

Let's chat

At *Nature Methods* we are happy to engage with prospective authors and readers. Here we go through the why, what, who, when and how of talking to journal editors.

Interacting with journals editors is an important part of the publication process.

At minimum, journal decisions will be shared directly from editors to authors. But communication between researchers and journal editors can be much richer and more nuanced than such formal letters and can be mutually beneficial. For some, interacting with editors comes naturally. For others, it may not be clear whether a concern or query is worth contacting an editor, or whether a note would be welcome.

As editors, we thrive on engaging with our communities, and we are eager to meet scientists at all career stages. It is our job to be aware of emerging trends, cutting-edge methods, pain points, bottlenecks, skepticism, standards and community issues within different fields. We benefit from networking by hearing about exciting work early, recruiting papers, and expanding our reviewer pool. We also benefit by establishing relationships with scientists, so they know we understand their work and are invested in serving their communities. We are inspired by our dialogues with scientists when we commission Reviews and Comment pieces and choose what to feature in our news pieces. Moreover, we are deeply motivated to improve the author experience and the journal itself, so feedback along these lines is crucial to our journal's success.

In non-pandemic times, we largely learn these details directly from scientists while attending conferences, doing campus visits, inviting guest speakers to our offices, chatting one-on-one with researchers, and participating in social media. Over the past year, most of our interactions have been virtual. Of these venues, meeting us at conferences and campus visits is the most fruitful from our perspective, and we encourage researchers to seek us out at these events. We attend these meetings with the intention of networking and hearing about new work, and we actively seek to meet those we haven't before, not just to catch up with 'famous' scientists.

Talking to editors or knowing an editor is by no means a prerequisite for a successful publication process. Indeed, not talking to us before submission is the norm, and being 'friends' with an editor is not a ticket

to publication. It does not benefit us as a journal to turn away excellent work just because we have not met the authors nor to publish work that does not meet our criteria because we have established a positive working relationship with the researchers.

That said, communication is a two-way street, and talking with editors can benefit authors, especially early-career researchers who may not have had much experience with publishing. If a researcher is curious whether a paper is a good fit for a journal, who better to ask than the people who devote themselves to curating its content? Conversations can reveal the types of papers we're especially interested in, whether a paper might be right for us (or perhaps another *Nature Portfolio* journal), and what our standards are in different areas. They also give researchers an opportunity to describe their motivation or explain aspects of their research that may be hard to convey in a paper.

There are many places to begin a conversation with an editor, including discussing a work in progress, a paper that is nearly completed, or an idea for a Review or Comment. Outside of conferences and visits, conversations can begin via e-mail or via a formal presubmission inquiry. At early stages, our comments typically involve whether a paper is potentially interesting and within our editorial scope. We tend not to give detailed advice or suggestions for experiments at this point, as we might upon full submission, as these are typically based on limited information. In our experience, the best way to get rich feedback from these early interactions is to ask any specific questions regarding, for example, the extent of validation or type of demonstrations we might require.

Another great place to converse is while a manuscript is under review or revision. Some authors e-mail us frequently with small queries or updates and others largely interact with us via formal cover and rebuttal letters. Both are completely appropriate, but in cases where questions concern revisions, timelines, competing work or any confusion, e-mails are always welcome. One possibly underutilized point of communication is at the revision stage. We do our best to

tell our authors what our expectations are for a revision, especially if there are any referee concerns with which we disagree. However, questions may remain about what specific experiments or text revisions might satisfy the editors and referees. Authors are encouraged to discuss a revision plan with us and ask whether we think it is appropriate before proceeding. We want the publication process to be smooth for our authors and hope that such conversations can save time, effort and unnecessary anxiety.

For some researchers, interacting with editors is folded in with their training. We encourage advisors to include trainees on calls or e-mail exchanges with editors and to participate in the review process. We also encourage researchers who would like to offer their reviewing services to be in touch.

Although we try to be frank with authors, there are some things we cannot say. We are not at liberty to discuss our decisions on previous papers we've published or considered. We also cannot say whether we are aware of similar work from competing groups. As a general rule, we don't make promises, even about peer review, as these decisions are made after we've read a paper carefully and discussed it as a team.

Like all busy people, we are bandwidth limited. We must limit our phone and video chats to those things that most benefit from live discussion. And if you don't hear back from us right away, friendly reminders are always welcome.

We want to grow our partnership with the research community and are open to hearing from all readers and anyone curious about submitting to *Nature Methods*. We post our (virtual) travel schedules on our social media accounts and encourage anyone who wants to meet with us during conferences to schedule a chat. We are also available anytime by e-mail. We want to specifically encourage early-career researchers, women and under-represented minorities to reach out, and hope to lower barriers to conversations. We look forward to hearing from you. □

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