

Original Article

Review invitations from journals: A health sciences researcher's experience, 2022–2024

Gina Joubert✉

Department of Biostatistics, School of Biomedical Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

gnbspgj@ufs.ac.za

orcid.org/0000-0002-3728-6925

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interests

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Abstract

Background: As the number of journals and manuscripts continues to increase, so do the calls on researchers to review. To ensure that researchers accept or decline review invitations quickly and appropriately, review invitations should be informative.

Objectives: Review invitations received by one health sciences researcher are summarized and invitations from journals listed in Web of Science, Scopus, or Directory of Open Access Journals are compared with invitations from journals listed in none of these three databases.

Methods: This quantitative cross-sectional study included review invitations that the author received from journals between 1 January 2022 and 31 December 2024. For the analysis, only the most recent review invitation from each journal was included so that the results were not skewed towards journals that requested reviews more frequently. Requests for reviews of revised manuscripts were excluded.

Results: Review invitations were received from 52 journals, 10 (19%) of which were not listed in any of the three databases. Emails from the 42 listed journals generally provided more, and more appropriate, information such as the manuscript abstract (98% of listed journals vs. 60% of unlisted journals) and addressing the email recipient correctly (62% of listed journals vs. 30% of unlisted journals). For 45% of listed journals and 50% of unlisted journals, the time to review was not stated in the email itself and 74% of listed journals and 80% of unlisted journals made no statement regarding the anonymity (or not) of reviewing.

Conclusion: Minimum requirements for review invitations are recommended, as well as areas for further research.

Keywords:

information for peer reviewers, invitations to peer review, peer review, peer reviews in health sciences

Introduction

Peer review, the cornerstone of scientific publishing, has been called ‘the ultimate in academic altruism.’¹ Reviewers devote their time and expertise without tangible rewards¹ to enhance the research field and support journals and authors.² However, Eva stated that reviewers benefit from reviewing because such altruism enhances their professional reputation.³ Reviewers have reported that learning about current research from manuscripts they review energizes them in pursuing their own research.⁴

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) states that ‘authors who have benefited from the peer review process should consider becoming peer reviewers as a part of their professional responsibilities’.⁵ COPE further advises that such invitations be declined if reviewers (1) see a conflict of interest that may bias the review, (2) lack the required expertise to review, or (3) cannot adhere to the time frame stipulated for the review. Invitations should also be declined if the manuscript in question is similar to one the reviewer is currently working on as researcher.⁵

As the number of journals and the number of manuscripts continue to increase steadily, so do the calls on researchers to review.⁶ In the field of cardiovascular medicine, Kusumoto et al.⁷ have pointed out the problem of the increasing number of journals, with ‘no obvious source of growth among the pool of peer reviewers’. Eva considers one review request a month as a ‘lot of reviewing’,³ whereas Smith mentions the case of a researcher receiving eight review invitations within a month.⁶ In the first 3 months of 2025, the author received 36 new review invitations, averaging about three invitations a week.

If researchers are to accept or decline such invitations quickly and appropriately, the invitations should be informative. The present study sought to describe the invitations received by its author from 2022 to 2024 and to compare the invitations from journals listed in the Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, or the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) – referred to as the ‘listed journals’ from now on – with those from the ‘unlisted journals’, that is journals not listed in any of the three databases.

Methods

This quantitative cross-sectional study included all review invitations the author received from journals between 1 January 2022 and 31 December 2024. For the analysis, only the most recent review invitation from each journal was included so that the results were not skewed towards journals that requested reviews more frequently.

The data source was emails received from journals inviting me to undertake the first review of a manuscript (requests for reviews of revised manuscripts following an earlier review were excluded). For each invitation, the author completed a data form compiled in REDCap (REDCap Consortium; Nashville, Tennessee, United States).

The form collected some basic information about the journal, namely the location (whether South African, African, or international), scope, and the content of the invitation (salutation, abstract, author and reviewer anonymity, time to review, benefits offered, and type of manuscript).

The listing of each journal in WoS, Scopus, or DOAJ was checked using

Excel (Microsoft Corporation; Redmond, Washington, United States) spreadsheets, which are available on the university library's website (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein) and are updated annually.

The first three review invitations received in 2024 were used for a pilot study. Subsequent additions and changes (order of items and options to multiple-choice items) to the data form were approved by the Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSREC) as amendments. The pilot cases were included in the main study.

Ethics

The research protocol was approved by the HSREC of the University of the Free State (ethics approval number UFS-HSD2024/0089/2603-0003). No identifying information was recorded for any of the authors of the reviewed manuscripts, and no details of manuscripts that would make them identifiable by any person are given. Each journal was given a code number on the data form.

Statistical analysis

The data were analysed in terms of frequencies and percentages (for categorical variables) and medians, interquartile ranges (IQR), and ranges (numerical variables due to skewed distributions) using SAS Version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc.; Cary, North Carolina, United States). Given the small sample size, associations between categorical variables were assessed using Fisher's exact test, and numerical values of the subgroups were compared using the Mann-Whitney test. The significance level was set at 0.05.

Results

A total of 130 invitations were received: 43 in 2022, 28 in 2023, and 59 in 2024. Two additional invitations, excluded from the analysis and not part of this total, were for a re-review of previously reviewed manuscripts, although the email invitation omitted to mention this fact. One other invitation was excluded: it stated that the review was no longer required, although no such invitation had been received in the first place. The peak months for the invitations were different in each year: in 2022, it was October (8, 19% of the invitations for that year); in 2023, the months were January and February (4, 14% in each month); and in 2024, it was December (13, 22%).

The invitations were received from 52 journals, and 13 of them requested three or more reviews during the 3-year period. The largest number of invitations from a single journal was 17. On two occasions, three new review invitations were received from the same journal within 10 days or fewer, and on two more occasions, two were received from the same journal within the same time frame. Approximately a fifth (10 out of 52, or 19%) of the journals were not listed in any of the three databases (Table 1). The scope of the journals was mainly a specific field within health sciences field (35 journals) or encompassed the entire field of health sciences (10 journals). The specific fields were primary health care, public health, community health, and family medicine (five journals), mental health and psychiatry (five journals), medical and health sciences education (three journals), and cardiovascular, nutrition and nursing (two journals each). All seven journals that either dealt with fields other than health sciences or covered the entire spectrum of

Table 1. Scope and location of 52 journals either listed in the Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, or the Directory of Open Access Journals or unlisted in any of the three databases

Feature	Total (n = 52)		Listed journals (n = 42) ^a		Unlisted journals (n = 10) ^b	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Scope						
Specific health sciences field	35	67	28	67	7	70
Broad health sciences	10	19	7	17	3	30
Other field, not health sciences	3	6	3	7	0	0
Broad research	4	8	4	10	0	0
Location						
South Africa	4	8	4	10	0	0
Elsewhere in Africa	3	6	3	7	0	0
Elsewhere (international)	45	87	35	83	10	100

^aListed journals: listed on Web of Science (WoS), Scopus or Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

^bUnlisted journals: not listed on Web of Science (WoS), Scopus or Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

research were listed journals. As to the location, all seven journals based in South Africa or in some other African country were listed journals (Table 1).

Selected features of the most recent review invitations from the 52 journals are shown in Table 2. Two of the invitations were reminders but the initial invitation was never received (both the invitations were from the listed journals). One invitation stated that only a statistical review was required.

Most of the emails (26 out of 42, or 62%) from the listed journals addressed me by my title and surname (Table 2), whereas only three out of 10 emails from unlisted journals did so ($P = .09$). Emails from the listed journals rarely (only one email out of 42, or 2%) used such unconventional forms as 'Dear Joubert' or 'Dear Prof Joubert, Gina', whereas the unusual forms were more common with the unlisted journals (4 out of 10; $P < .01$).

Nearly all emails (41 of 42, or 98%) from the listed journals included the abstract within the body of the email message, whereas only 6 of 10 from the unlisted journals did so

($P < .01$). In 4 out of 10 invitations from the unlisted journals, the abstract was supplied as an attachment or through a link. The two categories of journals were comparable in terms of whether the authors were identified (19 out of 42, or 45% of listed journals and 4 out of 10 unlisted journals) and in omitting to mention whether the reviewer would be identified (31 out of 42, or 74% of listed journals and 8 out of 10 unlisted journals). Eight journals – all of them listed – wrote that the reviewer report would be published with the manuscript.

The type of manuscript to review had to be ascertained from the title of the manuscript or from the abstract (if included). The types of manuscript offered for review differed significantly between the listed and the unlisted journals ($P < .01$). A total of 38 out of the 42 listed journals (90%) offered an original research paper to review, and in only three cases the type of the manuscript was either unclear or could not be ascertained from the text of the email message. With the unlisted journals, the numbers were three out of ten (original research) and six out of ten (type of manuscript unclear or unknown).

Roughly half the journals (23 out of 42, or 55% for the listed journals and 5 out of 10

Table 2. Components of review invitations from journals listed in the Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, or the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and those from journals not listed in any of the three databases

Feature	Total (n = 52)		Listed journals (n = 42) ^a		Unlisted journals (n = 10) ^b	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Salutation						
Title and surname	29	56	26	62	3	30
Title, name and surname	5	10	5	12	0	0
Name and surname	3	6	2	5	1	10
Generic "Dear Colleague"	2	4	1	2	1	10
Another person's name/surname	1	2	1	2	0	0
Surname or first name only	7	13	6	14	1	10
Title/surname/initial/name in unusual order	5	10	1	2	4	40
Abstract included in email						
Yes	47	90	41	98	6	60
No, in manuscript attached	3	6	0	0	3	30
No, need to open link	2	4	1	2	1	10
Authors identified in the email						
Yes	23	44	19	45	4	40
Type of manuscript to review						
Research article	41	79	38	90	3	30
Quantitative	36		33		3	
Qualitative	4		4		0	
Mixed methods	1		1		0	
Review article	1	2	1	2	0	0
Case report	1	2	0	0	1	10
Unclear from abstract in email	4	8	2	5	2	20
Unknown from email text	5	10	1	2	4	40
Statement in email whether reviewer will be identified						
Yes, reviewer will be anonymous	3	6	1	2	2	20
Yes, reviewer can choose	7	13	7	17	0	0
Yes, reviewer will be known	2	4	2	5	0	0
No statement in this regard	39	75	31	74	8	80
Vague statement about anonymity	1	2	1	2	0	0
Time to review stated in email						
Yes	28	54	23	55	5	50
<i>If yes</i>						
Median	14 days		14 days ^c		7 days	
Range	Previous day to 28 days		2–21 days		Previous day to 28 days	
Benefit offered						
Yes	16	31	14	33	2	20
<i>If yes, type</i>						
Complimentary access to online content	8		7		1	
Discount on future article-processing charges ^d	5		5		0	
Reviewer certificate	5		3		2	
Digital Object Identifier	3		2		1	

(Continued)

Table 2. Components of review invitations from journals listed in the Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, or the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and from those from journals not listed in any of the three databases (Continued)

Feature	Total (n = 52)		Listed journals (n = 42) ^a		Unlisted journals (n = 10) ^b	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Publons	3		2		1	
Reviewer of the month	2		1		1	
Reviewer Hall of Fame	2		1		1	
Complimentary invited paper after 10 quality reviews	1		1		0	

^aListed journals: listed on Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, or Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ),

^bUnlisted journals: not listed on any of the above three databases, ^csome indicating that this is the time allowed from the date of accepting the invitation, ^dwith varying conditions governing duration, sharing, and applicable journals

unlisted journals) stipulated the time available for review in the body of the email message. The median duration was 14 days for the listed journals (IQR 14–14 days) and 7 days for the unlisted journals (IQR 7–21 days; $P = .51$). Only 14% of the listed journals and 2 out of 10 unlisted journals stated a specific due date. A third of the listed journals and two out of 10 unlisted journals ($P = .70$) offered some form of reward for reviewing: this mainly took the form of discounts on future article-processing charges (APCs) and complimentary access to online content in the case of the listed journals and a certificate in the case of the unlisted journals.

Discussion

The journals listed in at least one of the three major databases generally provided more, and more appropriate, information than did the unlisted journals. However, nearly half of the invitations from the listed journals omitted mentioning the time available for review in the body of the email message, and the majority also failed to mention whether the reviews will be anonymous. The advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches to preserving the

anonymity of authors, reviewers, and editors and of offering different forms of incentives to reviewers are well documented.⁷ However, the current analysis focused not on the best approach but on whether any information was provided on the approach chosen by the given journal.

An already overextended reviewer will be irritated, or at times baffled, by glitches in systems, such as emails meant for a different person, follow-up reminders without any prior invitation in the first place, and no clear indication in the email of whether the request was for a first-time review or for a review of the revised manuscript following an earlier review by the reviewer.

With most of the invitations from the listed journals, the type of manuscript to be reviewed was clear and could be ascertained from the abstract or from the title of the manuscript. The few cases in which it was not could have been eliminated if clear and appropriate instructions had been given to authors on the content of the abstract and the abstracts screened by the editorial offices before sending a manuscript for review. These measures would ensure that potential reviewers can in fact determine whether they have the appropriate expertise or are working on something similar, as recommended

by COPE,⁵ before agreeing to review a given manuscript.

Nearly a third of listed journals offered some benefit, so that reviewing is no longer entirely without reward. It would be of value to investigate whether these benefits do in fact encourage researchers to accept review invitations. Similarly, proposals have been made to personalise review invitations⁸ (not only in the sense of getting the name right!) by, for example, highlighting compatibility between the reviewer and the manuscript to be reviewed and expressing appreciation for specific previous review contributions.⁹ The impact of such an approach during the 'reviewer matchmaking' process⁸ on reviewer acceptance rates needs to be investigated.

In conclusion, the journals listed in WoS, Scopus, or DOAJ generally provided sufficient information in the body of the email message inviting its recipient to be a reviewer, whereas the unlisted journals were deficient on that count. The author recommends that review invitations include at least the following components:

- Correct salutation addressed to the specific recipient.
- Explicit mention of the type of manuscript to be reviewed (for example, case report, systematic review, or original research article, as well as whether the research in question is quantitative or qualitative).
- Informative abstract.
- Indication of the type of anonymity (single-, double-, or triple-blinding) and choices in the matter, if any.
- Due date for review.
- A clear statement (also in the subject line of the email message) of whether the invitation is to review a revised submission and

whether the invitee has served as a reviewer for the initial submission.

If post-publication peer review becomes more common,¹⁰ the review invitation would also have to state whether pre- or post-publication peer review would be requested.

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