nature

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Editorial criteria and processes

This document provides an outline of the editorial process involved in publishing a scientific paper (Article) in *Nature*, and describes how manuscripts are handled by editors between submission and publication.

Editorial processes are described for the following stages:
At submission | After submission | After acceptance

At submission

Criteria for publication

The criteria for publication of scientific papers (Articles) in *Nature* are that they:

- report original scientific research (the main results and conclusions must not have been published or submitted elsewhere)
- are of outstanding scientific importance
- reach a conclusion of interest to an interdisciplinary readership.

Further editorial criteria may be applicable for different kinds of papers, as follows:

- **large dataset papers**: should aim to either report a fully comprehensive data set, defined by complete and extensive validation, or provide significant technical advance or scientific insight.

- **technical papers:** papers that make solely technical advances will be considered in cases where the technique reported will have significant impacts on communities of fellow researchers.
- **therapeutic papers:** in the absence of novel mechanistic insight, therapeutic papers will be considered if the therapeutic effect reported will provide significant impact on an important disease.

Articles published in Nature have an exceptionally wide impact, both among scientists and, frequently, among the general public.

Who decides which papers to publish?

Nature's aim is to publish the best research across a wide range of scientific fields, which means it has to be highly selective. As a result, only about 8% of submitted manuscripts will be accepted for publication. Most submissions are declined without being sent out for peer review.

Nature does not employ an editorial board of senior scientists, nor is it affiliated to a scientific society or institution, thus its decisions are independent, unbiased by scientific or national prejudices of particular individuals. Decisions are quicker, and editorial criteria can be made uniform across disciplines. The judgement about which papers will interest a broad readership is made by *Nature*'s editors, not its referees. One reason is because each referee sees only a tiny fraction of the papers submitted and is deeply knowledgeable about one field, whereas the editors, who see all the papers submitted, can have a broader perspective and a wider context from which to view the paper.

How to submit an Article

Authors should use the formatting guide section to ensure that the level, length and format (particularly the layout of figures and

tables and any Supplementary Information) conforms with *Nature*'s requirements, at submission and each revision stage. This will reduce delays. Manuscripts should be submitted via our online manuscript submission system. Although optional, the cover letter is an excellent opportunity to briefly discuss the importance of the submitted work and why it is appropriate for the journal. Please avoid repeating information that is already present in the abstract and introduction. The cover letter is not shared with the referees, and should be used to provide confidential information such as conflicts of interest and to declare any related work that is in press or submitted elsewhere.

All *Nature* editors report to the Editor of *Nature*, who sets *Nature*'s publication policies. Authors submitting to *Nature* do so on the understanding that they agree to these policies.

After submission

What happens to a submitted Article?

The first stage for a newly submitted Article is that the editorial staff consider whether to send it for peer-review. On submission, the manuscript is assigned to an editor covering the subject area, who seeks informal advice from scientific advisors and editorial colleagues, and who makes this initial decision. The criteria for a paper to be sent for peer-review are that the results seem novel, arresting (illuminating, unexpected or surprising), and that the work described has both immediate and far-reaching implications. The initial judgement is not a reflection on the technical validity of the work described, or on its importance to people in the same field.

Special attention is paid by the editors to the readability of submitted material. Editors encourage authors in highly technical disciplines to provide a slightly longer summary paragraph that descries clearly the basic background to the work and how the new results have affected the field, in a way that enables nonspecialist

readers to understand what is being described. Editors also strongly encourage authors in appropriate disciplines to include a simple schematic summarizing the main conclusion of the paper, which can be published with the paper as Supplementary Information. Such figures can be particularly helpful to nonspecialist readers of cell, molecular and structural biology papers.

Once the decision has been made to peer-review the paper, the choice of referees is made by the editor who has been assigned the manuscript, who will be handling other papers in the same field, in consultation with editors handling submissions in related fields when necessary. Most papers are sent to two or three referees, but some are sent to more or, occasionally, just to one. Referees are chosen for the following reasons:

- independence from the authors and their institutions
- ability to evaluate the technical aspects of the paper fully and fairly
- currently or recently assessing related submissions
- availability to assess the manuscript within the requested time.

Referees' reports

The ideal referee's report indicates

- who will be interested in the new results and why
- any technical failings that need to be addressed before the authors' case is established.

Although *Nature*'s editors themselves judge whether a paper is likely to interest readers outside its own immediate field, referees often give helpful advice, for example if the work described is not as significant as the editors thought or has undersold its

significance. Although *Nature*'s editors regard it as essential that any technical failings noted by referees are addressed, they are not so strictly bound by referees' editorial opinions as to whether the work belongs in *Nature*.

Competitors

Some potential referees may be engaged in competing work that could influence their opinion. To avoid such conflicts of interest, *Nature* requires potential referees to disclose any professional and commercial competing interests before undertaking to review a paper, and requires referees not to copy papers or to circulate them to un-named colleagues.

Although *Nature* editors go to every effort to ensure manuscripts are assessed fairly, *Nature* is not responsible for the conduct of its referees.

Nature welcomes authors' suggestions for suitable independent referees (with their contact details), but editors are free to decide themselves who to use as referees. *Nature* editors will normally honour requests that a paper not be sent to one or two (but no more) competing groups for review.

Transparent peer review

Nature uses a transparent peer review system, where for manuscripts submitted from February 2020 we can publish the reviewer comments to the authors and author rebuttal letters of published original research articles. Authors are provided the opportunity to opt out of this scheme at the completion of the peer review process, before the paper is accepted. If the manuscript was transferred to us from another Nature Research journal, we will not publish reviewer reports or author rebuttals of versions of the manuscript considered by the originating Nature Research journal. The peer review file is published online as a supplementary peer review file. Although we hope that the peer

review files will provide a detailed and useful view into our peer review process, it is important to note that these files will not contain all the information considered in the editorial decision making process, such as the discussions between editors, editorial decision letters, or any confidential comments made by reviewers or authors to the editors.

This scheme only applies to original research Articles, and not to Review articles or to other published content. For more information, please refer to our FAQ page.

Reviewer information

In recognition of the time and expertise our reviewers provide to *Nature*'s editorial process, we formally acknowledge their contribution to the external peer review of articles published in the journal. All peer-reviewed content will carry an anonymous statement of peer reviewer acknowledgement, and for those reviewers who give their consent, we will publish their names alongside the published article. We will continue to publish peer reviewer reports where authors opt in to our separate transparent peer review scheme. In cases where authors opt in to publication of peer reviewer comments and reviewers opt in to being named, we will not link a reviewer's name to their report unless they choose to sign their comments to the author with their name. For more information, please refer to our FAQ page.

If the reviewers wish to be named their names will appear in alphabetical order at the end of the paper in a statement as below:

- *Nature* thanks [Name], [Name] and [Name] for their contribution to the peer review of this work.

Any reviewers that wish to remain anonymous will be acknowledged using a slightly modified statement:

- *Nature* thanks [Name], [Name] and the other, anonymous, reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work.

If no reviewers agree to be named, we will still acknowledge their valuable service using the statement below:

- *Nature* thanks the anonymous reviewers for their contribution to the peer review of this work.

Speed

Nature makes decisions about submitted papers as rapidly as possible. All manuscripts are handled electronically throughout the consideration process. Authors are usually informed within a week if the paper is not being considered. Most referees honour their prior agreement with *Nature* to deliver a report within two weeks or other agreed time limit, and send their reports online. Decisions by editors are routinely made very rapidly after receipt of reports, and *Nature* offers an advance online publication (AOP) service to an increasing number of manuscripts.

What the decision letter means

All Articles published in *Nature* go through at least one round of review, usually two or three, sometimes more. At each stage, the editor will discuss the manuscript with editorial colleagues in the light of referees' reports, and send a letter to the author offering one of the following options:

- The paper is accepted for publication without any further changes required from the authors.

- The paper is accepted for publication in principle once the authors have made some revisions in response to the referees' comments. Under these circumstances, revised papers are not usually sent back to the referees because further technical work has not been required, but are accepted for publication once the editors have checked that the referees' suggestions have been implemented and the paper is in the required format (the formatting guide section is helpful to this end).
- A final decision on publication is deferred, pending the authors' response to the referees' comments. Under these circumstances, further experiments or technical work are usually required to address some or all of the referees' concerns, and revised papers are sent back to some or all of the referees for a second opinion. Revised papers should be accompanied by a point-by-point response to all the comments made by all the referees.
- The paper is rejected because the referees have raised considerable technical objections and/or the authors' claim has not been adequately established. Under these circumstances, the editor's letter will state explicitly whether or not a resubmitted version would be considered. If the editor has invited the authors to resubmit, authors must ensure that all the referees' technical comments have been satisfactorily addressed (not just some of them), unless specifically advised otherwise by the editor in the letter, and must accompany the resubmitted version with a point-by-point response to the referees' comments. Editors will not send resubmitted papers to the reviewers if it seems that the authors have not made a serious attempt to address all the referees' criticisms.
- The paper is rejected with no offer to reconsider a resubmitted version. Under these circumstances, authors are

strongly advised not to resubmit a revised version as it will be declined without further review. If the authors feel that they have a strong scientific case for reconsideration (if the referees have missed the point of the paper, for example) they can appeal the decision in writing. But in view of *Nature*'s extreme space constraints and the large number of papers under active consideration at any one time, editors cannot assign a high priority to consideration of such appeals. The main grounds for a successful appeal for reconsideration are if the author can identify a specific technical or other point of interest which had been missed by the referees and editors previously. Appeals written in general or vague terms, or that contain arguments not relevant to the content of the particular manuscript, are not likely to be successful. Manuscripts cannot be submitted elsewhere while an appeal is being considered.

Editors' letters also contain detailed guidance about the paper's format and style where appropriate (see below), which should be read in conjunction with the manuscript formatting guide when revising and resubmitting.

In replying to the referees' comments, authors are advised to use language that would not cause offence when their paper is shown again to the referees, and to bear in mind that if a point was not clear to the referees and/or editors, it is unlikely that it would be clear to the nonspecialist readers of *Nature*.

Appeals

If *Nature* declines to publish a paper and does not suggest resubmission, authors are strongly advised to submit their paper for publication elsewhere. If an author wishes to appeal against *Nature*'s decision, the appeal must be made in writing, not by telephone, and should be confined to the scientific case for

publication. *Nature*'s editors are unable to assign high priority to consideration of appeals.

Authors often ask for a new referee to be consulted, particularly in cases where two referees have been used and one is negative, the other positive. *Nature* is reluctant to consult new referees unless there is a particular, relevant area of scientific expertise that was lacking in the referees already used. Authors should note that as *Nature* is an interdisciplinary journal, referees for a paper are chosen for different reasons, for example a technical expert and a person who has a general overview of a field might both referee the same paper. A referee might be selected for expertise in only one area, for example to judge if a statistical analysis is appropriate, or if a particular technique that is essential to underpin the conclusion has been undertaken properly. This referee's opinion must be satisfied for the manuscript to be published, but as this referee may not know about the field concerned, an endorsement in isolation from the other referee(s) would not constitute grounds for publication. Editors' decisions are weighted according to the expertise of the referees, and not by a "voting" procedure.

Hence, *Nature* prefers to stick with the original referees of a particular paper rather than to call in new referees to arbitrate, unless there is some specific way in which the referee can be shown to be technically lacking or biased in judgement.

If *Nature*'s editors agree to reconsider a paper, the other original referee(s) will have the chance to see and comment on the report of the referee who is the subject of the complaint. New referees can often raise new sets of points, which complicates and lengthens the consideration process instead of simplifying it.

If an author remains unsatisfied, he or she can write to the Editor, citing the manuscript reference number. In all these cases, it is likely that some time will elapse before *Nature* can respond, and

the paper must not be submitted for publication elsewhere during this time.

After acceptance

See this document for a full description of what happens after acceptance and before publication.

Formats and lengths of papers

Space in *Nature* is extremely limited, and so format requirements must be strictly observed, as advised by the editor handling the submission, and detailed in the manuscript formatting guide.

Subediting of accepted papers

After a paper is accepted, it is subedited (copyedited) to ensure maximum clarity and reach, a process that enhances the value of papers in various ways. *Nature*'s subeditors are happy to advise authors about the format of their Articles after acceptance for publication. Their role is to

- edit the language for maximum clarity and precision for those in other disciplines. Special care is given to papers whose authors' native language is not English, and special attention is given to summary paragraphs.
- ensure that the paper is at the length specified by the manuscript editor (including number of figures).
- ensure that the terminology and notation conform to *Nature*'s house style.
- ensure that the figures and tables are clear and will fit in the space available.

Proofs and reprints

Our subeditors send authors the edited text for approval before it is typeset. This enables most queries to be resolved before proof stage. Authors subsequently receive an e-proof, including the

figures, and can also download a PDF proof of the layout. We suggest that authors send proofs to co-authors for them to check, but request that changes among the co-authors are coordinated so that only one author communicates with *Nature* and only one set of corrections is sent. The corresponding (or other single designated) author is responsible on behalf of all co-authors for the accuracy of all content, including spelling of names and current affiliations of all co-authors, so please ensure these are checked carefully.

Proofs are cycled between *Nature*'s production staff, our typesetter and the author by means of an online production-tracking system. Authors are provided with an encrypted link to this system after their paper has been accepted.

Instructions for ordering reprints are provided after the paper is scheduled for publication.

Publication and the media

Nature papers are assigned to a print issue two weeks before publication, at which time authors will receive an e-mail notifying them of their scheduled print publication date. Many papers are published online ahead of print publication date: corresponding authors of these papers will be informed by e-mail when the online publication date is confirmed, one week ahead of publication

The Journals and Editorial press office distributes embargoed mailings highlighting upcoming content to registered journalists six days in advance of publication. The titles of forthcoming papers will be listed on the mailing, along with the corresponding authors' contact details, which means authors may receive media enquiries relating to their paper during this embargo period.

Authors are free to discuss their paper with the media from six days before the publication date, and are asked to ensure that

Nature Research's embargo conditions are understood by journalists and others. Journalists have embargoed access to papers via the Nature Research press site, and are permitted to show papers to independent specialists a few days in advance of publication, under embargo conditions, solely for the purpose of eliciting comment on the work described.

Before publication, the Journals and Editorial press office also informs the press / public information officers of authors' institutions to allow them to prepare their own publicity. Authors and their institutions are advised to coordinate any of their own publicity with the Journals and Editorial press office by e-mail after their paper is accepted for publication.

The content of the press release mailing and papers described therein is embargoed until 1600 London time/1100 US Eastern Time on the day of publication, which is the time at which the research is published and become publicly available. In all cases, authors are expected to abide by the Nature Research press and embargo policies.

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