

The National Institutes of Health Fellows Editorial Board

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The National Institutes of Health Fellows Editorial Board (NIH FEB), established in 2002, is a confidential, all-volunteer editorial service that is provided to the NIH community. The purpose of the NIH FEB is twofold: first, to provide NIH fellows with editorial feedback on their manuscripts, grant proposals, abstracts, and other scientific documents and, second, to provide NIH fellows with an opportunity to gain editorial experience and to improve their own scientific writing. In the current context, fellows include not only postdoctoral fellows but postbaccalaureate fellows, predoctoral fellows (graduate students), and staff scientists. All fellows are encouraged to submit their manuscripts to the NIH FEB.

The NIH FEB consists of a senior editor, four associate editors, and about 25 primary editors. Previous editorial experience is not required for membership, but new members are asked to fill out a registration form in which they introduce themselves to members of the board and state the reasons for joining the FEB. Those interested in assuming the role of associate editor may nominate themselves when a position becomes available, and the appointments are determined by the senior editor. The senior editor is elected by the board to serve a 1-year term, commonly after serving as an associate editor and acquiring the skills necessary to fulfill the requirements of the position.

In brief, on receipt of a manuscript, the senior editor assigns it to one associate editor on a rotating basis. The associate editor then solicits three primary editors who

will be responsible for preparing the editorial reports. FEB meetings are held weekly, and up to three manuscript submissions are discussed at each meeting. The meetings are conducted both in person and by videoconference with various NIH sites. Attendance is mandatory for members because the manuscripts are reviewed during the meetings. The primary editors and the associate editor lead the discussion; however, all members are encouraged to contribute. At the end of each discussion, the associate editor solicits volunteers from among the three primary editors to compile the editorial reports.

After the meeting, the primary editors exchange their comments and compile them into two reports. The hard-copy report includes typographic and grammatical markings directly on a draft of the submission, and the electronic report consists of a list of more general comments that include suggestions for reorganization, grammatical corrections, or word changes. The electronic report is divided into sections corresponding to the sections of the manuscript or grant submission and contains comments on each section and general comments that apply to the manuscript as a whole. The primary editor responsible for compiling the hard-copy report and the one responsible for compiling the electronic report send the reports to the associate editor to whom the submission was assigned. The associate editor may edit the reports for proper tone, editorial corrections, and content, if necessary. The final reports are sent to the senior editor, who ensures that the reports are properly formatted and complete before sending them to the authors.

As noted, submissions are edited for grammar, structure, and style; but they are not edited for scientific merit. The editors strive to provide authors with the most constructive feedback to strengthen the clarity, flow, and impact of the manu-

script. For journal articles, each section is examined separately; in addition, the manuscript must flow well and be properly formatted. Questions that are addressed during the discussion and in the editorial reports include

- Is the information in the appropriate section? For example, would some information in the discussion be more suited for the introduction to prepare the reader better to appreciate the study?
- Are verb tenses used appropriately? As a general rule, previously published (referenced) findings are referred to in the present tense and new data in the past tense. Thus, the introduction and discussion generally should contain some material in the present tense.
- Can the results and discussion be combined into one section, if permitted by the target journal? This sometimes aids the flow of the manuscript, particularly if some steps in the study depend on results of previous steps.
- Are paragraphs structured effectively? Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence that sets the theme for the paragraph. Then should come statements that follow from the topic sentence, such as mention of previously published work that supports the idea being presented or that is connected to the current study. This structure will provide flow within each paragraph.
- Are paragraphs linked clearly? Transitional words and phrases (such as *for example*, *in order to*, *however*, and *therefore*) help to provide such linkage and allow the author to express conceptual connections.
- Is the writing concise? Each sentence should be free of excessive words.
- Do explanations flow smoothly? One approach to enhance the flow of complex explanations is for the author to explain the rationale or argument out loud as

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one would to a fellow scientist. The flow will become clear, and the sequence of thoughts may be transcribed directly to paper. After some editorial modifications, this may allow for the most direct presentation of complex ideas.

- Are figures incorporated suitably? Figures should be ordered according to their presentation in the text. One paragraph may be devoted to a figure, so jumping to the next figure in the same paragraph should be avoided. The figure captions should summarize or highlight the relevant findings of each image.

As of February 2008, the FEB had reviewed more than 350 pieces of writing, including more than 250 scientific papers, 18 review articles, and 12 grant applications. For more information on the FEB, please visit its Web site at ccr.cancer.gov/careers/feb or e-mail the board at ncieditors@mail.nih.gov. 



Jennifer Dickey, senior editor, and Rana Al-Hallaq, immediate past senior editor, NIH Fellows Editorial Board.