

How to Deal With a Mathematics Journal Editor

Scott T. Chapman

Readers will enjoy this parting testament from the outgoing editor of *The American Mathematical Monthly*, the flagship publication of the Mathematical Association of America and one of the oldest, most popular, and particular of all mathematics journals. Of course every editor and every journal is different. *Notices* has fewer rules.

As my term as editor of the *Monthly* comes to a close in 2016, I would like to offer some guidelines, aimed especially at my younger colleagues, about submitting papers to mathematics journals. Since I took over the *Monthly* in 2012, I have handled well over four thousand papers. I have probably seen almost every problem scenario that can arise in handling a paper: authors behaving badly, referees behaving badly, and, yes, even the editor behaving badly. In almost every case, the contention could have been avoided by keeping a very important point in mind: all players in this act are human. Mistakes will be made. What matters is not the mistake itself, but how the person responsible reacts to it. Mistakes can be corrected, but heated dialogue, mass email campaigns, and inaccurate blog posts don't help the situation. How you deal with the editor can be key to the final result.

Let me go through the process of submitting a paper with some tips and comments along the way.

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Picking the Journal: Do Your Homework

Probably the most common reason I reject papers is that the paper does not have the general appeal necessary for the *Monthly*. While the *Monthly* may be an extreme example (we mainly publish expository pieces), this point applies to all journals. Most journals have a summary of their scope and focus on their webpage. You don't want to send an algebra paper to a complex analysis journal. You don't want to submit a paper with a very narrow result to a general subject journal like *Proceedings of the American Mathematical Society* or *Bulletin of the London Mathematical Society*. Check in which journals your references lie. Consider the prestige level. Check page limitations. Don't hesitate to bother your senior colleagues who have publishing experience; in most cases, they will be happy to help you.

Read the Submission Instructions Carefully

Don't make yourself resubmit multiple times because you have neglected to satisfy the journal's requirements. It amazes me how many authors ignore the submission instructions. Case in point: at the *Monthly* we have instituted (as of January 1, 2015) a double-blind review policy. Hence, manuscripts should not contain authors' names. This is clearly advertised in our submission instructions. Last year I had to return 20 percent of submissions for this reason alone.

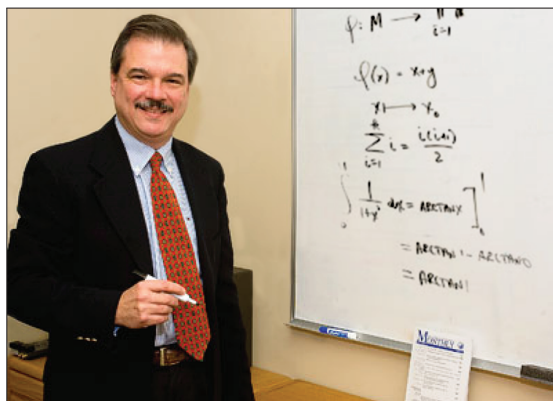
Prepare the Submitted Version of Your Paper with the Utmost Care

When you submit a paper, it should be as close to perfect as possible. After submitting, don't barrage the editor with corrections. While some editors will allow you to make some changes and resubmit, many do not. If you reread your paper and find minor grammatical errors, don't worry about it; these can be fixed later. If you find a major mathematical mistake, then write a very polite letter to the editor asking to withdraw the paper. Be apologetic; remember, you might want to resubmit to this same person. Keep the following in mind: someone (and perhaps multiple people) will referee your paper. This may be their first impression of you. You want this first impression to be as positive as possible. Bug a colleague to review the paper before you submit. After you look at the same paper long enough, it is amazing what you can miss that another reader will quickly see.

The Hardest Part—Now You Wait

We live in an instant communication age. Waiting for things is not in our psyche. While journal waiting times have changed from forty years ago, they have not changed that drastically. If a paper is refereed by one or more people, it may well be four to eight months before you hear anything from the editor (sometimes longer). There are a lot of factors that go into this waiting time that the author does not see. For instance, securing a referee (or referees) might be difficult. I recall on one paper having to solicit over twelve people to secure two reports. Even with email, this takes time. It is not unusual for the *Monthly* to take a month or more to secure two reports. Moreover, we usually review a paper for at least two weeks before deciding whether or not to have it refereed. Hence, when the author thinks we have had the paper for almost two months, it might just be getting into a new referee's hands. Editors are at the mercy of referees as much as authors are. A nonresponsive referee is almost as annoying to an editor as to an author.

When is it appropriate to contact the editor concerning the status of your work? Sometimes I appreciate it when authors do this. Even with a high-tech online system, it is possible for papers to fall through the cracks. I think it is premature to do this before six months since submission have passed. After six months, I think a short reminder every three months is acceptable. I again emphasize that these requests be polite. I once had an author demand an answer on his paper that day. Don't try that.



Sam Houston State University.

Scott Chapman at the board.

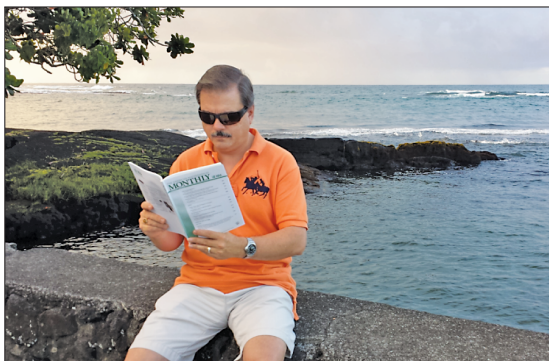
The Decision: How to Interpret It

Your paper will come back with one of three decisions: Accept, Reject, or Revise. In all likelihood, it will be one of the latter two. Revise is not equivalent to accept. I have on several occasions had referees look at revisions and change their minds and recommend rejection.

You may receive one or more referee reports. They could be extremely short and ask for only esoteric changes, or they could be extremely long and contain a request to essentially rewrite the paper. Don't react too quickly. Emails sent in haste can't be recalled. Read the report extremely carefully, and think about the contents for several days. While your first reaction to being told that Theorem 5 is not strong enough might be horror, after a few days you might begin to appreciate the referee's point of view.

There is a good chance you will not agree with all of the suggested changes. It is reasonable to ask the editor to waive a few of these. What becomes problematic for the editor is a scenario such as the following. Author A receives a referee's report from Referee R on a 12-page paper. The report is two pages in length and asks for about two dozen moderate changes. Author A then sends back a 7-page response explaining why none of the changes should be made. Author A should not expect a Christmas card from the editor. In fact, I would not be surprised if the editor became the heavy and demanded all of the changes. If you were to withdraw the paper and send it to a similar journal, there is a good chance you would hear many of the same things in the next report. Do your best to make the referee happy. Having requested a revision, the referee is clearly on your side.

If the decision is to reject, again take some time. You might come to accept the referee's report and the journal's decision. The referee might have done you a great favor by showing you either what is wrong or how to improve your manuscript. Don't rush to revise the manuscript and try submitting



Scott Chapman in Hawaii.

it somewhere else. Make sure you have addressed the valid points that the referee has made before moving forward.

How to Appeal/Protest a Decision

I will begin this section with a lemma, presented without proof, but valid based on my nearly thirty years of publishing.

Lemma 1. *You probably won't win an argument with an editor.*

The key word above is *argument*. Don't start your correspondence with the editor in an adversarial tone. Nothing turns me off more than hearing what a "moron" or "idiot" the referee is. Keep it professional. Start the email to the editor with something like, "Thank you for your report and decision on our paper. We appreciate the efforts of the referee(s)." Your job now is to convince the editor that there are problems with the referee's reasoning. Opinions here are not going to help much. For instance, the following will probably get you nowhere: "My coauthors and I disagree with the report of the referee and ask you to reconsider your decision." Of course you disagree with the referee. What you need now is not opinion but facts. Give the editor as many facts as you can, such as the following:

(a) Here is an argument which demonstrates that the proof of Theorem 6 is actually correct.

(b) The referee claims that the main result of [12] is of little interest. According to Google Scholar, [12] has been referenced over 1,500 times.

(c) The referee claims that our main result is already contained in [21]. This is incorrect, as our hypotheses are much weaker....

The more facts you can offer, the better the chance you are going to grab the editor's attention.

Rejection is difficult. While I spend a great deal of my time rejecting papers, I can show you a filing cabinet drawer peppered with rejection letters to my own work. Every author has the right to question a decision. While I know of no

statistics, I would guess that your chances of changing an editor's decision are not high. This does not mean that you should not try. Don't expect your appeal to result in a long, detailed email exchange. Most editors don't have time for this. If the editor responds and sharply negates your arguments and lets the decision stand, leave it at that and move on. Another email similar to your first will likely get almost the same response. Keep in mind that you might call on this editor again, and you want him or her to be open to dealing with you. If you have the last word, try to leave on a high note: "While we disagree with your decision, we respect the opinion of the journal and thank you for your time...."

Some Further Comments on Revision

The final version of your paper should be the version approved by the referees with their various changes, which in turn has been approved by the editor. If you have an acceptance with minor changes required, then this is not a green light to completely rewrite the paper. If you do, the editor will likely send it back to the referees for a further okay, which clearly delays the process. Prepare the revision as carefully as you prepared the original version of the paper.

Read the Proofs

Don't blow off your page proofs. While many typesetters now produce the final product based on the author's \LaTeX file, they often format in a particular way and things can change drastically. While it is tempting to read the first two pages (which are perfect) and then skip the rest, don't do it. Very few of the page proofs I get back from authors contain no errors. Errata and addendums are like hangnails to editors. A good read of the proofs might avoid something embarrassing down the line.

Disclaimer

There is no one way to deal with an editor. What works with one editor or journal may well not work with another. Always remember that an editor has a difficult job and has to say no to a lot of meritorious work. Meanwhile, academic publishing is changing daily. In the coming days and months, you will likely hear more about "double-blind", "zero-blind", and "open access". No matter in what direction our systems evolve, there will probably always be one person making a final decision. Practicing effective professional communication with editors will help you in publishing and will serve you well in other aspects of your academic career.