

I Just Clicked Submit. What Happens Next?

The first in a series of articles providing guidance to researchers on the publishing process for peer-reviewed scientific journals

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This article is the first of four based upon presentations made during an IMMUNOLOGY 2011™ AAI Publications Committee Symposium titled “In the Lion’s Den: The Manuscript Review Process and How to Survive It.” Zúñiga-Pflücker is a former Section Editor and Associate Editor for The Journal of Immunology and a current member of the AAI Publications Committee.

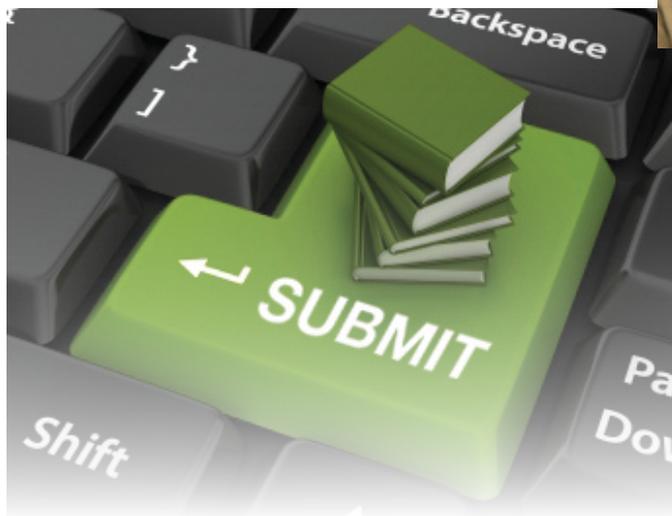


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I Just Clicked Submit. What Happens Next?

Is your heart racing and the excitement palpable as you click “Submit” on *The Journal of Immunology* (*The JI*) online submission site? If so, you are not alone. It’s a very tense moment for everyone — and for good reason. You’ve spent tremendous amounts of time, money, and effort in your research, and you are now eager to share your findings with your peers in the field. And you are sure your research will resonate in the broader scientific community beyond! Suddenly, though, excitement morphs into near panic as you wonder, “Did I upload the correct file, the one with the latest versions of the figures or text, the one with all the corrections and proper labels?” You check and double check yourself, verifying that all was submitted correctly. Eager anticipation is restored. But, alas, this sense of well being is short-lived, for an ominous chorus has commenced in your head: “What happens next? What will the reviewers think of my paper?”

In this article, we’ll focus on the first question, the “What happens next?” That is, we’ll look at the process that takes place within *The JI* from the time you submit your paper to the point that you, the Corresponding Author, receive a decision notice. (See “Corresponding Author” insert, page 30.) As in our scientific papers, I think a chart for this process may be helpful. In Figure 1, I’ve attempted to map the steps of *The JI* editorial process (see page 29).



For the second question, the one regarding reviewers’ opinions, I advise you to seek comfort and guidance from the sages at your local hangout — your favorite bar, pub, or café.

The Editorial Structure

The JI makes use of a three-tiered editorial structure established to ensure that all full-length submissions are considered by more than one person and given a fair review. In addition to the AAI professional staff of Ph.D.s at *The JI*, there are fifty two Section Editors, ten Deputy Editors, and one Editor in Chief. The Section Editor is typically a scientist working in the same or closely related field as the author, while the Deputy Editor, who covers broader areas for *The JI*

and deals with several subspecialties, is likely to be familiar with the general topic of the manuscript but less involved in that particular subspecialty of immunology. In 2010, *The JI* review process was supported by the generous assistance of nearly 3,700 reviewers and 123 Associate Editors (a select list of peer reviewers) engaged in reviewing nearly 4,000 papers received that year.

The Review Process

Once the manuscript is received, a member of the editorial staff confirms that the paper is structured according to *The JI* requirements and that all the necessary forms associated with the submission have been received (Step 2). If the paper does not pass this inspection, it is returned to the Corresponding Author (Step 2b). Note

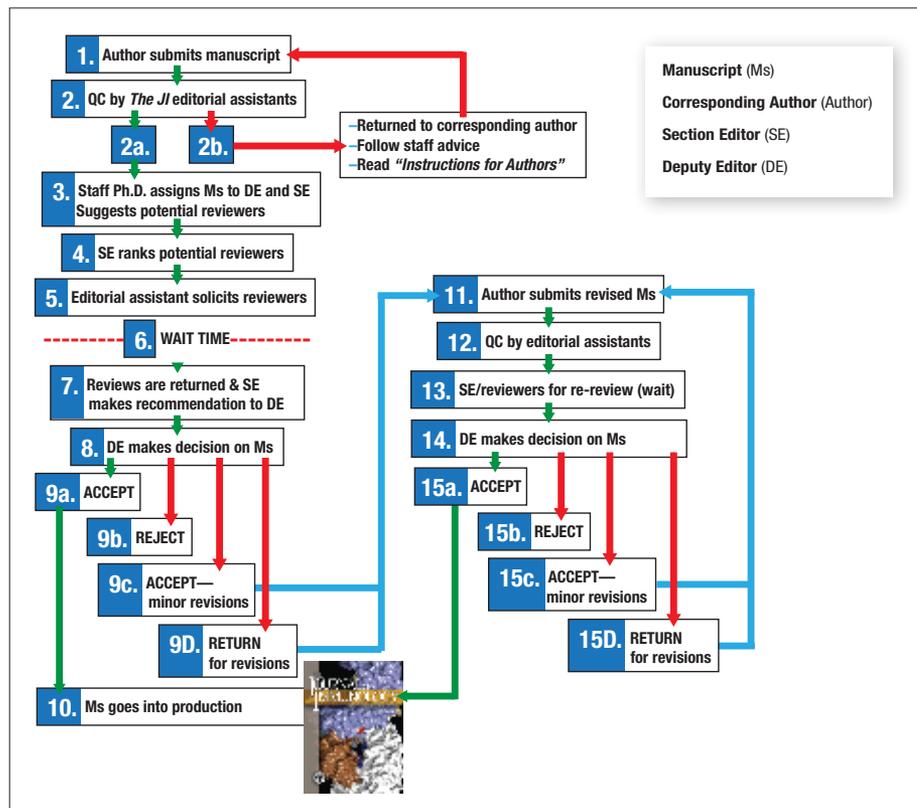
that this and all other communications between the journal and the authors are conducted with the Corresponding Author. Any author whose manuscript is returned at this point should “re-” consult *The JI* “Information for Authors” guidelines available online at www.jimmunol.org/site/misc/authorinstructions.xhtml.

Once the paper is properly organized and all necessary forms have been received by *The Journal*, the manuscript is assigned a Deputy Editor and a Section Editor. At this point, the staff Ph.D.s at *The JI* compile a list of potential reviewers to be forwarded to the Section Editor with the manuscript. The Section Editor reads over the paper and assigns a rank order to the list of potential reviewers. The Section Editor may also add names or veto suggested potential reviewers. These reviewers are your peers, highly regarded scientists who, because they are working within the same field, are deemed capable of offering a substantive and insightful review of the work.

The JI staff next contact potential reviewers in the order provided by the Section Editor until at least two reviewers are secured. Reviewers are given a two-week window for providing their review of the manuscript.

Once two reviews are received (Step 7), the Section Editor reads over the manuscript again and assesses the reviews. The Section Editor is also able to consider reviewers’ insights forwarded in comments made directly to the editors but not shared with the Corresponding Author. When I was a Section Editor, I found these comments extremely valuable, for they typically provided clarity on points at issue. At this juncture, if conflicting reviews are received, the Section Editor will provide a third review or seek a third reviewer’s opinion. Finally, with the benefit of reviewers’ comments to the Corresponding Author and those exchanged among editors, the Section Editor re-examines the manuscript and formulates a recommendation to be forwarded to the Deputy

Figure 1—*The Journal of Immunology* Review Process from Submission to Decision



Editor. The Deputy Editor looks over the manuscript, reads the reviews, and considers the Section Editor’s recommendation before making a decision on the manuscript. The staff then send the decision letter to the Corresponding Author.

The JI does not use a triage system. That is, *The JI* does not reject or accept manuscripts without sending them for the complete peer review process. Although this lengthy process may seem onerous to an author, it provides the kind of transparency and instructive feedback that is especially important for a journal published by a professional society. (Note that a different process applies to papers submitted to the “Cutting Edge” section of *The Journal*. Because a dedicated editor, also an active scientist, assesses the manuscripts submitted to this section prior to soliciting reviewers’ comments, these papers may be declined without the benefit of a full review. However, any manuscript rejected from the “Cutting Edge” section, either with or without

review, may be resubmitted as a full-length manuscript without any prejudice from its rejection as Cutting Edge.)

Four Potential Outcomes

There are four potential outcomes of the review process (Step 9). A paper can be accepted outright (Step 9a), a rare and wonderful outcome. (Upon this most marvelous occurrence, you are well advised to revisit your local hangout to take back all that you said about the dearth of insight and understanding you had anticipated from your peers.) Bear in mind, however, that over 50 percent of manuscripts submitted to *The JI* are deemed unready or, in fact, unsuitable for publication and are rejected. (See parenthetical comment above, but replace “take back” with “restate!”)

Two other potential outcomes are less clear-cut, and both trigger further editorial and/or peer review. The manuscript may be accepted pending minor revisions (Step 9c).

Continued next page

That is, no new experiments or major work is required, but clarifications, corrections, or other minor changes are all that must be addressed. (Again, this calls for another visit to the local hangout, for this outcome is also greeted with much joy!) Following resubmission, the Section Editor looks over the authors' revisions and makes a recommendation to the Deputy Editor.

Alternatively, the manuscript may be returned to the authors for major revisions (Step 9d), as the work requires further experiments or major alterations before being reconsidered for publication by *The JI*. This decision is not made lightly. Careful consideration is given to whether the reviewers' comments and recommendations are reasonable and would, in fact, substantially improve the publication prospects for the paper. Authors of manuscripts that are returned for revisions are given a firm deadline (nine months from date of return) for requested revisions, and the Corresponding Author is given no assurances that the paper will be accepted upon resubmission.

After the authors have completed major revisions and the manuscript has been resubmitted, the Section Editor reads over the Corresponding Author's letter, which should outline

point-by-point the changes made to the paper. Most revised papers are sent back to the initial reviewers for re-review. The Section Editor may recommend whether both or only one of the reviewers needs to see the revised manuscript, but it is the Deputy Editor who ultimately decides who should see the revised submission. In rare circumstances, the Section Editor alone handles the re-review. As before, the Section Editor makes a recommendation to the Deputy Editor (Step 13), who then makes a decision on the manuscript (Step 14), and again the same four outcomes are possible.

If accepted, the manuscript goes to the publisher. If the acceptance is contingent upon minor revisions, the manuscript, as before, is returned to the authors. This is a common outcome. In the re-review, the reviewers and/or the editors may believe that not all the points were properly addressed by the authors, that further clarification must be requested, or that issues initially missed during the first review must now be addressed.

In a less common outcome, the manuscript is returned for major revisions a second time. This is a very rare occurrence since all major issues should have been addressed during the

initial revision. Any outstanding issues are likely either minor issues (Step 15c) or issues previously identified but not fully addressed. Issues that prove to be insurmountable lead to a rejection (Step 15b).

The fact that more than 50 percent of papers submitted to *The JI* are rejected following the initial review or after the re-review phase may strike you as a dispiriting statistic. It shouldn't. Perhaps it's cold comfort, but a rejection from *The JI* should be regarded as a learning experience. After all, it comes after a manuscript has been fully reviewed and carefully considered. The comments that authors receive from peers in the field offer critical insights for improving eventual publication prospects for the paper.

Remember, all authors are filled with anxiety as they await word from the editors. The top-of-mind question for all is why the review process must take so (fill in with your favorite expletive) long. The urge to contact the journal starts nearly as soon as the paper is submitted. Know, though, that *The JI* process from manuscript submission to a decision is about thirty-five days. This is an average time, and some decisions may take longer. *The JI* staff makes every effort to keep the time to a decision as short as possible, sending overdue reminders to reviewers. (That's likely you, at some time, or your peers!) Finally, following acceptance, the average time before the paper appears on the website as a fully formatted and proofed article is about 4.9 weeks.

So, sit back and relax. Or, as is more likely the case, continue performing your experiments and pursuing the funding to sustain them. Take comfort in knowing that your paper and the work it details will be uniquely recognized and handled by a dedicated team of editors and reviewers. After all, *The Journal of Immunology* is your society's journal, and the editors and reviewers look forward to seeing your work bear its proud imprimatur.

The Corresponding Author

- The Corresponding Author is responsible for the content of the submitted work.
- The submission system allows someone other than the Corresponding Author to submit the manuscript (Ms), but once the "Submit" button is clicked, all correspondence about the Ms will be done only with the Corresponding Author.
- If the Ms fails Initial QC and is returned to the Corresponding Author's account to be fixed, the accompanying e-mail goes only to the Corresponding Author.
- The Corresponding Author is responsible for submitting all necessary forms to the journal.
- The Corresponding Author is responsible for paying any fees to the journal.
- Only the Corresponding Author can see the status of the Ms during the review process; office staff cannot give access to other authors to see the Ms status.
- The Corresponding Author is responsible for making newly described reagents available after the Ms is published.