

Tracking VZJ Papers from Submission to Acceptance

Associate Editors (AE's) have an extremely important function with VZJ, as they are the primary point-of-contact for authors submitting manuscripts. AE's are responsible for monitoring the status of a paper during review and revision, ensuring that the journal's standards for timeliness are met for each manuscript, and for maintaining the professional integrity of the review process. Guidelines available for Associate Editors describe responsibilities, but they do not provide guidelines for how to implement the review process most effectively, including identifying and tracking reviewers and knowing when/how to facilitate reviews. These short notes aim to provide suggestions for managing a more effective review, and to avoid pitfalls that are commonly encountered. The goal is to unify the approaches used by the AE team, and to make the review process more understandable to editors and authors.

Responsibility, Authority, and Timelines

The AE's at VZJ have been chosen because of their scientific expertise and experience in publishing research. As such, AE's also have the authority to make decisions, contact authors, and to assist authors in improving manuscripts. In general, here are goals for the editors:

- Editor assigns Co-Editors within 24 hours
- Co-Editors assign Associate Editors with 72 hours
- AE's initiate the search for reviewers within 72 hours, following guidelines shown below
- AE's receive confirmation from all reviewers with 1 week of assignment
- Reviewers complete their reviews within the time period specified (30 days)
- AE's move the decision within 72 hours of completion of all reviews, either to the authors in terms of revision, or the Co-Editor in terms of release or acceptance.
- Co-Editor makes decision within 72 hours of notification of decision by AE.

It is vital that the steps be maintained as closely as possible to avoid lengthy delays in the review. In cases of extended travel or time away from VZJ, AE's should notify the Editor accordingly, so that alternative plans can be made.

Determining Manuscript Readiness and Appropriateness

Manuscripts submitted to VZJ undergo different levels of review before reaching the Associate Editor. The Submissions System Manager assesses whether the paper has followed the specified format (line numbers, pdf versus MS Word, etc.), and Editors and Co-Editors will assess topic relevancy for VZJ. To the extent possible, Editors and Co-Editors should also review the paper for grammar (i.e., English proficiency). Accepted papers are edited for grammar and style by VZJ staff, but the language must be adequate to convey the scientific content. Associate Editors should also review the paper for scientific content to identify appropriate reviewers. If anybody in the editorial group (Editor, Co-Editors, AE's) feels that the paper is not ready for external review, the manuscript should be released. VZJ does not want poorly written papers to be sent to reviewers, as this will waste precious time and frustrate the reviewer. AE's should contact the assigning Co-Editor with any questions regarding appropriateness of the manuscript, with respect to either formatting or scientific content; AE's have the authority to contact authors (or Editor) to request or require additional preparation before the manuscript is sent for external review. In the case where manuscripts are outside of VZJ's scientific area, they should be released as soon as possible so the authors can resubmit elsewhere. This determination should be done throughout the Editorial team, as soon as possible after the manuscript is submitted.

Identifying Reviewers

Official SSSA policy is that a decision can be made on the basis of two independent reviews (see <https://www.soils.org/files/publications/editorial-policies-10-11-2011.pdf>), though common practice is to receive three reviews for each manuscript. Reviewers can be found in many ways, including:

- the SSSA reviewer database using keywords as search criteria
- other databases that would point to suitable reviewers (e.g., Web of Science or Google Scholar, again using keywords)
- the AE's own network of colleagues.

Once identified, reviewers can be contacted either through the manuscript management software, where the reviewer is assigned upfront without first checking on availability, or by first contacting the reviewer outside of the management software using email or phone calls (the old-fashioned approach!) to see if the reviewer has the time to review the manuscript.

Tracking the Review Process

In the case where reviewers are assigned without upfront confirmation of availability, it is vital that AE's check the management software frequently to see if the reviewer:

- has looked at the manuscript but hasn't accepted/rejected the assignment;
- has accepted or rejected the assignment;
- has not responded to the request

A lack of response (yes or no) puts your review timeframe at risk. Reviewers often do not indicate acceptance until weeks into the review process. If they instead decide to reject the review request, or ignore the request altogether, the AE must then find new reviewer(s), thus delaying the decision point. This is perhaps the most common cause for late decisions. The management software will spawn an email to the reviewer, but reviewers often ignore these emails or are otherwise on travel, in the field, occupied with teaching obligations, etc. AE's should contact the reviewers about their status and gently nudge them to finish the review. Do not assume the reviewer has automatically added your request to his/her queue.

In the latter case, where AE's contact reviewers outside of the manuscript management software, note that you will likely be contacted by the Co-Editor (through an automatic email spawned by the management software) that reviewers haven't been assigned in a timely fashion. In this case, you should let your AE know what is happening, so that they understand the correct status. Once you receive confirmation that reviewers are available, you assign them in the manuscript management system accordingly, and the review clock begins. As above, check the manuscript status frequently enough to ensure progress; reviewers frequently wait until the deadline looms and then finish up papers accordingly. Staying in touch with reviewers will ensure a timely review. Do not assume the reviewer has automatically added your request to his/her queue.

If a manuscript is short of the needed number of reviewers, for any reason, Associate Editors can also do the review. Choosing to review a manuscript can do so in two ways:

- To maintain anonymity, AE's can assign themselves as reviewers and then provide feedback on the article as would any other reviewer (e.g., uploading comments or annotated manuscripts to the online system)
- To waive anonymity, AE's can provide their comments, and any other documents, to the authors as part of their decision on the manuscript.

In any case, AE's need to be responsive to the status of the review and to help "unstick" processes when needed.

Officiating Reviews without Consensus

Often, the manuscript reviewers do not reach a consensus. In this case, the AE must weigh in to decide how the paper should proceed (accept, revise, or release). AE's should review all comments, and the manuscript itself, and then use best judgment on the decision. In any case, AE's should explain the decision, so the authors understand why the decision was made and how the manuscript can be improved so that it becomes publishable. We want to help the authors, many of whom are young scientists trying to establish themselves professionally. The Co-Editors should also weigh in accordingly and assist in the decision making.

Communicating with Authors

AE's have the responsibility and authority to communicate with authors, providing them with updates and explanations. In these cases, please cc your Co-Editor as appropriate, so that we can understand and track the status of the manuscript.