

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Peer review and manuscript management in scientific journals. Guidelines for good practice*, by Irene Hames (2007). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing in association with the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers. 293 pp. ISBN 978-1-40513-159-9.

To say that *Peer review and manuscript management in scientific journals* is comprehensive is an understatement. Drawing on many years' experience as managing editor of *The Plant Journal*, Irene Hames has written a highly informative book: detailed, yet readable. It takes the reader through the peer review process, laying out clearly the roles and responsibilities of each of the people involved.

Early in the book, Irene Hames writes: "Peer review is a very powerful tool if used correctly, but . . . the whole spectrum of quality exists, from very poor to excellent. It is also rather an amateur activity in that there is usually no formal training, with most people learning 'on the job' " (p. 4). These statements about variable quality and lack of formal training also apply to editorial tasks. The overall aim of this book is to provide editors with an alternative to learning by trial and error—something that would surely be of benefit to everyone involved.

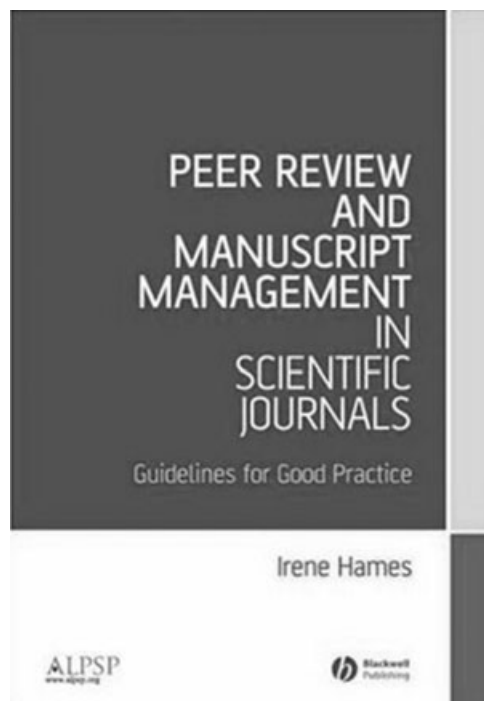
The book begins with a brief introduction to what peer review is, what it aims to achieve and what it assumes. After that, "[a]ll the practical aspects of peer review are covered: from how to set up and run an efficient peer-review system to dealing with unusual and sensitive situations, from manuscript submission to final decision" (p. 5).

Editors whose journals are contemplating a switch from paper to online submission will find pointers not only on the advantages and disadvantages of various technical solutions, but also about the effects that going online may have on staff members.

Those who have acted as peer reviewers know it is often a thankless task. The chapter entitled "Reviewers—a precious resource" shows how much editors appreciate the work reviewers do, even if they don't always take the trouble to express their gratitude. Hames feels reviewers deserve more thanks than they usually get, and I agree wholeheartedly. Reviewer! Read this chapter so you know how you ought to be treated.

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But then please go on and read the next chapter: "The obligations and responsibilities of the people involved in peer review". Authors, editors and editorial office staff should also read this to make sure they know what is expected of them. (Publishers clearly also have obligations, but they are not mentioned here—one of the book's few oversights.)

The last chapter deals with misconduct in scientific research. Hames makes it very clear that an editor's responsibility for an article does not end with publication. Editors also play a crucial role in keeping the published scientific literature clean—correcting errors, marking duplicate publication as such and retracting articles that prove to be unsound. Luckily, serious cases are rare. Yet that means editors will usually have little personal experience of dealing with misconduct. Hames describes procedures for dealing with everything from honest errors and trivial misdemeanors to falsification and fabrication of data: when to correct errors and when they can be left alone, how to look into cases of suspected malfeasance and how to go about retracting articles. She also has advice on what punitive actions can be taken against authors, reviewers—or editors—who have misbehaved. Several organizations dedicated to publication ethics are listed, with information on how to contact

them. Papers involving scientific misconduct can quickly become nightmares for an editor. If the situation arises, this book may be a godsend.

Anyone who wants a crash course on peer review can read Appendix I—"The golden rules and the peer-review good practice checklist", which summarizes essentially everything anyone involved in peer review needs to know in just ten pages. Appendix II provides real-life examples of editorial documents: submission checklists, change of authorship forms, conflict of interest declaration forms and instructions for reviewers (including the instructions used by *Polar Research*). After these come a sampler of the kinds of letters editors must constantly write: invitations to review, thank-you notes, reminders and, of course, decision letters in all shades from "Accept without change" to "Reject with no resubmission encouraged".

Current trends in publishing are not ignored. One reason the book is needed at all is the recent increase in submission numbers, which in turn generates an ever-increasing need for peer reviewers. Research papers are also becoming more complex: as science advances, and competition for journal space increases, papers now often describe studies involving several techniques where a single technique might have been sufficient a decade or two ago. This has led to a reassessment of the old principle that all persons listed as authors are responsible for the entire content of a paper. Some journals are now rephrasing this as "Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for *appropriate portions* of the content" (p. 152; my italics). Nonetheless, each paper would have at least one "guarantor" who takes responsibility for its entire content. This is an interesting discussion, especially against the backdrop of recent scandals concerning co-authors who apparently had no idea of how some parts of a discredited study had been done.

Another current trend is the use of websites as references. This is mentioned in the book, but only indirectly,

in the context of peer review. Hames warns that reviewers who access an author's personal website in the course of their review task may reveal their IP number (internet protocol number) and thus lose their anonymity. Although this is a valid concern, it sidesteps the issue of whether references to websites should be allowed at all. The problem is the lack of permanence. Websites come and go; URLs change. We have all come across the message "HTTP error 404, file not found". (Embarrassingly, this problem is illustrated by some of the book's references. There are even dead URLs to the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, one of the publishers.)

Alternative methods of peer review are presented in Appendix IV. People interested in this hot topic can read about several interesting experiments in pre-submission or post-publication review, open (or unmasked) review, and online review by reviewers (anonymous or named), sometimes with the scientific community also contributing viewpoints.

In summary, this is a timely and well-informed book. Newly appointed editors will find masses of useful information and practical tips. Seasoned editors will be inspired to reassess and refine their own procedures. Reviewers can read segments of the book for useful information and a bit of well-earned respect. But should authors read it? One of my favorite sentences comes under the heading "Author's responsibilities", where Hames writes: "... a well-prepared manuscript puts editors and reviewers in the right frame of mind and allows them to get on with the real job of reviewing" (p. 29). Although this book is not primarily aimed at authors, I hope many authors read it and take that sentence to heart. It would make peer review and manuscript management a much more efficient, fast and rewarding process for all of the parties involved.