-making is evidence-informed and that publications from the scientific community do not act as a source of misinformation, the [PREPARED](#) project¹ investigated potential measures that could help to speed up publication processes without compromising the scientific and ethical integrity of the published works. This guidance focuses specifically upon the first stage of review, often undertaken by the editorial team, to identify manuscripts that either meet or do not meet the threshold criteria for peer review. It is intended as supportive guidance for editorial teams, to assist with fair and rapid decision-making for initial manuscript assessment.

The guidance has been developed specifically for use during times of crisis, but the measures described might also be helpful for editors and publishers in routine times. While the need for fast assessment may not be as great in routine circumstances, the goal of fair assessment is always relevant.

Editors and publishers, please feel free to adapt this guidance to your own specific requirements.

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated the key role that academic journals play during times of crisis as they sought to disseminate new knowledge about the virus, the epidemic and clinical care rapidly.² In response, many medical journals accelerated their publication processes for COVID-19 related manuscripts.

For instance, comparison of the duration of 14 medical journals' publication processes prior to and during the pandemic found that, for these journals, the time between submission and publication had decreased on average by 49%.³



This achievement was quite remarkable given that most journals in biomedicine, health and social care experienced a significant increase in the number of submitted manuscripts during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that more than 11,000 manuscripts were submitted between January 1st and June 1st 2020, compared with approximately 4000 manuscripts submitted during the same period in 2019, with virtually the entire increase ascribed to COVID-19-related manuscripts.⁴ The number of resultant publications also increased rapidly; in May 2020, the Economist reported that since January 2020 the number of COVID-19-related scientific publications had been doubling every 14 days, reaching 1,363 in the preceding week.⁵

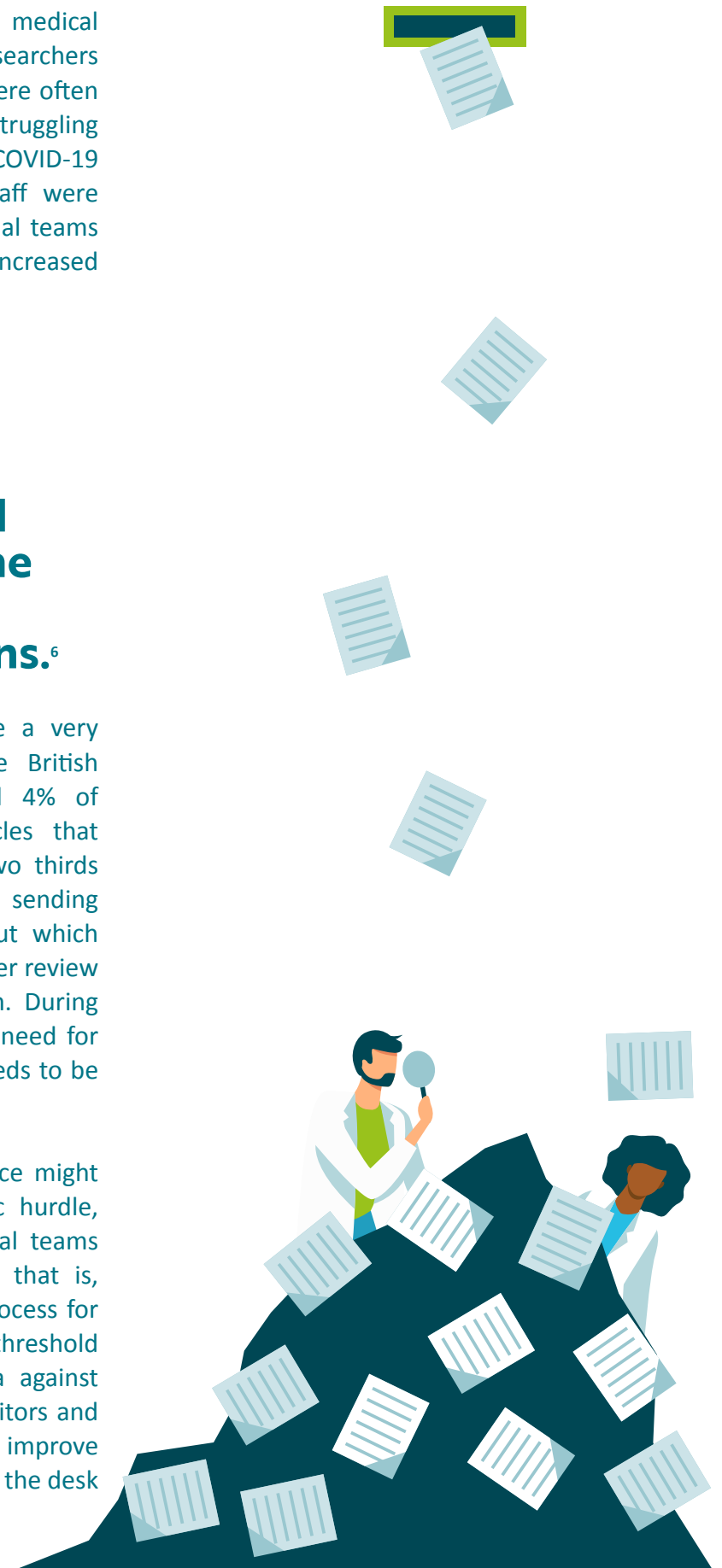
Context (cont)

Simultaneously, many reviewers (like medical professionals, academics, clinical trial researchers etc.) were more difficult to find as they were often too busy with their primary work and/or struggling with COVID-19 / COVID-19 restrictions / COVID-19 in their families. Journal editors and staff were similarly affected and hence, many editorial teams were overstretched and working under increased pressures.

Considering these challenges, it is easy to understand how editors and staff could be overwhelmed by the sheer number of new manuscript submissions.⁶

Many high-profile medical journals have a very low acceptance rate. For instance, the British Medical Journal only publishes around 4% of the approximately 4,000 research articles that are submitted each year, and roughly two thirds of all submissions are rejected without sending for external peer review.⁷ Decisions about which submissions should be sent for external peer review are normally taken by the editorial team. During crisis situations, when there is an urgent need for reliable information, initial assessment needs to be undertaken swiftly and reliably.

While there is a danger that new guidance might be viewed as an additional bureaucratic hurdle, this guidance is intended to help editorial teams streamline their processes in a manner that is, nonetheless, fair. It addresses both the process for identification of manuscripts that meet the threshold criteria for peer review and the criteria against which the submission can be assessed. Editors and publishers might use this information to improve consistency, efficiency, and transparency of the desk assessment process.



What makes the assessment process fair?

Transparent criteria and process

- A description of the editorial decision-making process is included in the journal's guidelines for submission.
- The criteria against which new submissions are assessed are specified in the journal's guidelines for submission.
- Authors are informed within a reasonably short period of time about the reasons for rejection, with specific reference to the assessment criteria.

Consistent criteria and process

- All submissions are assessed using the same process and against the same criteria to promote fairness and to ensure that there is consistency between editors.

Minimisation of bias

- Care needs to be taken regarding the assessment process to ensure there are no conflicts of interest between the authors and those undertaking the evaluation. Where a conflict of interest exists, the manuscript should be handled by an alternative member of the editorial team.

Timeliness

- Rapid editorial decision-making enables authors to consider revision and /or submission to another journal where they may have a better chance of future acceptance.

Competence

- The persons undertaking the assessment are equipped with the relevant skills and expertise.

What makes the assessment process fast?

There are various logistical issues that need to be considered:

- How to balance speed with rigour (speed might compromise rigour).
- How to balance speed with fairness (enacting fairness can slow things down).
- Whether a checklist or framework based upon the criteria below might help to speed up the process in a manner that also upholds both rigour and fairness.









Since there is such a wide variation between journals in terms of workload, available resources, and management structures and processes, the above issues, and how to address them, are best considered by individual teams.

The criteria









Threshold criteria fall into three categories: **relevance, quality, and ethics and integrity**. Failure to reach the threshold criteria in any of these areas may constitute a fair reason to reject a manuscript submission; in other words, the expectation is that only where an author meets the threshold criteria for all three categories will the manuscript then be sent out for peer review.









Relevance

Scope	The manuscript falls within the aims and scope of the journal.	 
Current priorities	The manuscript aligns with the current priorities for the journal (which may be different in times of crisis).	 
Novelty	The manuscript makes a novel contribution to knowledge / understanding in the field, which may take many forms, including new discoveries, theory development, innovative methodologies, synthesis of other works etc. as relevant to the field.	 
Context	The manuscript is appropriately contextualised within contemporary debate.	 

Quality

Writing standard	The manuscript is comprehensible, appropriately academic in style (including with respect to structure) and adheres sufficiently to the journal's formatting requirements.	 
Analytically sound	The manuscript includes appropriate depth and breadth of analysis with a well-constructed and well-founded argument.	 
Methodologically sound	The methods for data collection and analysis (including statistical methods) are appropriate for addressing the research aims with no obvious flaws or errors.	 
Aims	The aim / hypothesis / research question is stated clearly.	 

Ethics and integrity

Evidence of ethics approval	<p>Where relevant, evidence of approval by an appropriate body is supplied.</p>	 
Compliance with research ethics	<p>Where relevant (for instance, clinical studies, other research with humans, human data, animals, or impacts for the environment), reporting indicates compliance with and respect for the relevant ethical norms, which may differ between cultures, countries, and fields of study.</p> <p>See Suspected Ethical Problem in a Submitted Manuscript - https://publicationethics.org/sites/default/files/ethical-problem-in-submitted-manuscript-cope-flowchart.pdf</p> <p>Where relevant (for instance, collaborative research between high-income country partners and lower-income country partners), reporting indicates that steps were taken to avoid ethics dumping (the off-shoring of unethical practices to regions where regulatory systems might not be as rigid). See the TRUST Code: A global code of conduct for equitable research partnerships - https://www.globalcodeofconduct.org/</p>	 
Conflicts of interest	<p>Potential conflicts of interest are disclosed (including funding of the study and the role of the funder as well as declaration of other types of conflicts of interest). See COPE Conflicts of interest / Competing interests - https://publicationethics.org/competinginterests</p>	 

Ethics and integrity (cont)

<p>Researcher conduct</p> <p>Given the wide variation in resources that are available to different editorial teams, many will not be able to undertake in-depth checks for all forms of research misconduct, especially at the submission stage. Nevertheless, the COPE guidelines that are recommended here provide helpful pointers for all who work in academic publishing, regardless of resources.</p>	<p>There is no evidence of researcher misconduct including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data fabrication / falsification Plagiarism Citation manipulation Excessive self-citation <p>Authorship problems – see COPE How to spot authorship problems - https://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts/how-spot-authorship-problems</p>	<p>✓ ✗</p>
	<p>Suspicious submission patterns (e.g. submission by third party, duplicate submissions – see COPE guidance on Systematic Manipulation of the Publication Process - https://publicationethics.org/sites/default/files/publication-process-manipulation-cope-flowchart.pdf)</p>	<p>✓ ✗</p>
	<p>Redundant/duplication /major overlap submissions (i.e., based on same data with identical or very similar findings and/ or evidence that authors have sought to hide redundancy, for example, by changing title or author order, or not citing previous publications). May be detected by text similarity software (e.g., Crossref Similarity Check) See COPE flowchart Redundant (duplicate) publication in a submitted manuscript https://publicationethics.org/sites/default/files/duplicate-publication-submitted-manuscript-cope-flowchart.pdf</p>	<p>✓ ✗</p>

Development of this guidance

The decision to focus upon the first stage of assessment was taken after literature review and consultation with publishers and editors to reveal challenges that were experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first draft of the guidance was informed by publicly available information on publisher and journal websites, as well as relevant academic literature.

The draft guidance was refined with the help of journal editors and representatives from publishers. Thanks to all who contributed their thoughts that helped to shape this version.

References

- ¹ The overall goal of the PREPARED project is to develop an operational ethics and integrity framework, which safeguards key ethical values, supports a rapid and effective research response to crises and improves overall pandemic preparedness.
- ² Sullivan, P., Trapido, E., Acquavella, J., Gillum, R. F., Kirby, R. S., Kramer, M. R., ... & Baral, S. (2022). Editorial priorities and timeliness of editorial assessment and peer review during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Annals of epidemiology*, 69, 24.
- ³ Horbach, S. P. (2020). Pandemic publishing: Medical journals strongly speed up their publication process for COVID-19. *Quantitative Science Studies*, 1(3), 1056-1067.
- ⁴ Bauchner, H., Fontanarosa, P. B., & Golub, R. M. (2020). Editorial evaluation and peer review during a pandemic: how journals maintain standards. *Jama*, 324(5), 453-454.
- ⁵ The Economist (2020) Speeding up science during the pandemic May 9th 2020. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/05/09/speeding-up-science-during-the-pandemic>
- ⁶ Kondziolka, D., Couldwell, W. T., & Rutka, J. T. (2020). Putting pen to paper during a pandemic: increased manuscript submissions to the JNS Publishing Group. *Journal of Neurosurgery*, 133(4), 947-949
- ⁷ British Medical Journal (2024) Publishing Model. Available at: <https://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/publishing-model>

