
Editorial

From the Editors: Perspectives on Turnaround Time

Editors are frequently asked about the turnaround time at their journals, but there is no standard way this “simple” statistic is defined, making comparisons across journals somewhat risky. The easiest number for an editor to access is based on all the time to reach a decision for all submissions. This lumps together the time it takes to immediately reject manuscripts (about 20 to 30 percent at Health Services Research [*HSR*]) with the more time-consuming process of getting external reviews back for the first submission and (usually faster) subsequent submissions. (This overall average also makes the review process look fast.) For the past several years at *HSR*, the “simple statistic” we reported has been in the 10- to 14-week range.

Regardless of how it is calculated, reducing the turnaround time is obviously in the interest of authors and editors, especially if it can occur without reduction in the quality of the review process. Time to get external reviews, however, is not the only thing that authors are interested in; some want to know how long it takes from submission to acceptance (or rejection), which is quite another thing because that may involve several revisions and, thus, also include steps where the manuscript is in the author’s hands. Others want to know how long it takes until an accepted manuscript appears officially in print and electronically. (That statistic at *HSR* is approximately five to six months.) In exploring the breadth of issues implied in the question, “How long will it take?”, it became clear that the authors’ and editors’ perspectives might be quite different.

From the perspective of one trying to manage the review process, the primary concern is how long it takes us to reach a decision on a particular manuscript. The numerous steps involved are discussed elsewhere, but the simplified version is that a manuscript first goes to the editorial staff (usually one of the coeditors-in-chief, but occasionally also to one of the senior associate editors), who make a decision as to whether the manuscript will go on to an external peer review. If it does, then once the reviewers’ comments are back, the editorial staff review the comments, reviews, and manuscript again. Then the coeditor-in-chief for the manuscript makes the final decision and notifies the author. (The reviewers are notified about the decision and reviews,

blinded from names, at the same time.) Total turnaround time from the editor's perspective (what we will call "cycle time") is measured as the time from receipt of the manuscript until a decision letter about that particular submitted version is sent to the author. For some authors, this is a definitive end to our process, that is, a rejection, or very rarely, an acceptance. For others, the decision is usually a "revise and resubmit" on a first submission, and it may be a long time before the entire process is finished, reaching a definitive rejection or acceptance. If one takes the perspective of an author who is primarily interested in "how long will it take until I know that my paper has finally been accepted or rejected?" the additional time for the multiple cycles of revisions and decisions is relevant.

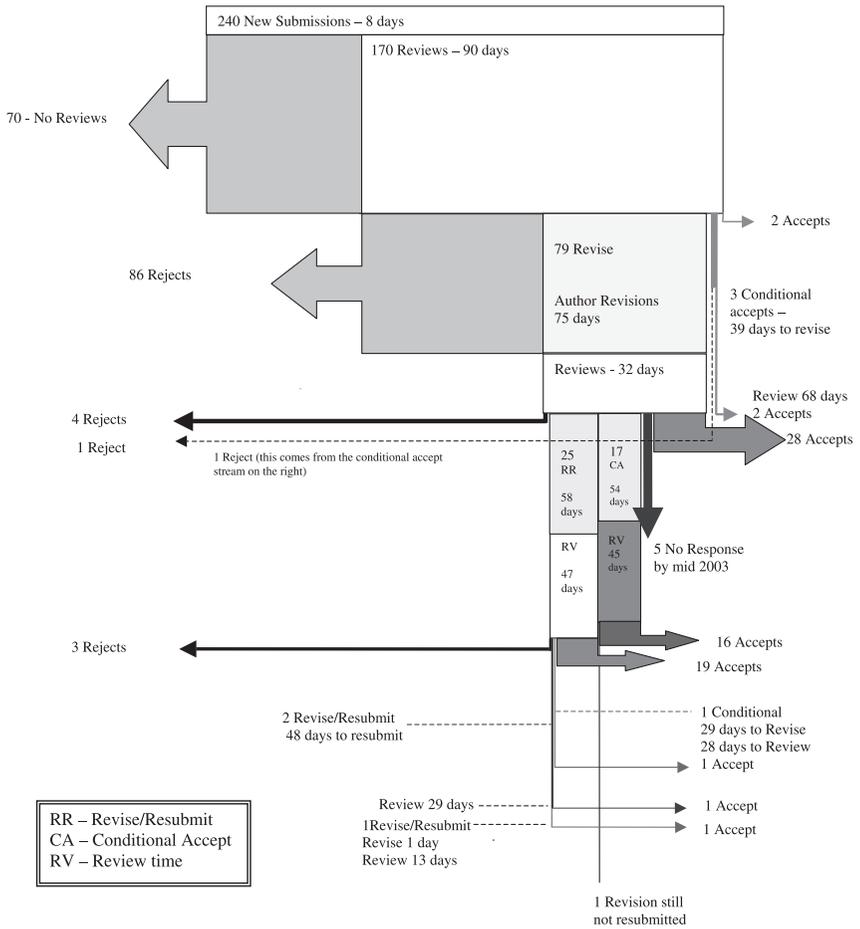
THE 2001 "COHORT"

To explore this question of "how long does it take," I collected the available data from our system for our activity during 2001 and for all manuscripts submitted in 2001. As in any empirical study, the data were not as complete as one would like, but most variables were available. (The manuscripts with substantial missing data were all "rejects," most of which are likely to have had shorter than average turnaround times, given the nature of our system. A few other manuscripts were missing partial data and are included in the counts, but do not affect the average times reported.)

The first observation is that, without careful definition, even the denominator of an assessment of "review activity" is ambiguous. During 2001, 342 manuscripts were logged into our system, with a mean cycle time of 70.6 days. Many of these were new manuscripts; some were revisions of manuscripts submitted previously (including some initially submitted before the dates under study). There were 240 new submissions in 2001 (mean cycle time of 72.1 days for first cycles beginning in 2001), but these submissions eventually accounted for 362 cycles averaging 69.4 days. Many of the subsequent cycles ended, and some began, well after 2001. Thus, while cycle time appears relatively invariant to the measure used, it is noteworthy that for every 100 new submissions, there are roughly 50 resubmissions. The real story, of course, is more complex.

Borrowing from the famous 1861 graphic of Charles Joseph Minard popularized by Tufte (1983), Figure 1 shows what happened to these 240 submissions. More than a quarter (70) were rejected by the editor without further review, within an average of 8.3 days. The remaining 170 entered the

Figure 1: Experience of New Submissions to HSR in 2001



external review process, which took an additional 90.2 days, on average. More than half of these (86) were rejected, but 46 percent (79) were invited to revise and resubmit. Two were accepted outright, but these were invited commentaries, so don't get your hopes up! However, three were conditionally accepted, which usually means authors were requested to change some important but minor points before full acceptance. The "conditions" are real, nonetheless. As can be seen in the second cycle, one of these was rejected in the next cycle, presumably when the author was unable, or refused to make some changes. In total, by the end of the first cycle about two-thirds of the

authors had a definitive answer (usually a rejection), more than half with the benefit of external reviews while the others “benefited” by receiving a rapid answer.

After the initial cycle, the “ball is back in the authors’ court” for a revision. On average, authors took about 11 weeks to resubmit, nearly as long as *HSR* took to get reviews. The longest resubmission times for the 2001 cohort were 492 and 587 days—for those who resubmitted. However, 20 months after the end of 2001, five authors who received a “revise and resubmit” letter still had not returned a revised manuscript or had withdrawn their submission officially (which they *should* do before submitting elsewhere).

Of the 74 resubmissions, the average cycle time for rereviews was 74.6 days. Only four were rejected at this stage. At the end of the first revision cycle, more than a third (28) were accepted and another 17 were offered Conditional Acceptance. A third (25) were asked for further revisions. Of the 17 conditionally accepted, 16 were accepted on the next round. One author was asked for further revisions and has not yet resubmitted. (This could be a sign of discouragement, but the author took 337 days to respond to the previous request, so it could be a particularly problematic paper.)

The 25 papers receiving a revise and resubmit at the end of their second cycle were resubmitted after an average of 58 days, and underwent another 47.1 days of review before decision. Three-quarters (19) were then accepted, three were rejected, and three were given conditional accept or revise status, all of which were eventually accepted.

OBSERVATIONS AND CAVEATS

More than two-thirds of all manuscripts submitted to *HSR* are ultimately rejected. For the vast majority, the bad news comes in the first cycle, and nearly 40 percent of the rejection letters come without review, usually in less than two weeks from submission. In most of these instances, it reflects an editorial decision that the subject matter does not match that of our journal, or that the contribution is directed toward an audience that is too narrow. The author can then submit the paper elsewhere without losing much time.

Looking at it from the other side, of those manuscripts for which we invited a revision (or offered conditional acceptance) after the first cycle, nearly 90 percent (70/78) that “stayed the course” were accepted. This optimistic figure may decline somewhat in the future if, instead of outright rejection, we more frequently use our new category of “major revision,” which

is reserved for those total reanalyses that may or may not either be feasible or yield interesting findings. In 2001, papers fitting this description were probably more likely to have been rejected.

A few other observations are worth noting. It appears in Table 1, when ignoring the manuscripts rejected with “no reviews,” that negative decisions seem to take longer than positive ones. For example, on the first round, papers receiving a request for revision took an average of 89.0 days to receive a decision, and those that were rejected took 108.5 days, ($p = .023$). Likewise, among the revised papers, those upon resubmission receiving an acceptance took substantially less decision time than those receiving a conditional acceptance or revise (again). The “tough calls” really do take a good deal longer, perhaps because they require more thought, generate more communication among the *HSR* editorial staff, or result in reviewers and editors simply postponing a judgment in the difficult situations that more often wind up as rejections.

It also appears, perhaps surprisingly, that the papers much more rapidly resubmitted by authors were ultimately accepted compared with those papers that were ultimately received less positively. This should not be seen as encouraging hasty resubmissions but as evidence of an omitted variable capturing the work necessary to be done. It is likely that papers initially receiving quite favorable reviews needed only minor changes and were turned around more quickly than those that required more substantial work, and even this was sometimes not enough. In the future, our distinguishing between major and usual revisions might help assess this allocation of time.

Table 1: Decision and Revision Times on Initial and First Resubmission

<i>Situation and Decision</i>	<i>Number of Manuscripts</i>	<i>Author Revision Time (Days)</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>HSR Review Time (Days)</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Manuscripts on the first review cycle					
Revision	79	NA		89.0	
Reject	86	NA		108.5	.023
Manuscripts returned after revision					
Accept	28	45.9		56.6	
Conditional Accept	17	102.0	.073	83.8	.105
Accept	28	45.9		56.6	
Revision	25	80.5	.0001	84.8	.034
Accept	28	45.9		56.6	
Reject	4	101.5	.0000	133.8	.32

NA = not applicable.

These turnaround times also include manuscripts submitted in response to special issues. As noted in our previous editorial on special issues (December 2003), there are both advantages (e.g., an expressed interest in the topic) and disadvantages (e.g., time pressure that pushes toward an early definitive decision, without the opportunity for multiple cycles). Thus, these averages probably do not apply in all cases. Now we can track these manuscripts separately.

While it should be clearer now why the simple statistic of turnaround reported by editors is not that meaningful, there is good news and bad news from our more recent experience. As mentioned above, the average time for the 342 manuscripts handled (at all stages) in 2001 was 70.6 days. The bad news: comparable figures for 2002 (when we increased the number of pages and manuscripts, changed editors and managing editors, moved and converted to electronic processing) were 431 manuscripts averaging 110.8 days. The good news: as of the first 7 months of 2003, 244 manuscripts were processed with a cycle time of 63.7 days. We knew that our traumas in 2002 took a toll on our cycle time, but we didn't know just how bad the situation was.

We apologize, and end on a happier note: Things seem to have improved and we are on track to become increasingly responsive—improving upon the times when there were fewer manuscripts. This reflects the advantages of using a new system that reduces the number of manual steps and increases our ability to communicate with authors and reviewers and monitor the peer review process to ensure its high quality. The new system was implemented July 7, so there are currently relatively few manuscripts that have made it through the cycle of review. Manuscripts initially submitted before that date will continue in the old system, so we are currently operating parallel processes. However, we have been averaging about one new submission a day, and one solid measure of responsiveness available is that the average time for a “no review” decision or assignment to a senior associate editor is well under 3 days, in contrast to the 10 days of the past.

Improving our turnaround time is only one of many goals we have for *HSR*. Getting a clear conceptual framework of what we need to measure is a first step.

Harold S. Luft, Ph.D., Coeditor-in-Chief

REFERENCE

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