Twelve Tips for Editors, and One Suggestion

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In previous issues, I have written columns featuring tips for authors and tips for reviewers. Do readers of the *Observer* really need tips for editors, too? After all, we deal with only a few of them, right? Yes and no. Although any one author deals with relatively few editors in his or her little corner of the field, psychology and its numerous subfields have a huge number of journals.

How many psychology journals are there? How many editors? These are almost unanswerable questions, or, more accurately, the answers will depend on definitions of what counts as "psychology" and how broadly one casts the net. Nonetheless, Jane McConnell and Barbie Huelser in my lab undertook the task of counting all the editors of psychology journals. They counted only editors-in-chief and associate editors, but not those listed as consulting editors (a much larger set), nor managing editors, book review editors, and some other categories. I won't detail the methodology, except to say that they looked over the world for psychology journals and were not too inclusive of neuroscience journals or those of other related fields. The number of psychology journals they came up with was 336, and the number of editors and associate editors was 1,827. The editor count is probably conservative, because some journals permit consulting editors to accept and reject papers, too. Editors and associate editors change every few years, so the number of past, current, and future editors is very large.

For most editors, there is little or no training. You are plopped into the job and have to figure it out. In 1981, when I became associate editor of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* (thanks to Rich Shiffrin, the editor, asking me), I received five manuscripts, with reviews, and was asked to write action letters on them. My first action was to reject a paper by Donald Broadbent, the eminent British psychologist. He wrote back a gracious note thanking me for my comments — quite the gentleman. When I became editor of the same journal a few years later, I bought a book called *How to Edit a Scientific Journal*. However, because I had already started the job, I didn't have time to read it. Thus, something shorter might be useful. These 12 tips arise from my experience editing two journals, helped by the comments of a few friends and former editors.

1. *Make the journal your top priority*. If you have taken on the task of being the editor-in-chief of a major journal, it must become your top professional priority. (I am assuming that the journal receives hundreds of manuscripts a year and is not a boutique journal that can be handled easily.) Editing a complex journal is the hardest job in academic psychology, much harder than being department chair (I've done both). If you get, say, 300-400 new manuscripts a year, you are dealing with papers every day, even if you have (or are) an associate editor. (By way of perspective, *Psychological Science* is on track to receive well over 1,500 papers this year.) The pace is relentless, with new submissions, revisions, reviews, queries, and complaints (from rejected authors) arriving daily. Also, editors get requests for all sorts of additional information, such as being asked to be in surveys and receiving numerous requests for letters of reference for promotion and tenure (after all, the editor should know how this person's work stacks up).

You can try to create time by lightening loads in other areas of your life, but it's hard. Of course, you can get some relief by not reviewing for any other journals and resigning from the editorial boards you serve on. Maybe you can get some teaching relief; my department chair at Purdue University let me go from four courses to three when I became editor of JEP:LMC, but two of the three were teaching Introductory Psychology to 475 students each semester. Not much relief. And of course you can't slack off on your own research, writing, and advising of students.

How does one edit a journal and keep everything else afloat? It is still kind of a mystery to me, and I've done it twice. It is a huge amount of work, but the rewards are great too, because you learn so much from the papers and the reviews. Editing a journal is like spending several more years in graduate school, except the education is ten times more informative.

The points here are simple: First, be prepared for the onslaught, and second, it will be much worse than you thought it was going to be due to all the hidden extra duties (like writing more letters of reference) that come with it. But you will be glad you did it. You will be a much better psychologist when you finish due to your intensive education.

2. ***Be efficient.*** When you first start as editor, you will be tempted to take your time, thoroughly perusing papers when they come in, doing careful research to pick reviewers, reading each paper thoroughly when the reviews come back. You need to quickly get out of this mode if you are going to get the job done. Speed up. Skim (or speed read) papers. Make decisions soon after the reviews are in. You should aim at quick turnaround to establish your journal as a place where the author will get prompt feedback. Authors accept rejection much better if you get the bad news to them after one month than after six months. I have noticed that many neuroscience journals are able to respond to authors promptly, in a matter of a few weeks. Few psychology journals manage that, but it is a goal. Electronic submission and reviewing have not seemed to speed matters appreciably, because most of the time spent between submission and action lies in the paper sitting on the reviewers' and editor's desk (or in their computers).

Set tight deadlines for reviewers, and have your assistant start nagging them before the deadline arrives. An e-mail every day or two days helps get those reviews in. Then once the reviews are in, reinforce the reviewers by turning around your decision promptly. If the reviewers have to wait a long while to get your action letter, they will know they don't need to bother being fast to review the next time around.

3. ***Pick your editorial board with care***. Many editors load up their editorial boards with senior researchers who have big labs and who seem to be too busy to actually review manuscripts. Check with previous editors on people you are considering. Appoint people initially for a brief term so that you can see how they do and then turf them off if their reviews are slow or superficial. Make the editorial board large enough so that you do not overwhelm reviewers (6-10 manuscripts per year seems to be a norm for most journals). However, if you keep your original board relatively small, you will have room to add as you find reliable, prompt reviewers whose work you value.

4. ***Select reviewers carefully, with an aim to getting a range of opinions***. The most critical (and overlooked) stage in the editorial process is selection of reviewers. Sometimes a paper's fate is sealed before it arrives in the reviewers' in-boxes. Let's say a young researcher submits a paper with three experiments challenging Famous Psychologist A's theory and supporting Famous Psychologist B's

theory. First, the editor should skim the paper enough to realize the situation. Assuming that is done, then to whom should the paper be sent for review? If the paper were sent to A and two of A's former students, doubtless they would find many flaws in it. Correspondingly, if B and B's students got it, the paper would doubtless receive much more favorable reviews. This is human nature. What the astute editor will probably do in such a case is send it to someone in the A camp, someone in the B camp, and a third person who is knowledgeable in the field, but has no published opinion on this particular issue. Thus a broad range of views is insured.

Of course, the editor who follows this strategy is, in all likelihood, deliberately creating a problem to face later: mixed reviews. That seems to occur often in our field, even in cases less dramatic than the one just sketched. Many people have written about the unreliability of peer review and have argued against the peer review system on this basis. However, that's life. If editors do a good job of selecting diverse reviewers, papers will often (but not always) receive mixed reviews. It's the editor's job to weigh the pros and cons of the arguments about the paper. Sometimes a paper will be accepted over one or even two negative reviews, if the editor decides that the paper's merits outweigh its demerits. Don't be afraid to go against the tide of reviewers, at least occasionally, if you have clear reasons. Reviewing and editing is not a democratic process, with everyone having one vote. The editor is The Decider (borrowing from George Bush). The reviews provide information for the editor's decision.

Another point in selecting reviewers — do not send the paper to many reviewers. On occasion, I have been one of five or even six reviewers. In one memorable case, six people reviewed a long, confusing paper, everyone wrote roughly the same review, and the paper was rejected with much wasted effort. If you are relying on people you are pretty sure will come through, only 2 or 3 reviewers should be enough. You are an independent reader, too. We all have too much reviewing to do, so try to keep your requests to a minimum.

5. ***Treat associate editors well***. If you are the editor-in-chief of a high volume journal, you probably have at least a few (and maybe more) associate editors. Like the editorial board, associate editors should be selected with great care. One of your tasks is to track their performance a bit and try to provide advice as needed. This can greatly add to your load, but it is critical. If a journal has many associate editors, its reputation can be greatly harmed if only a couple of them are very slow or erratic in their decisions. Try to skim their action letters and provide advice if they are too downbeat (or, less likely, if they are too upbeat and accept too many marginal papers). Exhort them to be speedy. Have your assistant send monthly or bimonthly reports indicating the editor's and associate editors' performance in terms of number of papers handled, speed of action, percentage rejected, etc. Give general advice on acceptance/rejection rates. Praise good work in associates. Editing is truly a thankless task: If you accept an author's paper, she thinks "of course", if you reject it, she thinks you're an idiot. So the editor can at least thank the associate editors for their hard work.

Finally, never, ever overrule an associate editor. When I was editor, I was surprised the first few times that an author would write to me saying that my associate editor had made a terrible mistake in rejecting a paper. The author would then ask me to read the whole file (paper, reviews, action letter) and, if I agreed with the author's judgment, to reverse the decision and publish the paper. I developed a semi-form letter that essentially said "Sorry, everyone gets one shot at this journal. If we made a mistake and did not accept your good paper, then you should not have too much trouble at another journal." Yes, the peer review system is not infallible and sometimes good papers get rejected from one journal and find a

home in another journal. As we psychologists well know, decision-making processes are fraught with various biases, much as we may try to guard against them. And reasonable people can disagree. Luckily, our field has many journals on most every topic.

6. ***Try to accept papers that advance the field.*** Papers get accepted in journals for a variety of reasons. Often the reviewers did not find anything terribly wrong with a paper and neither did the editor, so in it goes. However, as we all know, papers can have nothing much wrong with them without having anything much right, or exciting, about them either. Unfortunately, almost by the nature of academic publishing, this must be true. After all, citation data show that most published papers, even in good journals, have little impact on the field. In psychology it usually takes years to know the genuine contribution of a paper in terms of its impact, but the editor can guess. I think our editors might be a bit more risk taking in accepting some papers that set a new direction for the field, even if the paper does not tie up every loose end.

Endel Tulving suggested a criterion for reviewing that also works for editing: What did I learn from reading this paper? Is it worth knowing? Will this paper have an impact on the field? If the answers are yes, accept the paper. (Of course, if the paper is far from your own area of expertise, you sometimes have to take the reviewers' word for it.) One thing you do not want to do as editor is reject a paper that goes on to be published somewhere else only to become a citation classic.

Here is the one suggestion promised in the title of this column: If you are ever appointed editor of a journal, ask authors to answer Tulving's questions in their letter of submission. Imagine all authors answering three questions in their letters of submission: 1) What is it that the reader will learn from this article that she did not (or could not) have known before? 2) Why is that knowledge important? and 3) If published, what will this paper be cited for in the future? Keeping these questions in mind will help the authors in crafting their papers, and the answers will help reviewers and editors in their deliberations.

7. ***Write good action letters; be concise and be as kind as possible.*** No one (I assume) wants to get an action letter that says "I am rejecting your paper. See the reviews for details." That's too concise. Still, an action letter need not go on for very long, especially if the reviewers have done a thorough job. Certainly, if the reviews are consistent one way or the other, the action letter can serve as a one page summary. Resist compulsively repeating everything the reviewers wrote. You have many more papers calling for your attention. Because our field is often full of unrelenting criticism, I always tried to include a few kind and encouraging words, especially if the reviewers did not. However, don't go overboard here. One of the worst mistakes to make is to mislead an author. If you are rejecting the paper and do not want to see a revision, be clear about it. If you reject it too kindly without being clear, the author may waste time and effort revising and sending it back. And then your time as editor is wasted too, as you will handle the paper again.

8. ***Don't routinely send papers out for re-review.*** Many editors seem to almost always send papers out for review a second and even a third time. This consumes huge amounts of reviewer time and greatly delays publication (or rejection) of the paper. My advice to editors is make a decision on a resubmission by yourself (with the previous reviews and the author's resubmission letter) whenever possible, especially if you know something about the topic. If you are truly ignorant of the topic and baffled by the paper (and sometimes you are – it's just too far afield from your expertise, but reviewers found it promising), then send it back out to review a second time.

Why do so many papers get sent out a second and third time? From my own experience, it's often because the editor wants to make the decision easier and to delay it. If I am an editor and I get a resubmission landing on my desk, I might already have six papers with reviews that are beckoning for my attention. If I decide not to have the resubmission reviewed, I then have seven papers. However, if I decide to send it out to review again, I get some advice to use and I buy myself (say) 4-6 weeks of time.

As editor, you should resist that urge to send it back out. Just read it, read the initial reviews, and then make the decision (again, if it's in your area). Repeated reviewing clogs the whole editorial system, wastes reviewers' time, and slows publication.

9. ***Try to keep your editorial criterion relatively consistent over the years***. I have never seen a study to confirm this point, but my observation of editors (myself included) leads me to suspect that one's editorial criteria become more lax with experience in the job, especially for editors who may never have served as an associate editor. In the first months on the job, the editor has very high standards. Practically nothing is good enough for the journal. In the fifth or sixth year, after reading hundreds of papers and sets of reviews, the editor seems to say "Well, this looks pretty good." A paper rejected in Year 1 of the editorial term might well be accepted with the same reviews in Year 5. One of my associate editors once wrote me (regarding an invited paper for a special issue), "This paper is pretty boring, but it won't do any harm." Because it was a short invited paper commenting on a symposium, it was accepted, but the attitude captured by the quote seems to be the way many editors feel at the end of their editorial terms when they accept what, years earlier, would have been viewed as marginal papers.

There have been very famous cases of editors losing control near the end of their editorial terms and accepting nearly everything. One editor for an APA journal accepted a huge number of papers near the end of the term, and APA had to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars publishing huge issues and special issues of the journal, because the authors all had acceptance letters written on APA letterhead.

10. ***Don't give in to special pleading.*** Some members of our field have chutzpah, to put it nicely. When they submit their paper they may tell you that it deserves priority treatment, such as extra-speedy review (or maybe just you, the editor, reading it and accepting it). Then they would like it jumped above other papers in the queue and published early, as the lead article. Or maybe they write that because of the "high legal stakes in the courtroom," their paper deserves special treatment. And so on. Really, it happens. Worse yet, it sometimes works. I've seen it. Resist these special pleadings. If someone demands special and fast treatment, that is all the more reason to slow down and be deliberate.

11. ***Discourage replies and counter-replies.*** There is a place for replies to papers, but in my opinion many journals overuse the tactic. Are there any reply or counter-reply papers that have gone on to make a big impact on the field? Maybe, but I certainly can't think of any offhand. These situations create huge headaches for editors as they try to adjudicate the testy exchanges between authors. The papers can generate more heat than light, though they sometimes make good "theater of science" for readers.

owever, precious journal space may often be better devoted to new papers. An aggrieved author can always collect new data on the matter and try to rebut a previous paper more strongly, which is probably the preferable strategy in most cases. Nonetheless, this whole reply/counter-reply business is tricky, and each case must be decided on its own merits.

12. ***Always remember: It's the author's paper, not your paper.*** This may be the most important tip. I wish I could make it a rule. Some editors are very heavy-handed. They want the author to rewrite the paper to their and the reviewers' specifications, as though the editor always knows best. It is maddening from the author's perspective to have his or her paper nannied through the system, often with multiple rounds of (sometimes conflicting) reviews, so the final paper is hugely qualified and footnoted. My way around this issue when I was editor was to tell authors of papers I wanted to accept "Here are a few things you must do to bring the paper up to publishable quality," and I would try to keep this a short list. Then I would write, "If it were my paper, here are some things I would do. However, it's your paper, so just take these as suggestions, and I'll accept the paper whatever you decide." Then I could inject my opinion, but not demand that the author write the paper to my specifications. Still, some people out there may think I was overactive as an editor, too.

Those are my 12 tips. After reading them, you might wonder why anyone in his or her right mind would want to be an editor. I hinted at the reason above: It is the most exciting job in academia. You learn a huge amount, you think hard, you see new work on the cutting edge, and it can change your own research for the better. I am so glad I did it. While serving on and chairing editorial search committees, I have seen many people decline the opportunity to edit. However, despite the demands of the job, I strongly recommend that you accept an editorship if you are ever given the opportunity. You will make mistakes along the way, especially when you are just starting out, but you will get the hang of it. As Will Rogers said "Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment."