

PLOS Section Editor Guide

Applies to: [*PLOS Complex Systems*](#) | [*PLOS Computational Biology*](#) | [*PLOS Digital Health*](#) |
[*PLOS Genetics*](#) | [*PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases*](#) | [*PLOS Pathogens*](#) |
[*PLOS Sustainability and Transformation*](#)

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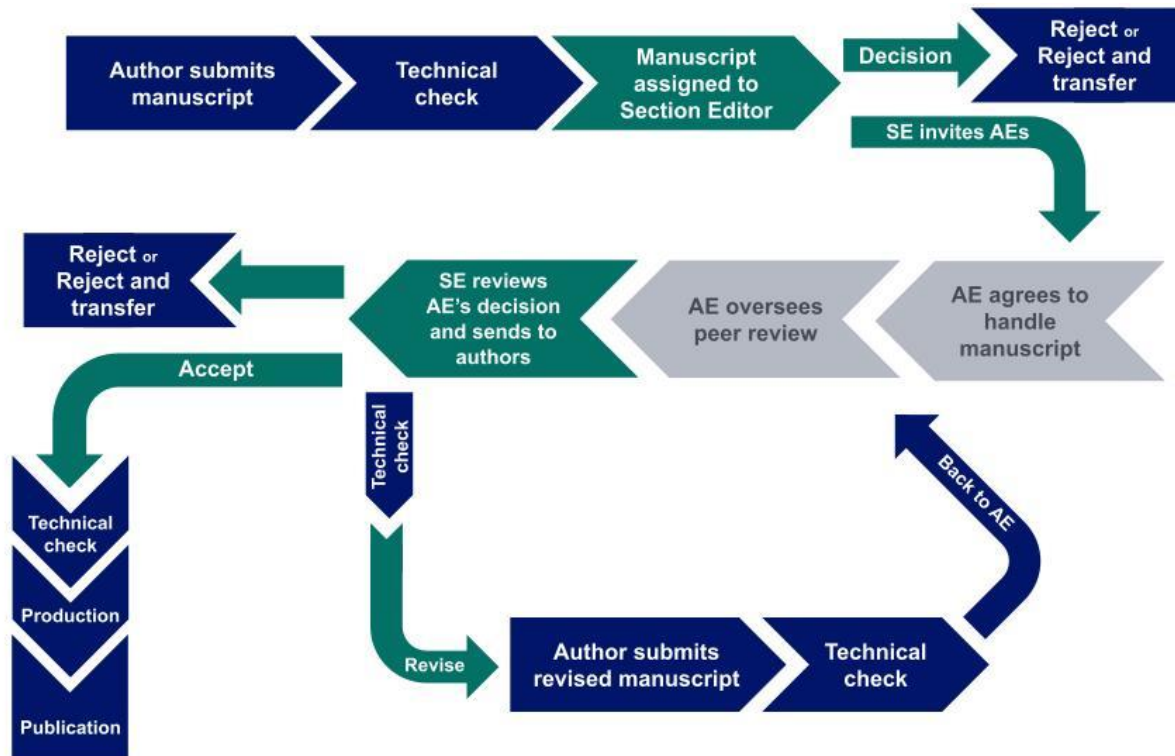
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Life of a manuscript

■ - Author or Journal Office

■ - Section Editor

■ - Academic Editor



- After you are assigned a manuscript, you are first responsible for either issuing a **reject decision** or **securing an Academic Editor** for further handling.
- Once the Academic Editor (AE) issues their decision, you are responsible for **reviewing and approving** their decision, **providing feedback and sending the decision letter back to the AE** as necessary, and ultimately **sending the decision** along to the authors.
- Throughout the life of a manuscript, the journal office conducts a series of technical checks and communicates with the authors to ensure authors comply with our policies and formatting requirements. We will also include these types of requests in decision letters.

Manuscript assignment

- You will receive New Assignment notifications via email and can also access them from your Editor Main Menu in Editorial Manager (EM)
- Manuscripts are assigned to you based on your section and therefore may not always fit perfectly within your area of expertise. You only need enough of an understanding of the submission to identify suitable AEs to handle further.
- You are typically expected to handle **8 papers per month**, though this will depend on submission volume and the number of other SEs in your section.
 - If you will be away, **add Unavailable Dates** on the Update My Information page in your EM account. Please specify if you are available to continue handling your active assignments.
- Aim to take action within **4 days** of being assigned.
 - After this time we will begin to send reminder emails. If no action is taken, we may reassign the manuscript to another SE.

Reject or invite Academic Editors?

If a manuscript does not meet the journal's publication criteria or scope, you may issue a **reject** or **reject and transfer** decision. In your decision letter, ensure that authors receive clear, constructive feedback that supports your decision.

Reject and transfer if:

- The scope of manuscript is not suitable for your journal but may be appropriate for another of [our journals](#).

Reject without review if:

- There are serious methodological or analytical flaws that cannot be addressed through peer review.
- Conclusions are not supported by the data.
- The hypothesis, rationale, methods, or results are flawed or insufficiently detailed for proper evaluation.
- The methods have not adhered to the field's ethical standards.
- The study is redundant without discussing existing literature (Exceptions: replication

studies, reanalyses that explicitly reference past research, or manuscripts that meet the journal's definition of [complementary research](#))

- Required revisions will take longer than a few months, such as extensive reanalysis, new experiments, or major reframing.
- The language quality of the writing is not intelligible enough for a reviewer to provide feedback.

Note: If there is a risk the study could be misused for harmful purposes (see our policy on [Dual Use Research of Concern](#)), please contact the journal office before proceeding.

If none of the above apply or you feel you do not have the specific expertise to make an informed decision, **invite Academic Editors** for further handling of the manuscript. If you would like a second opinion before deciding, you can open a Discussion with another Section Editor or Editor-in-Chief.

Inviting Academic Editors

Expectations

- Aim to identify **3-8** AEs to invite in a ranked queue
- If you have cannot secure an AE after **2 weeks**, write to the journal office for advice on next steps
 - **We do not recommend you handle the paper yourself.** Typically, AEs will have expertise closer to the manuscript, allowing them to identify suitable reviewers and provide more detailed feedback in decision letters. However, if more than **4 weeks** have passed without an AE agreeing, you may choose to do this. You can visit our Resources for Editors pages for guidance.

Search strategy

- We recommend building and ordering your Academic Editor (AE) invitation queue in a separate document, then looking them up and ordering them all at once in Editorial Manager (EM).
- **Prioritize AEs.** Use Guest Editors (GEs) as a last resort. Do not invite other Section Editors.

- AEs have agreed to be active members of the Editorial Board while GEs participate on an as-needed and ideally, infrequent basis.
- **Be aware of potential conflicts of interest:**
 - Do not invite AEs from the same institution as any of the authors.
 - Do not invite AEs if they are on the list of opposed or suggested reviewers provided by the authors
- To further understand an AE's expertise after following the steps below, visit their ORCID page or find their institutional page and publications online.
 - It's ok to invite AEs outside of your own section. Use your best judgement to determine who is a good fit for the manuscript.

Search steps

1. Start your search on your journal's Editorial Board page where you can browse the list of Academic Editors (AEs) by section and Classifications (PLOS taxonomy)
[*PLOS Complex Systems*](#) | [*PLOS Computational Biology*](#) | [*PLOS Digital Health*](#) | [*PLOS Genetics*](#) | [*PLOS Pathogens*](#) | [*PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases*](#) | [*PLOS Sustainability and Transformation*](#)
2. Continue your search on the **Assign Editors** page in EM, where you can look up additional editors using single or combinations of Personal Keywords - these are free-text terms AEs have added to their profiles.

Building the queue

1. Once you have your list and prioritized order of AEs ready in your separate document, look them up by last name on the **Assign Editors** page in Editorial Manager (EM).
 - On this page, pay attention to:
 - Current Assignments
 - Open Invitations
 - Past Assignments for the last 90 days
 - Maximum Number of Assignments (their preferred max)
 - Available during next 7 days
 - Don't invite AEs who have Unavailable Dates listed and try not to overburden your colleagues. AEs are typically expected to handle 1-2 new manuscripts per month.
2. Once you've verified suitability, capacity, and availability, select the box next to the AE's

name, and click “Add to Queue”

3. Type the appropriate invitation order numbers to match your list and click “Update Invitation Order”
4. Submit the queue either with or without customizing the letters.
 - It is not necessary to customize the AE invitation template unless you would like to include a personal message about why you think their expertise is a good fit for the manuscript.
 - The first few AE invitations will go out all at once. The others will be paced out over several days depending on if editors decline or as time passes

After an AE agrees to handle the manuscript

- Your responsibility is mostly complete for now.
- You may need to support the AE along the way by responding to manuscript Discussions. Invitations to participate in Discussions will come via email. Be prepared to provide advice on, but not limited to:
 - Deciding whether to send for peer review or reject
 - Finding and securing reviewers
 - Split or unhelpful reviews
- It can happen that an Academic Editor is unable to see a manuscript through to a final decision. In these situations, the manuscript will be returned to you. Depending on the stage of the manuscript, follow the steps above to secure a new AE or issue a decision yourself.

Assessing the Academic Editor’s decision

What to assess

- We provide guidance to Academic Editors (AEs) on what makes a good decision letter in our [Assessing Reviews and Making Decisions Quick Guide](#). Reference this guide to determine if they met these expectations.
- If the AE wrote minimal or no comments in their decision letter, this is ok as long as the recommended decision aligns with the reviewer reports. However, if there is concerning behavior in the reviews (for example, citation stacking) that the AE did not address or if

the AE recommended a reject/reject and transfer decision with no justification, you will need to send it back to them to address.

- Look at the reviewer reports as well to ensure they are substantive, the reviewers' expertise is reasonable for the paper, and there are no violations of our [Ethical Peer Review](#) policy - notably excessive self-citation and egregious use of generative artificial intelligence.
 - If you note any ethical concerns, contact the journal office.
 - Do not edit or remove reviewer comments.
- Typically, you will agree with the decision recommended by the AE but you are not obligated to. You may choose to override with a different decision option.
 - Provide feedback to the AE as to why you did this so they understand your reasoning

Actions

Decision letter quality	Action options
Good	Pass it on to the author: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor/Major Revision - click 'Submit Decision with Draft Letter' • Reject, Reject and Transfer, or Accept - click 'Send Now.'
Needs improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open a discussion with the AE to discuss the decision letter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ You may choose to add your own comments in the decision letter directly. However, ensure you have first discussed with the AE

Providing feedback to the Academic Editor

- If the decision letter fell short, point out specific constructive points for the AE to improve upon in the future
 - You can reference specific points in our [Assessing Reviews and Making Decisions Quick Guide](#) as a resource
- If the decision letter was great, let them know! Both constructive and positive feedback is valuable.

After the decision

- Authors will revise and resubmit. Revised papers go directly back to the AE until the next decision letter*
 - *If the AE is unavailable when the revision comes back, the manuscript will be assigned back to you. At this point, you may decide to invite a new AE or complete the handling yourself, depending on the nature of the revisions.

Need help? Contact

complexsystems@plos.org | ploscompbiol@plos.org | digitalhealth@plos.org |
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