2015 SSB Mid-year Executive Council Meeting
Editor's Report – 27 February 2016
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I. Submissions and Decisions: 2015

Number of Original Submissions in 2015

305 (256 regular manuscripts, 38 Point of View manuscripts, 11 Software for Systematics and Evolution manuscripts; includes resubmissions, but does not include 13 book reviews)

This is an increase of 16 (6%) compared to 2014, and follows the 6% increase of 2014 over 2013 and 9% increase of 2013 over 2012. To my knowledge, it is the first time we have topped 300 original submissions and resubmissions (manuscripts with unique manuscript numbers) in a single calendar year.

Of the 292 decisions that I made on original manuscripts in 2015, I rejected 60 (~21%) as "not appropriate for journal". This is lower than last year's percentage (26%), but roughly in line with 2013 (22%). As is usually the case, many of these papers were simply inappropriate for the journal (i.e., they focused on topics in medicine, genomics or molecular evolution without a systematics component, or were really "systems biology"), though a few were phylogenetic studies that were simply not of broad interest. We seem to be getting fewer of these over time, though. As in 2014, in many cases, I asked associate editors (AEs) to first decide whether or not a manuscript should go out for review at all and, if not, to write a recommendation without review. The main goal of editorial rejection is to reduce the burden on the AEs, Editorial Board members, and reviewers, and to save authors time—instead of waiting for what I (or, often, an AE and I) think will be a "reject" decision, they can quickly submit to a different journal.

Initial decisions made by me in 2015: 292

Accept: 1 (I believe this was a symposium volume introductory paper)
Accept pending receipt of final changes: 1
Accept pending minor revisions: 33 (11%; 6% in 2014; 9% in 2013; 14% in 2012; 17% in 2011; 11% in 2010)
Accept pending major revisions: 49 (17%; 15% in 2014; 18% in 2013; 11% in 2012; 10% in 2011; 20% in 2010)
Reject, encourage/permit resubmission: 80 (27%; 23% in 2014; 23% in 2013; 28% in 2012; 25% in 2011; 24% in 2010)
Reject: 69 (24%; 27% in 2014; 22% in 2013; 21% in 2012; 19% in 2011; 20% in 2010)
Not Appropriate: 60 (21%; 26% in 2014; 22% in 2013; 26% in 2012; 28% in 2011; 24% in 2010)

Overall acceptance rate: 29% (24% in 2014; 33% in 2013, 25% in 2012; 27% in 2011; 31% in 2010)
Overall rejection rate (including reject/resubmit): 71% (76% in 2014, 67% in 2013, 75% in 2012; 73% in 2011; 69% in 2010; 66% in 2009)

The acceptance rate appears to be up again a bit in 2015, but is only slightly above the average for the past five years.

II. Manuscript Handling

In 2014, Lizi Dawes took over from Dr. Lulu Stader as our Managing Editor in the OUP Virtual Editorial Office. Lulu was great, but Lizi was a fantastic replacement and that transition was smooth. Unfortunately, we had some turnover in the VEO again in 2015, as Lizi stepped down for a few months due to personal reasons and Paula Potter took over. In February of 2016, Paula took over from Lizi permanently and, once again, the transition was nearly seamless from my perspective.

Please refer to the Publisher's and Virtual Editorial Office report for details on how OUP handles accepted manuscripts, data on manuscript submissions, turnaround time, etc. In short, accepted manuscripts are made available via the journal web site's "Advance Access" section in less than a week once the authors complete the copyright form.

One continuing issue is the lengthy period of time from manuscript submission to an editorial decision. More information is available in the Virtual Editorial Office report, but the average times from submission to first decision for original submissions received in 2015 were:

Book reviews: 0 days (I turn these around immediately upon receiving them, and handle them outside of the Manuscript Central system)
Point of View: 46.90 days (50.22 in 2014, 53.15 in 2013)
Regular Manuscript: 50.66 days (57.83 in 2014, 67.45 in 2013)
Software for Systematics and Evolution: 23.30 days (23.54 in 2014, 7.5 in 2013)
Average across all submission types: 49.30 days (55.57 in 2014)

As you can see, average turnaround time in the two categories that make up the bulk of our submissions (Points of View and Regular Manuscripts) continued to decline in 2015. Turnaround times for Software submissions are about the same as they were in 2014, following a sharp uptick between 2014 and 2013. Authors increasingly seem to understand that we only consider high-impact, user-friendly software for the Software section.

Our turnaround times have improved markedly during my tenure as EIC, but they are still long compared to most other journals. Most of our Associate Editors write helpful recommendations that function as an additional review, and this effort takes time. There is a clear connection between turnaround time and rigor of review, and I strongly suspect there is a connection between review rigor and journal impact factor. I am aware that some researchers rarely submit their work to Systematic Biology because of our slow turnaround times, and some advise their students and junior colleagues to avoid us as well. However, I think we are still a fairly attractive option even for young researchers on the job market looking for a quick decision, and this inference is supported by the numbers—submissions have increased several percent every year during my tenure as EIC.

We have implemented several changes over the past year or two (most suggested by associate editors or council members) to accelerate our review process; please see my 2014 annual report for details. I think those changes, coupled with my increasing use of our AEs as a "reject without review" filter, have played major roles in the reduction of our average turnaround time for regular submissions by nearly 17 days since 2013.

III. OUP

Jennifer Boyd continues to operate as Publisher for our journal; she appears to be permanently ensconced in this role, and she has done a wonderful job.

IV. AE news and work loads

Emma Goldberg is our newest Associate Editor, joining the team in the summer of 2015. She has only handled a few manuscripts to date, but she has done an outstanding job, quickly turning manuscripts around and providing thoughtful and helpful recommendations. We currently have 29 Associate Editors (actually 30—Editor-Elect Tom Near just added one last month). In 2015, Peter Foster handled the most original submissions (14), which is actually rather surprising to me. Norm MacLeod (our morphological workhorse) handled 11 manuscripts, as did Luke Harmon (who handles many of our diversification-type papers). No other AEs received more than 10 original submissions. However, note that these numbers underestimate the work our AEs do, because they do not count resubmissions or revisions. To be very clear, the AEs and reviewers are the backbone of this journal. They don't just make my job easier, they make it *possible*.