

# Smoothing and Speeding the Journal Review Process

BY GARY MICHAEL SMITH

Journal peer review involves a fairly standardized process of manuscript receipt, reviewer selection, the review cycle, and decisionmaking about which drafts will be published, declined, or sent back for revisions. Although the peer review process is relatively simple in structure, it's important to make the best use of the time and expertise of editorial board members, reviewers, and authors. Often, editorial board members, like reviewers, are volunteering their time. Authors may be operating on strict grant deadlines that require publication of articles for additional funding; journal staff have an obligation not to allow submissions to languish—or worse, get lost in a shuffle of misdelivered express-mail packages, misdirected faxes, and expensive long-distance phone tag.

## Manuscript-tracking options

All journal editorial offices develop their own specific procedures, but the goal is to move manuscripts efficiently through the stages of an effective, unbiased review cycle while offering authors the quickest turnaround time possible for feedback, whether or not a paper is accepted. Electronic systems can ease the transition of the hard-copy and snail-mail editorial office into the speedier world of electronic submissions and reviewer comments.

Perhaps one of the most discussed topics among staff members of editorial offices is manuscript-tracking software. Which software to choose among the many available is a matter of personal preference, taking into

account the nature, size, and scope of the journal. Start with an analysis of what the software will be used for and whether proprietary modifications are anticipated. What information needs to be tracked? How will the data be used by staff members? What display formats are preferred? Should a program be developed from scratch for a complex but long-standing editorial process? Should a current software package be modified? If so, which one?

If the journal is small and receives only a few dozen submissions monthly, or even yearly, a simple off-the-shelf system can be used. However, if the journal is larger and receives hundreds or thousands of submissions yearly, a program appropriate to such volume is necessary.

Commercially available tracking software developed for the specific needs of the peer-reviewed journal includes such industry-specific packages as RMTS (ScholarOne, Inc.), PaperLab (BJM Software), The Editorial Assistant (E.A. Software), and SwiftTrack (SwiftTech Software).

These programs may or may not offer the options desired, but trial versions often are available at no charge and may be worth testing. If modification of the software is necessary, the provider may offer these services for a charge, and may even offer to convert files from an existing software package to the new one.

## Reviewer-database options

To avoid undue repetitiveness when selecting reviewers—especially since reviewers often work pro bono—larger offices often aspire to maintain a data-

base with a number of appropriate candidates. If a database software package is appropriate for the journal, the system that works best for the office may be one developed for the specific needs of the particular environment. It is necessary to determine whether

- an available manuscript-tracking package will satisfy the need to organize the review process,
- a database program can be modified to serve as a tracking program for manuscripts, or
- a new database program should be developed separately from the tracking program.

A cursory review of database software will reveal a variety of packages such as Access (Microsoft Corp.), Paradox (Corel Corp.), and Oracle9i (Oracle), and database software descriptions can be seen on Web sites such as [www.dosbin.com/dbase.htm](http://www.dosbin.com/dbase.htm).

A database program such as Paradox may provide seemingly limitless variables for manuscript and reviewer tracking, as well as template development and text and graphic report generation and presentation, but the programming code may not be easy to modify. If a programming consultant is required, a premium fee of from \$80 to \$100 an hour may be charged. If, however, the editorial office staff includes people familiar with or trainable in programming, a system with more user-friendly code, such as Access, may be the answer.

The capabilities and versatility of database software programs may seem comparable, but the final decision on which package to use should be based

on expectations of what the software will do, the ease of modifying it, and the cost (in time and money) of making such modifications in-house or by contracting out for services.

If a journal's budget and production schedule allow time for staff to evaluate specialized software, using a comprehensive manuscript-tracking software package may provide the most efficient and least labor-intensive system for handling the oversight of manuscripts as well as reviewers.

### **The electronic submission and review process**

Although the electronic check-in process varies from journal to journal, it generally consists of issuing the manuscript a number identifying it from all other submissions. For instance, if the year is 2002 and this is the 300th submission, the assigned number will be 02-300. The paper then is logged into a computerized system for tracking.

A dedicated, specialized manuscript-tracking system such as Carden Jennings Publishing's Gastro-central may be preferable for one journal, while another may benefit from combined word-processing and database software for general correspondence and the automated tracking of reviews, editorial decisions, and general status. See a review at [www.gastro.org/news/99-11/manuscript9911.html](http://www.gastro.org/news/99-11/manuscript9911.html).

Although manuscript-tracking or database software may accommodate the generation of letters and envelopes, a word-processing software package such as Microsoft Word or Corel WordPerfect may offer more flexibility when cutting and pasting various parts of form letters. Word-processing software may also be less cumbersome for generating complex forms and may provide easier links to fax numbers and e-mail addresses than database

software, although later versions of software such as those associated with current operating systems offer increasingly versatile options.

### **Web privacy and e-mail issues**

The integrity of posting research and critical reviews on the Web, once deemed at risk of potential breaches of confidentiality, is viewed by many journals and publishers as a nonissue. This general lack of concern is justified because of the availability of encryption software and the increasing swiftness with which articles are published. As a matter of fact, it's a growing practice to publish the entire texts of articles on a journal's or publisher's Web site, instead of offering only a table of contents and an abstract of articles.

However, a journal must remain sensitive to the potential lack of technology within research institutions. Consequently, although e-mail or Web posting may be the suggested or recommended method of communication and document transmission, do not make it a requirement for authors and reviewers.

Journal publishers that prefer to use Web posting to streamline their process and make it more convenient for authors may want to consider systems such as Cadmus' Rapid Review hosting service or Manuscript Central by ScholarOne. One such organization is the Institute of Food Technologists. See its guidelines at [www.ift.org/publications/jfs/sty-guid.shtml?L+mystore](http://www.ift.org/publications/jfs/sty-guid.shtml?L+mystore).

When sending reviewers their packets by e-mail, to avoid incompatibility journals should include clear instructions about software and format requirements for e-mailing reviews. E-mailed manuscript review correspondence can present a whole new set of potential pitfalls. Here are two:

- Reviewers must be warned not to send comments as an e-mail attachment unless they use the file format specified by the journal. If a review is not created as an e-mail but as a word-processing file such as Microsoft Word, the receiver will be able to open the attachment to the e-mail only if Word is loaded on the receiving machine. Newer software packages may address this compatibility problem, but not all recipients will have the latest hardware and software.
- Formatting can be lost or altered in e-mail transmission of a detailed layout such as that of a review form, with a confusing reconfiguration of the initial design the result. Although special software programs are available that offer electronic forms generation and transmission, reviewers using such forms must become familiar with the software and understand its limits and specific requirements. Each party will need to have compatible viewing software installed if the software is not universal.

Software doesn't make peer review completely automatic, by any means. In fact, implementing electronic steps may actually require you to rethink your entire editorial and review processes. But why not free up journal staff as much as possible from routine administrative work? In the long run, investing in what admittedly can be the time-consuming transition to using technology is an investment in human resources. ♦

*Gary Michael Smith is a publishing instructor at the University of New Orleans, a publications specialist at the Information Technology Center, and the author of The Peer-Reviewed Journal: A Comprehensive Guide through the Editorial Process (Chatgris Press).*