

What Can Editors Do to Deal with Appeals and Complaints?

O Que é Que os Editores Podem Fazer para Lidar com Reclamações?

Tiago Villanueva^{1*}

*Corresponding Author/Autor Correspondente

Tiago Villanueva [Tiago.villanueva@ordemdosmedicos.pt]
Acta Médica Portuguesa, Av. Almirante Gago Coutinho, 151,1749-084 Lisboa, Portugal
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2182-3818

<https://doi.org/10.48687/lj.155>

Keywords: Editorial Policies; Ethics; Publishing

Palavras-chave: Ética; Políticas Editoriais; Publicação

Editors often make decisions regarding papers that are subsequently contested by the authors. Handling appeals of rejected papers is a part of any medical journal editor's routine work although it can be one of the most stressful and least satisfying parts of the job. Not much is known about the appeals process of major medical journals and about the outcomes of appeals. In a survey of 20 international biomedical journals, only 50% of journals had explicit information on appeals in their website, most journals did not have a clear written procedure on how to handle appeals, and almost all journals could not provide data about the success rates of appeals.¹ From personal experience, appeals form a small proportion of rejected papers and most are not justified. Authors usually appeal because they did not feel their paper was treated fairly by editors. This can include not understanding the rationale behind a decision, thinking that editors overlooked the relevance of the paper or considering that a reviewer misunderstood the study or had an undisclosed competing interest.

When handling appeals, editors should start by reading the appeal letter / rebuttal and then discuss it with another editor, preferably someone who was not involved in the previous editorial decision. Depending at what stage the paper was rejected, accepting an appeal may include sending the paper

for review (when it was previously rejected), sending it again for peer review (to new reviewers) and/or discussing it at an editorial meeting if it was rejected post-review.

Since most appeals are not usually accepted, authors may often become abusive towards editors. Editors who face abusive behavior from authors should immediately report the situation to senior members of the team. It is important to ignore any aggressive tone and avoid escalating the confrontation, and that is particularly relevant in the case of personal attacks on social media. Although discussion and decisions regarding appeals have to be documented on editorial notes, editors should be cautious to avoid making judgements or potentially derogatory comments towards authors in their notes, in the unlikely event of legal proceedings. In certain cases of particularly abusive behavior, it may be justified to inform the manager or the employer of the author. Inexperienced or more junior editors may be more vulnerable to attacks from very senior or high-profile authors, which is why it is essential to ensure that there is support from the senior members of the editorial team. All cases of abusive behavior towards editors should be written up in an anonymized form and sent to the Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE), which always provides very useful feedback, even if on

1. Editor-chefe, Acta Médica Portuguesa e editor associado, The BMJ e BMJ Open

Recebido/Received: 10/04/2023– **Aceite/Accepted:** 12/04/2023 – **Publicado online/Published online:** 22/4/2023 **Publicado / Published:** 30/6/2023

© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) and Lusíadas Scientific Journal 2023. Re-use permitted under CC BY.

© Autor (es) (ou seu (s) empregador (es)) e Lusíadas Scientific Journal 2023. Reutilização permitida de acordo com CC BY.

hindsight. Pippa Smart has written a very useful guide with tips on how to deal with difficult authors.²

It is possible to reduce the likelihood of receiving appeals. For instance, editors can encourage authors to send pre-submission inquiries. Submissions resulting from pre-submission inquiries will, in most cases, be at least sent for peer review. Moreover, editors should also check whether the authors listed any preferred or opposed reviewers, involve at least another editor in the decision-making process and provide the rationale of the decision in the decision letter. It is also very important for journals to have robust editorial processes in place, which must include statistical review in the case of quantitative research papers.

Although not as common as appeals, editors may also be confronted with complaints, which is defined as “anything we believe goes beyond an expression of disagreement with a decision and identifies a perceived failure of process or severe misjudgement.”³ Although appeals may be considered a particular type of complaint about the scientific content of a paper, for the purposes of this article they will be considered separately. A complaint could relate, for example, to the conduct of a reviewer or the editor towards the authors, or to the processes around a submission (e.g. long delays in reviewing or sending the decision letter). Complaints that may be financially liable, potentially brand damaging, that receive strong social media presence or press coverage or that originate from a legal firm will be particularly challenging to deal with. Individual complaints may usually be handled by the relevant member of the editorial team and escalated to more senior members if the complainant is not satisfied. There may ultimately be a need to consult an ethics committee or external bodies like COPE.

Dealing with appeals and complaints should be part of editorial training, if available, either in house or externally. In fact, COPE’s code of conduct for journal editors actually states that “Journals should have a declared mechanism for authors to appeal against editorial decisions” and that “Editors should respond promptly to complaints and should ensure there is a way for dissatisfied complainants to take complaints further. This mechanism should be made clear in the journal and should include information on how to refer unresolved matters to COPE.”⁴

Ultimately, dealing with appeals and complaints is about being objective and sticking to the important facts, while trying to remain calm particularly if the situation involves personal attacks, written or verbal abuse or bullying, and hopefully feeling reassured that senior team members will have our back.

Responsabilidades Éticas

Conflitos de Interesse: Os autores declaram não possuir conflitos de interesse.

Suporte Financeiro: O presente trabalho não foi suportado por nenhum subsidio o bolsa ou bolsa.

Proveniência e Revisão por Pares: Comissionado; sem revisão externa por pares.

Ethical Disclosures

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Support: This work has not received any contribution grant or scholarship.

Provenance and Peer Review: Commissioned; not external peer reviewed.

References

1. Dambha-Miller H, Jones R. An appealing prospect? A survey into the numbers, outcomes, and editorial policies for appeals of rejected biomedical manuscripts. *Learned Publishing*. 2017;30:227–231
2. Smart P. Dealing with difficult authors. *Eur Sci Editing*. 2020;46: e52201. doi: 10.3897/ese.2020.e52201
3. BMJ. Complaints procedure.[accessed April 10, 2023] Available from: <https://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/complaints-procedure>
4. Committee on Publications Ethics. Code of conduct and best practice guidelines for journal editors: [accessed April 10, 2023] Available from: https://publicationethics.org/files/Code_of_conduct_for_journal_editors_Mar11.pdf