International Society of Managing and Technical Editors

Setting up an editorial office

Introduction

This is a guide to setting up an editorial office for a scholarly journal or journals. It is intended for people who have not been involved in scholarly publishing before. If you are working with a publisher, a lot of the decisions will be made for you (which software to use and how to process accepted manuscripts for publication, for example). However, we have tried to give you a list of the most common tasks you need to understand in getting a journal office up and running smoothly.

You might also like to read *Peer review and manuscript management in scientific journals* by Irene Hames (2007) for an introduction to how peer review works.

Contents

Basic Equipment

Computer with internet access

The computer you use needs a few basic software packages: word processing, spreadsheet, internet browser, e-mail, PDF viewer. Depending on the subject matter of your journal, you may also need software for image viewing in order to detect manipulation. (For further information, please see our resource on Dealing with Image Manipulation.)

Microsoft Office software packages will handle word processing and spreadsheets. Alternatively, you could use Open Office, a freely downloadable application that mimics Microsoft Office software in many ways. Whether on a Mac or PC, your software must be sufficiently updated to be able to receive .docx and .xlsx files. It may also be useful to own some image manipulation software so that you can check on the quality of figures. Adobe Photoshop is the most common.

Online submission system providers will normally publish a list of browsers that they support and it is a good idea to consult this. You might like to try different browsers to find out which works best. Submission systems often present some information in pop-up windows so you may need to turn off the browser's pop-up blocker. Be prepared to follow their instructions on what you must do.

For a PDF reader, simply download the latest version from Adobe. However, editorial offices often find themselves removing identifying information from PDFs provided by authors or reviewers, so purchasing the full version of Adobe Acrobat is a good investment.

Printer

A printer is usually necessary and if you need a fax machine or a scanner, you can combine them into one piece of equipment to save space. Although an awful lot of things can be achieved electronically, having hard copies can be very useful.

Backup hard drive

A backup hard drive is very cheap and can save your office – literally! You can purchase thumb drives and do a manual backup or buy an external hard drive with more than enough space and do a daily automated back-up. Other options are external backup services or cloud systems that remotely store your backup files.

What is stored within the manuscript submission and peer review system is likely to be automatically backed up by the company that owns the system and/or the publisher;

therefore, you need only concern yourself with backing up documents created and stored outside that system. (Although you should be aware that manuscript submission system providers can charge to retrieve older files.)

Telephone

You will need a telephone, or at least the ability to speak via the internet. From a home office you might want to consider a cell phone. If you choose to work in an internet café, for example, a cell phone allows you mobility. Overwhelmingly, communication is handled by email and it is feasible an office phone may receive very little use.

You might also want to consider whether you will be using video conferencing for meetings. Skype is a good start but an editorial office may need to organise video conferences, so you might want to sign up for a paid-for video conferencing package (e.g., Skype for Business, WebEx or Zoom).

Questions

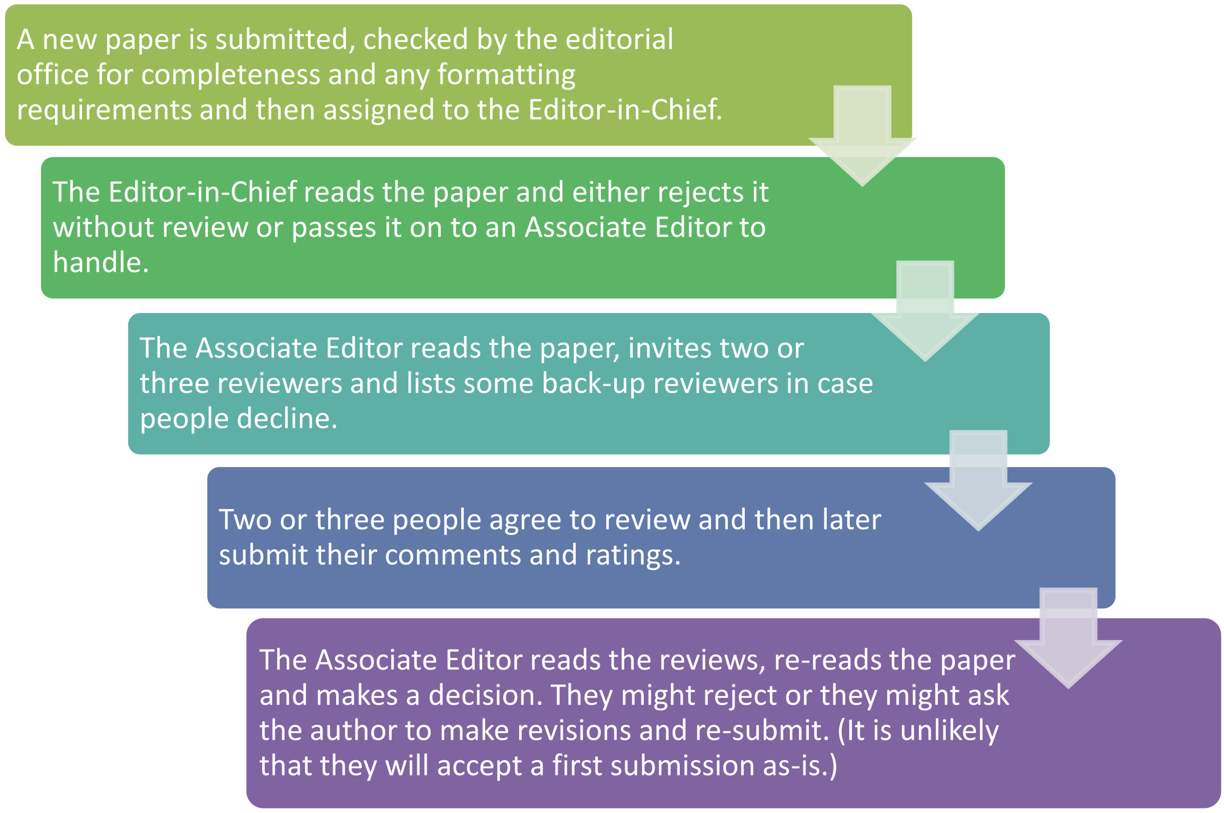
How will your editorial board be structured?

Most journals have an Editor-in-Chief and an editorial board. Associate Editors might handle peer review for particular types of papers (e.g., one editor might take all review papers) or they might handle papers in their areas of subject expertise. For smaller journals, the Editor-in-Chief might oversee all papers and invite members of the editorial board to assess them as reviewers.

Many journals have policies about how much the editors are expected to do. Some larger journals expect the editors to review a set number of manuscripts per year and this is explained in their invitation to join the board. Similarly, their presence may be expected at the editorial board meetings. The journal may also have a board of advisory editors who do not handle papers themselves. It is a good idea to be clear with editors about what they will be expected to do so that they can plan their time. (See the ISMTE resource Journal Editor Guidelines for more information on editors' roles.)

What will your journal workflow be?

This will depend on many things, including the structure of your editorial board. A typical peer review workflow might look like this:



However, there are many possible variations on this workflow. The editorial office should have a clear understanding of how peer review is normally conducted on the journal so that they can help configure the online submission system correctly and support the editors. There is a separate ISMTE resource that shows [model workflows for the editorial office](#).

What are the timelines for each stage of the workflow process?

Most editors are not full-time employees of the journal. Being an editor is a part of their professional development and a service to the larger scientific community and they are happy to do it. However, the journal will not always be their top priority. You might find it useful to talk to your editors and establish their time commitment to the journal, i.e., what are they able to give? You might like to encourage them to carve out some time each week (likely more for larger journals) to dedicate to journal matters. Your editors may have preferred modes of communication (some will prefer e-mail, others telephone), and if you comply with them, it may help journal work be processed more efficiently. It is imperative that editorial offices check in with their editors regularly. Authors increasingly expect, and will demand, a rapid turnaround time to decision.

You must define a reasonable time frame for manuscripts to pass through your peer review process. You, the publisher, and possibly the society if they own the journal, need to set guidelines with your editorial board on what are reasonable times for them to decide whether new submissions will go to review or be rejected (the chosen decision times should then be reflected in any automated editor reminder emails). Authors will often ask how long it will take for a first decision to be sent to them and their expectations about what is a reasonable time period will vary depending on the subject area. To pre-empt these questions, you might like to give authors a timeline in the email that confirms their submission, e.g., 'We aim to provide authors with a first decision on their manuscripts within 90 days of submission.'

Identifying reviewers can be very time consuming but how long do you give each reviewer to respond to an invitation? Do you send invitation reminders, or just give them one chance to respond? Once they have agreed, reviewers generally have 14 – 28 days to review the manuscript but, again, this can vary greatly by journal and subject matter – medical titles, for example, typically strive for rapid turnaround. Humanities titles, alternatively, can wait several weeks for an exceedingly detailed manuscript evaluation. Additional questions you need to ask are: How long do you wait after the deadline to remind reviewers that they are late? How many follow-up reminders do you send? When do you give up and attempt to find another reviewer?

Next, how much time after the reviews are complete does the editor need before making a decision? And how often will you remind them about the tasks they need to perform? These decisions will affect the timeline and flow of manuscripts from submission to decision. Authors will often look at the time to first decision when choosing where to submit their manuscript. Minimizing all these times, while giving your editors and reviewers enough time, requires some juggling!

As an example, here are the target timelines for a psychology journal and a medical journal:

Stage	Psychology journal	Medical journal
Submission to first decision	90 days	25 days
Submission to reviewer invitation (may include assignment to an Associate Editor)	7 days	7 days
Reviewer invitation	Reminder after 5 days, invitation cancelled after 10 days	Reminder after 5 days, invitation auto-declined after 10 days
Reviewer turnaround	28-day deadline, late reminders sent after 3 days, 10 days, 17	10-day deadline. First reminder on due date, second reminder

	days, 24 days and then assignment cancelled.	after another 5 days. Third reminder when review is outstanding and editor ready to make a decision.
Reviews complete to editor decision	14 days	7 days
Editor reminders	Summary reminders sent weekly. If an Associate Editor doesn't respond for several weeks, the editorial office contacts the Editor-in-Chief and the paper is normally re-allocated to another Associate Editor.	Papers flagged in the system when delayed. If delay continues, summary emails sent outside the system and then paper reassigned to Editor-in-Chief.

Research on timeframes has been conducted in recent years, which can help you identify what is best for your journal. Look at posters from ISMTE and CSE meetings, articles in the ISMTE newsletter EON and the CSE journal, and articles published in journals for findings on these topics. Also subscribe to the industry blogs, such as the Scholarly Kitchen, to help point you toward current peer review philosophies.

What are your submission requirements?

A style guide is an invaluable resource for answering those "How do we do….?" questions from authors when they are preparing their papers. The choice of style guide is agreed with the production team and will guide everything from the layout of different types of articles through to the structure of reference citations.

Some useful resources to consult include the following manuals:

- Council of Science Editors
- Modern Language Association
- Chicago Manual of Style
- American Psychological Association
- American Medical Association
- International Committee of Medical Journal Editors

These are generally large tomes full of the most intricate details of style. They are also usually not free, though some are and some will be made available through your library or publisher.

Most journals will make a shortened style guide (also called the Instructions to Authors) that is unique to their journal based on one of these larger guides. Many journals in biomedical fields adhere to the minimum standards as outlined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors Recommendations. They may simply state that as long as your manuscript adheres to these guidelines, it will be sent for editorial assessment.

For making your own unique style guide you may wish to specify that it is based on one of the well-known guides (so that authors can refer to the guide for particular issues) but then give guidance such as font size, line spacing, page numbers, separate pages for figures and tables etc. These are things that make it easier for your reviewers to read your manuscript. And keeping reviewers happy is important! However, it is also worth bearing in mind that authors will be frustrated by overly complicated submission requirements and there has been a lot of discussion in recent years about simplifying the submission process to save researchers' time. Some journals are now allowing authors to submit their manuscript in any format, as long as they are consistent, and only enforcing their own style requirements when the paper is ready to be accepted. If you use an online submission system, it too may have some of its own style requirements, such as what should be on the first page and figure requirements.

Most journals have particular requirements regarding their reference lists. If you use a template that is available in one of the reference management software programs, the work is done for a large proportion of your authors. For a more complete explanation on reference management software, see our separate resource. ISMTE has resources on creating effective instructions for authors.

What are your artwork requirements?

Journals that are published in print (rather than only online) need to be able to print good quality artwork. It is extremely hard to "improve" quality if the files submitted by the author are low resolution. Find out from whoever publishes your journal what their requirements for print-quality artwork are and specify them in the instructions for authors. Typically, such specifications include: the minimum number of dots per inch for artwork; the type of acceptable file formats and the preferred colour model (e.g., CMYK is better for printing; RGB is better for viewing online). There is an ISMTE resource on 'Getting better quality figures'.

Where will your office be based?

Working from a home office

E-mail and the internet have made it possible for not only the editors but any journal office staff to work from home. It has also meant that the tradition of the editorial office moving to wherever the new Editor-in-Chief is located is no longer necessary. This has given editorial office professionals the ability to develop with their journals and remain with them when the Editor-in-Chief completes his or her term.

A home office can be very isolating, so find a good network of other people working in editorial offices and set-up networking/socializing times. ISMTE can help here, by providing a network of peers, educational resources and training opportunities. In some cities, there are also local groups!

Renting space externally

There are opportunities, if you have the budget, to rent external office space for your editorial office. This can be useful if you have several staff members and all need to work from the same location.

Storage space

This may seem obvious, but it isn't going to be long before you are wondering what to do with all those copies of your journal. Hard copies are great for the occasional request from an author, and also for your own reference, but ultimately you are going to need storage space for them.

Will you need editorial assistants?

Is your journal big enough to require staff? If so, you will need to determine if having a team working in multiple remote locations works for the journal or if you need to all be in the same physical space. Working from home may be a challenge when you have staff, especially junior staff, to supervise. Having a staff or team of people working on the same journal requires someone to determine how tasks will be distributed. For example, an Editorial Assistant might check and assign new submissions and a Managing Editor might be responsible for dealing with queries and supporting the editors. People who are very organised and have exceptional attention to detail often make excellent editorial office staff.

Who will cover for you when you are on vacation?

If you are an office of one, then what will happen when you go on vacation? This is something you need to discuss with your editor(s), publisher, and society, if a society owns the journal. Can you work while on vacation? If not, or you choose not to, how long can you be gone before it negatively affects the journal and other stakeholders (e.g., authors, reviewers, editors, production team). If you are willing to work a bit while on vacation, determine which tasks are high priority, such as responding to urgent emails, processing incoming papers, sending accepted papers to production, and then schedule all other tasks for before you leave or when you return.   Be sure to set up an out-of-office message so that senders will be aware that it may take you longer than normal to respond to non-urgent queries. It is important that your absence have little effect on the daily workings of the journal. If you want to be away longer than the journal can function effectively without you (which is probably not long), you may need to consider hiring a freelance editorial person or company to provide the services while you are away. This will require planning ahead and allowing time for training/orienting the person to your journal and how it is managed.

How will you track manuscripts?

Most often your society or publisher will have an agreement with one of the peer review software vendors. Some of the commonly used systems are:

- Clarivate Analytics' ScholarOne
- Aries' Editorial Manager
- mstracker
- eJournalPress

This list is by no means exhaustive and some publishers have developed their own systems. An online submission system allows authors to submit their manuscripts electronically to the editorial office and staff can then assign editors and reviewers and track the manuscript throughout peer review. Peer review systems are normally quite flexible and can be configured to fit your journal's workflow. You should find out who can help you to make configuration changes – your publisher may provide this support or they may be able to train you to make changes yourself. Alternatively, technical support might be available from the system provider.

Do you have template letters?

Most of the software systems have template letters built in, but in all likelihood, you will want to personalize them. When you are writing template letters, it is important to include all the information that an author, reviewer or editor will need at that moment but also to keep them as concise as possible. If people receive a long, complicated email telling them how to submit the review comments, for example, it is likely that they will skim read it and miss something important. Think carefully about readability and use short paragraphs and bullet points to guide the reader through the information they need. Bear in mind that many authors, reviewers and editors might not be native English speakers. Use professional language in your template emails and address all recipients formally.

How will you process copyright forms?

Identify how copyright or exclusive license forms are received, reviewed, and stored for your journal. This process may occur after a manuscript is sent to production and be managed by the production team; and therefore, you have no role in the process. On some journals, authors may upload the copyright or license form with their other manuscript files and you and/or your editor must review it and chase the author if it has not been provided. Whatever the process, copyright assignment is an important legal requirement for publishing and you need to know how it will be managed. Some journals also require authorship forms, which may be handled in the same way as copyright forms.

Will you provide copyediting?

For those of us with publishers this part is easy – the publisher will provide this! However, the level of copyediting is often not extensive and you may be required to polish up a manuscript before submitting it to production. If your journal has a profit-share model, you will be under some pressure to ensure manuscripts are in the very best possible condition ahead of submission in an effort to keep copyediting and typesetting costs down. You might still need to be checking the quality of the copyediting at the proofing stage.

The alternative to copyediting yourself or relying on the publisher is to employ a freelance copy-editor; it is often possible to find a local copy-editor by searching online.

Will you need to deposit articles in a repository?

Many funding agencies, including the NIH, HHMI, and the Wellcome Trust require that a copy of the published article be deposited in a repository free of charge. Many publishers will deposit articles directly to PubMed, for example. However, if you are responsible for this task, how will this fit into your workflow? Will you deposit the files at first proof stage? An example of workflow to direct deposit is described here.

When you have set up your editorial office, you will continue to refine your processes to improve your service to authors, reviewers and editors and the ISMTE resources can help provide further guidance.