

The unbearable burden of peer review?

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In conversations between researchers and on social networks the slowness and pickiness of peer reviewing is often decried. Journal editors often have difficulty securing the desired number of reviews for a manuscript. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some scientists do not pull their weight in reviewing, often not even taking the trouble to reply to a legitimate review request. After all, logic suggests that if we want our own manuscripts to be reviewed, we should review several times the number of manuscripts that we submit to scientific journals. In cases where a scientist really does not have time and receives more than their fair share of reviewing requests, it is also helpful to decline quickly, so that alternative reviewers can be sought as soon as possible. Suggesting names of alternative reviewers is also helpful. In many cases, an experienced postdoc in the same laboratory may be able to provide a timely and thoughtful review.

At the same time, reviewers that do accept sometimes submit exaggerated requests for changes and additional experiments. They are perhaps doing to others what has been done to them, while they should really do to others what they wish would be done to them. Here, it is important that journal editors step in decisively to limit these requests in their letter to the authors, rather than just sending a generic letter requesting a revision in line with the attached reviews.

In our journal we are not immune to these trends and have also experienced difficulties at times. However, our impression is that, for scientific society journals, finding reviewers is easier than many other editors report. We also do not seem to receive that many exaggerated requests for unreasonable changes or additional experiments. This is probably related to a greater feeling of community than with non-society journals, and the fact that any profits that IUCr journals generate are returned to science, in the form of subsidising conferences, workshops, fellowships and prizes for example.

We have a committed team of Co-editors, covering a wide range of structural biology specialties. Details can be found on our webpage <https://journals.iucr.org/f/services/editors.html>. On the same page, you will see that we also run a Review Board. The Review Board consists of experienced scientists (currently 31), who have agreed to referee up to twelve papers a year, to reply to requests promptly and to return reports within two weeks. During the coming months, we plan to update the Review Board, so volunteers are welcome!

The Section Editors also keep a non-public list of junior, but reasonably experienced, researchers who have expressed their specific interest to review manuscripts for our journal (even if it is with the clear thought to obtain merits for their academic CV, for a citizenship application or similar). The Section Editors welcome enquiries from researchers volunteering to be on this list.

Together, the Co-editors, Review Board and volunteer reviewers have helped to keep our average manuscript publication time down to just over three months (from first submission to final publication). We feel this is a reasonable standard, although we aim to get it down further — without compromising review quality of course.

Finally, at *Acta Crystallographica F – Structural Biology Communications* we are happy to receive more manuscripts, have them reviewed by knowledgeable scientists — and edit them efficiently and speedily to a high scientific and technical standard.

