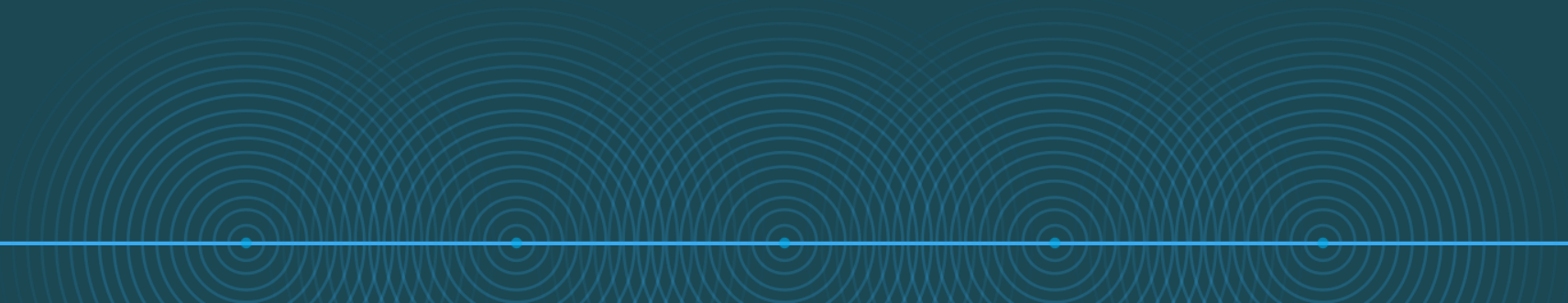


# An editor's guide to writing proposals for review articles

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Presented by Matt Pavlovich and Andrea Stephens

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## About the speakers



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## What is a proposal...

- Your way of asking for an invitation to submit a review article
- Direct submission: you go to the website and press Submit
  - Like how you'd submit a research article
  - May or may not be possible at every journal (not an option at Trends)
- By invitation:
  - An editor contacts you with an invitation to write an article, or
  - **You contact the editor to request an invitation** ←
- “Presubmission inquiry”: publisher jargon for asking the editor if your article is a good fit for the journal
  - Research: generally asking about the suitability of a finished study
  - Reviews: interchangeable with proposal
  - I prefer “proposal” because its meaning is more easily understood, but sometimes you will see “presubmission”

Topic of this webinar:  
How and why to do this

## ...and why do editors ask for them?

- For the author: it saves you work!
- For the editor: better understand scope, key take-home messages, niche that the paper will fill
- It starts a collaborative process between the author and editor
- Get to know your writing style (if I can't understand your proposal, the paper probably won't be suitable for a general audience either)
- Why you shouldn't send a 6000+ word paper unsolicited:
  - Maybe it's impossible to revise to fit journal style
  - Maybe we don't have room for it
  - Maybe it's not a good fit
  - No opportunity for collaboration
  - "Cuts in line" ahead of other proposals

## How is this different from a cover letter?

- A proposal is meant to introduce an idea for a manuscript that hasn't been written yet
- A cover letter should accompany the submission of a drafted manuscript:
  - Introduce the authors and the topic
  - Explain anything unusual or exceptional about the manuscript
  - Maybe suggest or oppose reviewers (more common in the old days)
- There are some similarities:
  - Convey excitement, timeliness, novelty
  - Justify the fit with the journal
  - Take time to learn the editor's name
- For more on cover letters, see our Cell Mentor post:  
<http://crosstalk.cell.com/blog/submitting-your-manuscript-write-the-right-cover-letter>

## Why editors ask for certain information in a proposal

- Article working title
- Author names & affiliations
  - Does the author team have the necessary expertise?
- A point-by-point summary (~300-600 words) outlining what will be discussed in the article and why it is timely and novel
- A list of 10-20 key recent references (published in the past 2-4 years) that indicate the intended breadth and balance of the proposed article
  - Demonstrate fit to the journal
  - Show the topic is timely
  - Highlight novel aspects of your work

## Different proposals for different article formats

- Every journal publishes a range of article types
  - Review, Opinion, Forum, Science & Society, Spotlight, Letter, Scientific Life, Book Review, X of the Month
- Don't make us guess what article type you're proposing!
- Information required for the proposal can differ for different article types
  - Review and Opinion articles
  - Science & Society, Forum
  - Spotlights and Book Reviews
  - Letters
- Sometimes we'll suggest a different format might be more appropriate

## How important is the information you include?

- Absolutely critical: the things the journal asks for on its website
  - Explanation of the topic and why it's timely
  - List of key recent references
  - Format
  - List of authors and affiliations
- Possibly informative but not necessary
  - Longer outline including planned figures
  - Your preferred submission date (the editor might prefer something else)
- Not that useful
  - Extensive author biographies (we will look you up, don't worry)
  - Word count and number of references (we *don't* want you to know this)
  - That ubiquitous bar chart of number of publications vs. time
  - Flattery



## Customizing your proposal for different journals

- Want to show the editor you're paying attention: following the directions here suggests that you will follow the directions for your article too
- Don't want to make it seem like the journal is your plan B

Title:	ARTICLE SYNOPSIS
Subject:	
Author:	SUGDENM
Manager:	
Company:	Royal Society of Chemistry

- This makes it very obvious you are using another journal's template (I am not M. Sudgen, and my journal is not published by RSC!)
- It's fine if you originally proposed your review somewhere else—but show genuine interest in wherever you submit next instead of giving the impression of “shopping around”

## I need an exception from your guidelines!

- The earlier you do this the better
- Whether an exception is possible at all depends
  - On the guideline
  - On the article type
- Can you see examples of where exceptions have been granted in the past?
  - However, this does NOT mean that one will be granted for you
- Clearly define what you need
  - "We would like an extra figure to explain x", "Could Box 2 be 600 words?"
- Explain why
  - "Our review covers x, y & z so we need author expertise covering these areas"
- Be prepared to be told that it's not possible -> have a backup plan

## What if the editor says no?

- Many journals are heavily over-subscribed – simply unable to take all pieces that are pitched
- Need to balance all subfields covered by the journal
  - Something similar in the pipeline
- Not the right time – topic has been reviewed recently
- Not the right journal
  - Topic area
  - Scope of article

## Writing truly great proposals

- What makes a truly great, must take proposal?
  - the "x factor"
- Not about "big names"
- Well formulated question of general interest
- Clear, logical arguments
- Reference list suggesting broad interest
- Get your colleagues outside your immediate subfield to read it – do they think it's exciting? Would they read it?
- Good luck!

## What makes me want to say yes?

- A concept that was part of every talk at a recent conference
- A truly new way of thinking about a topic (show, don't tell, that your idea is novel)
- A "story" that is obvious even to me, a non-expert (rather than "Many reviews exist about disease X, therapeutic Y, and device Z, but ours is the first to review specifically using device Z to deliver therapeutic Y to treat disease X")
- An author list that reflects intentional collaboration
- A unique personal perspective on the topic that only you can provide

## Examples from a personal Hall of Fame

- A review of the technological applications of a class of proteins, affibodies, from the research group that originally developed them
- An appraisal of various technologies for biofabrication along with a newly proposed figure of merit for measuring their efficiency
- A user's guide to performing qPCR from an industrial group that develops qPCR reagents
- A review of enabling technologies for personalized and precision medicine originating from a Gordon Research Conference on the topic and written by the conference's organizers
- The first review proposed for CRISPR-based biosensing, which included an extensive comparison of different nucleases for different applications

## 10 dos and don'ts of writing proposals for review articles

1. Do include all of the information that the journal asks for
2. Do explain your own expertise and the relevance of the proposed article for the journal
3. Do indicate the intended article format
4. Do customize your proposal for the journal
5. Don't assume the editor is an expert in the topic of the review
6. Do inform the editor as soon as possible if you want an exception from the guidelines, but
7. Don't assume the editor will necessarily be able to grant your request
8. Don't equate the editor saying no with the editor thinking your proposal was bad
9. Do seek advice from colleagues, especially ones outside your immediate field
10. Do explain why the topic is exciting instead of stating that it is

# Thank you.

Ask your questions on:

Researcher Academy Mendeley group  
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