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ASSOCIATE EDITOR ROLE

Associate Editors oversee the peer review process from beginning to end, taking responsibility for conducting an assessment based on the publication criteria, finding and inviting reviewers, evaluating their feedback, making editorial decisions, and communicating decisions to the Section Editor. Associate Editors play an active role in the community, and are highly engaged as representatives of the journal.

To ensure an efficient peer review process for our authors, our Associate Editors strive to:

- Agree to handle one to two new manuscript assignments per month
- Handle each manuscript assignment from first assessment to final decision
- Respond to manuscript invitations (Accept or Decline) within two days
- Assess whether the manuscript is suitable for peer review within four days of agreeing to the invitation
- Secure two or more reviewers on manuscripts that are suitable for review
- Submit a decision within four days of receipt of the complete reviews
- Adhere to editorial best practices

Our staff is always available to provide assistance and guidance on editorial policies, so please email the journal with any questions.
THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

Section Editor Initial Assessment

➔ When a manuscript is submitted it is assigned to a Section Editor (SE) who conducts an initial assessment of the paper.
➔ The SE will either reject before review or invite an Associate Editor whose area of expertise is suited to the paper

Manuscript Invitations

➔ Typically, you will respond to manuscript invitations directly from your email. You can also accept or decline invitations from Editorial Manager (EM)
When you receive an invitation from a Section Editor you can use the links in the email invitation to:

- **Accept** the invitation
- **Decline** the invitation
  - When declining the invitation we would appreciate it if you could:
    - State the reason (e.g. conflict of interest or too busy)
    - Suggest a potential alternative AE or Guest Editor (GE; someone who you consider would be suitable to handle the manuscript but who is not already a member of the Editorial Board)

- If you would like to discuss the manuscript with the SE before responding to the invitation (e.g. for potential competing interest or with general comments), please open a discussion with them or email the journal office.

**Initial Assessment**

- After you accept an invitation to handle a manuscript, conduct an initial assessment to decide whether the manuscript fits within the scope and publication criteria.

  - At this stage you may:
    - Suggest rejecting the paper without review (RWOR), no transfer
    - Suggest rejecting the paper without review (RWOR), with transfer, or
    - Send it out for external peer review.

  - If you choose to reject without review, the decision is passed to the SE for review prior to going to the authors.

**Choosing Reviewers**

- Ideally you will have your own suggestions for reviewers to invite. If it is challenging to secure reviewers, you may wish to consider the authors’ suggested reviewers.

  - Please ensure you check for conflicts of interest (e.g. they are not at the same institution as any of the authors, they have not published with any of the authors in the last 5 years etc.)

- Most reviewers should be independently sourced. Ideally, the author-suggested reviewers should make up no more than half the final reviews.
Navigating Editorial Manager: Inviting Reviewers

- Author-suggested reviewers can be found on the Details page, accessed from the Action links. The suggested reviewers are found in the top quarter of this page.

Once you have your reviewer suggestions, click **Invite reviewers** on the Action links.

This will take you to the reviewer summary screen.
If you know you are going to need more or less than the default 3 reviewers, you can change it in the **Review Settings**.

→ Set the reviewer search at the top of the screen to “Search for Reviewers” from “All reviewers” and click **Go**

→ This will take you to the reviewer invitation screen
We recommend you search by email address as this is often the most accurate. Alternatively you can search by last name or you can use the parenthesis and AND function to search for a combination of criteria.

Using the Or function, you can search for multiple reviewers at the same time.

- Many reviewers will already be in the EM database. However, if they aren't already, you'll need to register the desired reviewer prior to inviting them to review.
- Click Register and Select New Reviewer

- Enter the desired reviewer's email address
➔ Enter the reviewer’s **Personal Information**. All text in red and with an asterisk is required.

- **User Information**
  - **Reviewer Role**: Reviewer
  - **Default Login Role**: Reviewer

- **Personal Information**
  - **Given/First Name**
  - **Family/Last Name**
  - **Title**
  - **Middle Name**
  - **Degree**
  - **Country or Region**: Please select from the list below

- **Register User and Send Letter**

➔ Once complete, select **Register User and Send Letter** and then **Send Letter** to send the proxy registration letter.

➔ You can now select the desired reviewer and proceed to sending invitations.

- **We recommend trying to start with a minimum of 6 reviewers.**

➔ Once you have your reviewer search results you can choose to have them invited (Inv) or lined up as an alternate (Alt) by ticking the relevant box. We recommend to **invite 3 reviewers and queue 3 alternate reviewers**
  - Alternate reviewers will be invited automatically if the original 3 reviewers decline or are uninvited due to a lack of response.

➔ Click **Proceed** to move to the next stage.

➔ On this page you have the option of personalizing individual invitation letters (click **Customize** to do so) or extending **Days to Review** if you have communicated with the reviewer prior to the invitation and agreed upon a longer review time.

➔ Click **Confirm Selections and Proceed** to send the invitations.
Managing Reviewers

➔ If you run out of reviewer invitations and alternates EM will notify you when additional reviewers are required, and staff will follow up.

➔ Late Reviewers
  ◆ EM automatically notifies reviewers on their pending assignments, including late reviews.
  ◆ Staff will follow up with you if the reviewer is exceptionally tardy and might remove unresponsive reviewers.
  ◆ Reviewer Extension Queries
    ● If a reviewer emails you directly for an extension, please forward this to the journal office, we will process the extension
    ● Staff automatically extend reasonable reviewer extension requests but will contact you via discussion if someone is seeking a particularly long extension. Discussion comments come through via email and can also be accessed from the manuscript’s Action links

Required Reviews Complete

➔ Once all the expected reviews are complete, EM will automatically notify you to submit a decision. The paper will be found in your Submissions with Required Reviews Complete folder on your main menu.
You have the following decision letter options:

- Reject after review with transfer
- Reject after review without transfer
- Major Revision
- Minor Revision
- Accept

Navigating Editorial Manager: Submitting a Decision

- Select Submit Editor Decision and Comments from the Action links.

On the next page you are able to add your comments (clarifying your decision, relaying extra thoughts on the reviewer comments etc.) in the Comments to Author section. These will pull into the decision letter.
Next, select your decision (Reject and Transfer, Reject, Major Revision, Minor Revision, Accept) and click Proceed and Proceed again on the next screen. These cover decision letters before and after review, you will have further refinement options on the next screen.

If you select Reject and Transfer you will also have to select which PLOS journal you are recommending transfer to.

This next screen shows you the decision letter. At the top of the screen you can change your decision if you have selected the wrong option via the Modify Decision dropdown.

If the decision is correct you can switch between the before and after review varieties of the template reject letters using the Modify Letter dropdown (shown here with the reject without transfer options).
Regardless of whether you offer the transfer, the Reject template letter will automatically select **Reject After Review** and you will need to switch this to **Reject Before Review** when rejecting if the paper has not been reviewed.

➔ Please read the decision letter to ensure it is accurate and your comments and all reviewer comments and attachments have been pulled in correctly. The decision letter should clearly explain:
  ◆ The reasoning for the decision
  ◆ What is expected of the author
  ◆ A synthesis of the reviews

➔ **We strongly encourage editor comments to the author** to improve the author service but you should not edit or remove any reviewer comments. If you have any concerns about any reviewer comments please contact the journal office

➔ When you are ready, please select **Submit Decision with Draft letter**, which will send the decision on to the Section Editor for their confirmation.

➔ You can save the decision letter if you are not ready to submit it.

➔ This letter will always go to the SE for approval and not directly to the author.

**Navigating Editorial Manager: Re-Inviting Previous Reviewers to a Revised Manuscript**

➔ The **Reviewer Search** will automatically display the option to **Select from Previous Reviewers**.

➔ Click **Go**

➔ Select the previous reviewers you would like to re-invite then click **Proceed**
The appropriate letter template will already be selected, which you may customize as necessary.

Once you are ready, click **Confirm Selections and Proceed** to re-invite the selected previous reviewers.

**Beyond the Final Decision**

You may receive new submissions of previously rejected manuscripts; these are reassigned to the original editors with linked information from the original submission (reviewer comments and the decision letter). This information will be in the **File Inventory** (under the Action links) and you will be contacted via discussion if there is further information.

The journal staff may contact you with author queries, this will be done via discussion.
You may be asked to manage an Appeal of a rejected manuscript. The journal staff will provide the information provided from the author containing their reasons for the appeal and any new documents. This will be managed via a discussion and the journal staff will handle all communication with the author.

- You may be consulted on Corrections - formal changes after a paper has been published.

Navigating Editorial Manager: Initiating a Discussion

- To begin a discussion select **Initiate Discussion** from the Action links of the paper.

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<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Manuscript Number</th>
<th>Article Type</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Initiate Discussion</td>
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<td>Similar Assignments</td>
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<td>Yes I will take this Assignment</td>
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<td>No I will not take this Assignment</td>
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<td>Send E-mail</td>
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Manuscript invitation stage:

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<td>Initiate Discussion</td>
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<td>Invite Reviewers</td>
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<td>Set Final Disposition</td>
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Active assignments:

If the paper has previous discussions, **Initiate Discussion** will be replaced with **Discussion** and you will be taken to an intermediary page. On this page you will need to click **Start New Topic**.
Once you have initiated the discussion (or started a new topic) you will see the discussion box. There is no need to choose a template. Fill out the Topic and then your Initial Comments.

Once your comments are ready you can add other participants via the search function. When using the search it is best to search via last name or email. When you have found the people you are looking for, tick the box next to their name. You will then be able to initiate the discussion via the Proceed to Customize Letters.

Do not select Start Discussion Without Sending Letters. If this is selected the discussion will start but no one will be notified and you may not get a response.

Then select Confirm Selections and Proceed.

Navigating Editorial Manager: Setting Unavailable Dates

Set unavailability by going to Update My Information at the top of the page in EM.
Scroll down to the bottom Additional information section and input dates via the Unavailable Dates button. No new manuscripts will be assigned at this time, however revisions will be assigned back to you.

POLICIES

Conflict of Interest (COI)

→ We are diligent to avoid any potential or perceived editorial conflicts of interest between SEs, AEs, reviewers and authors
→ Editors or reviewers shouldn’t handle papers with authorship of anyone with whom they have collaborated in the past 5 years or if any of the authors share institutional affiliation.
→ Consult with staff for guidance. Full Competing Interests policy.

Code of Conduct for Editorial Board Members

→ PLOS Editorial Board members follow PLOS Ethical Publishing Practice policies, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers, and PLOS journal policies. Read the full Code of Conduct for Editorial Board Members.

Flagging Issues to Staff

→ Please forward any correspondences that occur outside of Editorial Manager with authors to journal staff that requires attention
Appeals - This is to help maintain proper records of appeals and author correspondences and ensure that you have the support of the journal when dealing with tricky situations.

Author ethics issues like suspected image manipulation or plagiarism

At accept, please notify staff if you accept a paper that is particularly press-worthy or otherwise notable.

During Review, please notify staff if you have serious concerns over a reviewer’s behavior or the content of their review.

TIMELINE

We aim to process all manuscripts as quickly as possible

SE Assigned to a manuscript (Week 1)

- SE is assigned a manuscript and makes decision to Reject Without Review (RWOR) or to invite an AE ideally within 48 hours
- You may be looped into a discussion for consult at this stage

AE queue invited and the system automatically cascades down the queue (Week 1)

- AE(1) invited immediately
- AE(2) invited after 2 days of no assignment OR if AE1 declines
- AE(3) invited after 4 days of no assignment OR if AE1+2 decline
- AE4+ (any left over in queue, together) are batch-invited after 6 days of no assignment OR if AE1,2,3 decline.

AE accept (Week 2)

- Day 1-2: AE reads paper and may consult further via discussion. AE is not required to send the paper out for review.
  - If your decision is not clear:
    - We encourage you to consult with the SE or loop in other editors via a discussion forum.
  - If your decision is clear:
    - We aim to process manuscripts (RWOR or inviting reviewers) within three days
  - Day 3: Invite Reviewers or submit RWOR decision
- Day 5 (and 10): PLOS staff contacts AE to make a decision if no action taken or no active discussion
- **Note**: authors do not know the status of their paper (after we send initial paper received email) until we either reject before review or send a reviewer invite

→ **Paper Under Review (Weeks 3-4)**
  - **Note**: we ask reviewers to return comments within 10 days, and regular reminders and follow-ups are sent. Reviewer extensions may be granted within this time.
  - **Reviewer timeline**
    - **Invitation**
      - Day 1: Reviewer invited
      - Every 2 days: Reviewer reminded of pending invitation
      - Day 7: Reviewer invited rescinded if no action taken; alternate reviewer automatically invited if listed
    - **Acceptance**
      - 10 days to review granted at invitation acceptance
      - 1-2 week extensions granted automatically by journal office, if requested
    - **Exceptionally late Reviewers (review is 2+ week overdue):**
      - Reviewer will be automatically unassigned
      - You will be asked to invite additional Reviewers if needed

→ **Reviews Returned (Week 4)**
  - AE may consult further (via the discussion forum)
  - Compile and submit a decision and accompanying decision letter for SE approval (see instructions above)

→ **SE Submit Decision (Week 4)**
  - SE looks over AE decision and letter draft to submit final decision and accompanying decision letter to author
  - AE may be consulted by SE before final decision letter is sent

**RESOURCE LINKS**
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<th><strong>PLOS SUSTAINABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION</strong></th>
<th><strong>PLOS DIGITAL HEALTH</strong></th>
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