

How editors think about paper submissions, and an announcement

Ruth E Malone 

One of the thorniest parts of being editor-in-chief of a leading journal is having to reject so many papers, knowing how hard the authors worked and how much is involved in a submission. Especially for junior authors with little experience with the publication process, those rejection letters are so unwelcome, but everyone gets them and learns to brush off and go on. Still, when I started as *Tobacco Control's* editor-in-chief more than a dozen years ago, I agonised over every single decision. I tried to always personalise the rejection letter and still do (we work from a form letter, given our volume of submissions) but I know from personal experience how deflating it can be to get those emails.

Determining what to reject outright, what to send out to review and what to reject after review is still sometimes excruciating for me, but since our senior editorial team meets every 3 weeks we have an opportunity to talk over manuscripts that any one of us feels unsure about. How do we decide? Several things factor into our decisions even before a paper goes out for peer review.

First, we ask ourselves whether this work is clearly within the scope of the journal and will be of interest to our global readership. *Tobacco Control* began as a journal publishing a wide range of tobacco control-related work, but across the last 30 years of publication, we have increasingly focused on contributions that address policy and systems. Thus, papers reporting small local studies of smoking cessation or evaluations of educational programmes, no matter how worthy the programmes, will not be a priority for the journal. We also virtually never publish prevalence studies, unless they are the first studies focused on a new product or have some other unique contribution.

We do, however, consider small studies, including qualitative studies, particularly if they illuminate an emergent area for policy research, are the first to study a particular phenomenon or report an

exciting pilot that has broad potential relevance for public health and policy. We also consider whether a potential contribution is coming from a country from which we get few submissions, or a country that has particular challenges in enacting tobacco control measures. Then we ask whether this paper will have value for our global readership, even if the work reported on was done in only one country.

I'm always surprised at how many authors fail to prepare a cover letter, or to use it to their full advantage. In fact, the cover letter and abstract are typically the *only* things I (and many journal editors) read before making the first cut by deciding to either desk reject the paper or assign it to a senior editor to read in full. A good cover letter (and the clear, well-organised abstract) should not be dashed off at the last moment just before submitting. These constitute your big openings to get your paper across the first hurdle towards publication, so you should use them to showcase the value of your work. Plan to take time to stand back from your paper and consider why this work is important—not just what it does, but why it *matters* and how it might relate to current hot issues in the field. If possible, sketch links between your work and current regulatory or legislative policy debates, conflicts in interpreting the scientific evidence or gaps in knowledge. Cover letters should be short but punchy. What's exciting and new about this? Hot tip: do not make the mistake of addressing the cover letter to the editor of a different journal, a glaring clue that the paper has already been rejected elsewhere and that the author has not carefully re-prepared the submission.

Good copy editing also matters. While we sometimes try to make accommodation for those whose first language is not English, enlisting volunteer helpers when possible, we do need to be able to understand your work clearly. At minimum, ask someone fluent in English to read it and correct any obvious errors before submitting. Please check all references for completeness and accuracy. Nothing telegraphs to an editor a concern that the whole paper may be sloppy work like references that do not line up sensibly with the in-text citations, are missing

information or are otherwise inaccurate or inaccurately portrayed.

Take the time to read through several recent issues of the journal before submitting. I screen a surprising number of papers only to discover that the authors are obviously unfamiliar with the journal and the type of work we publish: we do not publish studies on how to better cultivate tobacco crops, for example, or animal model studies on the effects of smoking. But in addition to knowing the type of work we publish, getting a 'feel' for the topics that authors are raising in the journal's pages will help you position your work as part of the ongoing and ever-unfolding discourse in the field. Perhaps you have done an analysis that takes a new perspective on the issues, or a study that challenges common assumptions. Make note of this in your cover letter. What is fresh about this work? Why does it matter? Is it the first study to examine something, or to examine it with a new approach? Is it a theoretical contribution that helps synthesise existing strands of emergent thinking?

Shorter papers are valued by editors with limited page budgets. Do not bother writing an extensive letter explaining that because your study used qualitative methods, you cannot possibly explain it all in less than 4500 words. Long ago I learnt through challenging experiences with my own team's work that there is no paper that cannot be trimmed by at least 500 words, and oftentimes more, and that this can be done without losing the essentials, resulting in a much stronger and more tightly organised contribution in which your most important analytical points will not be lost. This does not necessarily have to mean slashing whole sections or paragraphs. It may mean iterative whittling to eliminate words that you may have loved deeply as you wrote them but that on serious reflection are actually unnecessary to make your points. Remember that reviewers like shorter papers as well, and if your paper succeeds in getting sent to review, you will need some space to respond to the comments you receive. In a future editorial, I hope to write about some strategies helpful to authors in responding to editorial and review comments. But for now, perhaps these tips will help you get your paper across the starting line.

Meanwhile, an announcement: As editor-in-chief, I am finally preparing to cross the finish line. After serving since 2009 as the third editor-in-chief of *Tobacco Control* and commemorating both the 20th and 30th anniversaries of the journal, I will be stepping down

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sometime in 2023 after my successor is appointed. The call from BMJ Journals for the post of *Tobacco Control* editor-in-chief should be going up very soon. If you are interested in learning more about or applying for the position, or if you have suggestions of possible candidates, please feel free to email me.

It has been an exhilarating ride, and a great honour, to helm the journal during this period of such important progress in the field. And there is much more to come! Now, it is time to pass the torch to fresh leaders who will encourage new ways to connect the science and

scholarship across issues and disciplines, shaping the vision of what we know and do not know, and revealing new questions about where this dynamic multidisciplinary field is headed. This is not a sprint, it is a relay—but there is indeed a finish line not so far ahead.

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