

An Editor's Perspective: From submission to decision

Kristina Maria Kareh
Senior Editor
Nature Communications

Imperial College London
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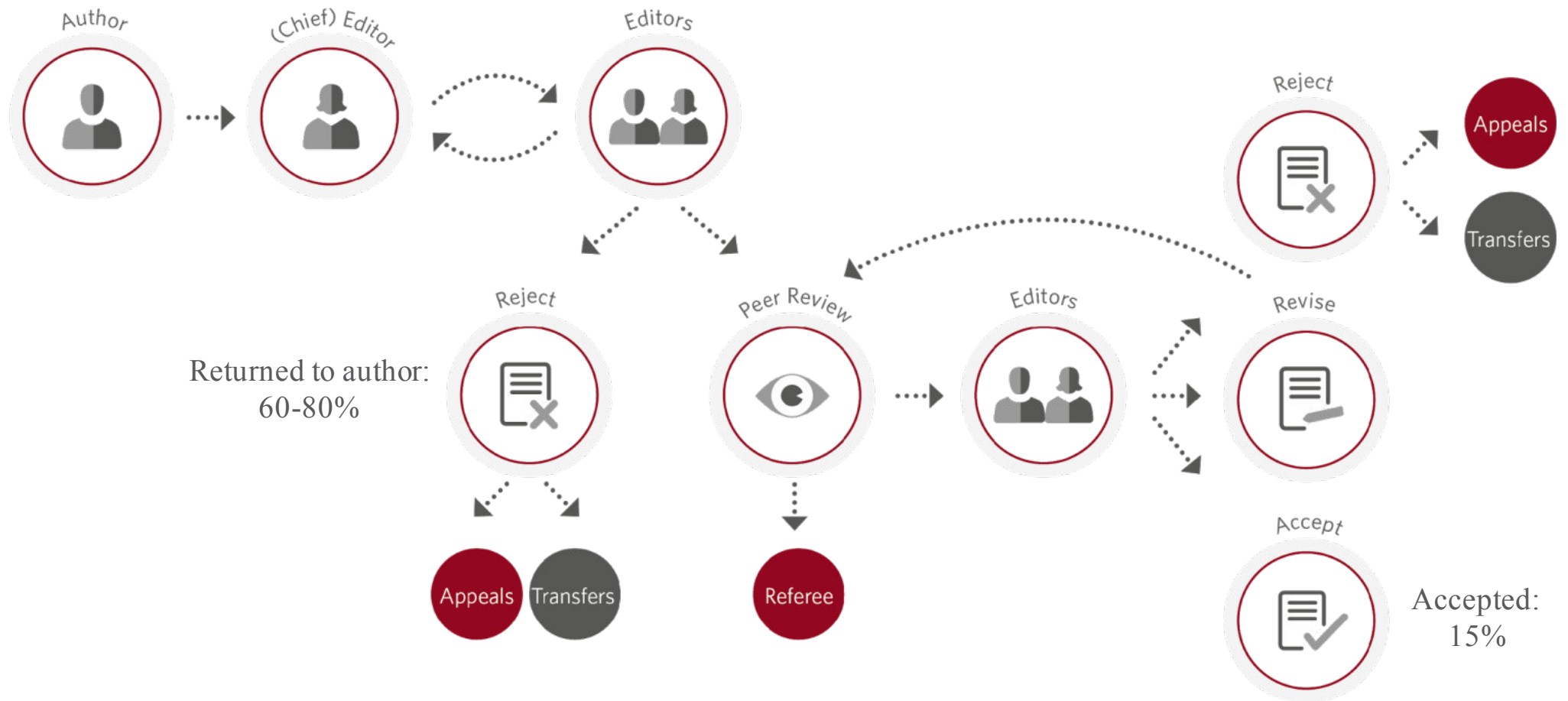
TOPICS WE'LL COVER

- 1 Preparing a submission
- 2 Writing a compelling paper
- 3 Editorial decisions: pre-review
- 4 Peer review
- 5 Editorial decisions: post-review
- 6 Revisions and response letters
- 7 Appeals

THE EDITORIAL PROCESS



THE EDITORIAL PROCESS



MY BACKGROUND AND CURRENT ROLE

PhD Materials Science and Engineering

Imperial College London

Synchrotron tomography

Semi-solid metallurgy

Two postdocs

Imperial College London

X-ray imaging of steels

X-ray and electron imaging of SOFCs

Senior Editor

Nature Communications



Metallurgy
& materials
science

**Kristina
Kareh, London**



Computational
chemistry

**Laura Zoppi,
Berlin**



Inorganic
materials
chemistry

**Jacilynn Brant,
NY**



Physical
chemistry

**Margherita
Citroni, Berlin**



Nanochemistry
Supramolecular
chemistry

**Ariane
Vartanian, NY**



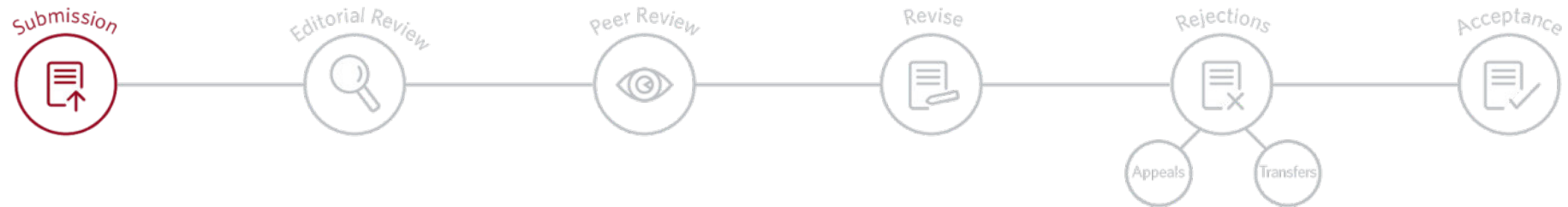
Vacancy

Inorganic
chemistry,
nanomaterials

PREPARING A SUBMISSION

SELECTING A JOURNAL

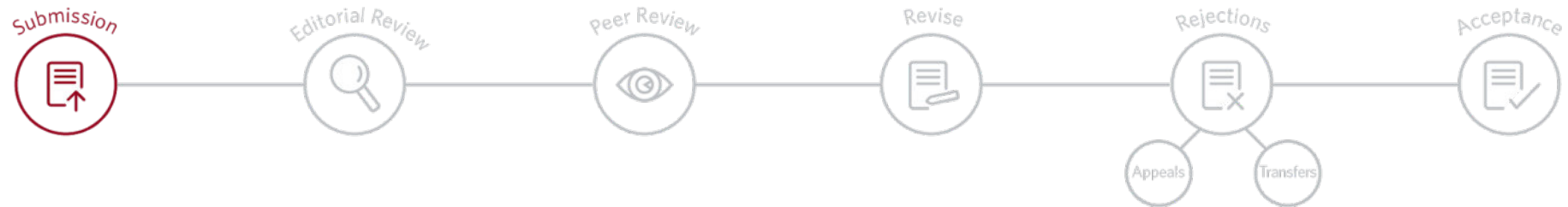
The editor determines a paper's suitability for that journal, so write with the journal in mind



- **Impact:** How significant are the findings?
- **Scope:** How big is your story?
- **Advance:** Does your work build on any recent papers in the journal?
- **Audience:** Who do you want to read your work?
- **Urgency:** How fast do you want to get it out?
- **Accessibility:** Is open access important to you?

GENERAL ADVICE FOR WRITING

How to tell a compelling story: focus, context, and significance



Don't frame the paper as 'see what we've done' but 'see why this is important'.

- The paper should have **one clear message or takeaway**. Before you begin writing, make sure you can summarize this message in 1-2 sentences.
- Keep the paper simple and focused: **every section should be relevant to the main message**. Side stories detract.
- Motivate the study. What's the **question** or gap in knowledge? **Provide tension** to keep us reading.
- Avoid writing chronologically ('We did A, then we did B'). Use a **logical flow**.
- Avoid writing descriptively ('We observed X and Y.') **The significance of each observation should be clear**. The reader shouldn't come away thinking 'So what?'

EXPLAIN, DON'T HYPE

Are you telling us how great the work is, or showing us?

Editors and referees can see through this. If you oversell, you will only disappoint us. The work should speak for itself. Good results will make themselves obvious.

- **Avoid overselling your work with hyperbole.**

Instead of: ‘This remarkable, innovative processing results in remarkable properties’

Try: ‘This processing results in improved properties’

Instead of: ‘This work represents a paradigm shift in the field’

Try: Making the importance clear in the paper itself

- **Avoid overt claims of novelty.**

Instead of: ‘We report a novel approach’ or ‘This mechanism is unprecedented’

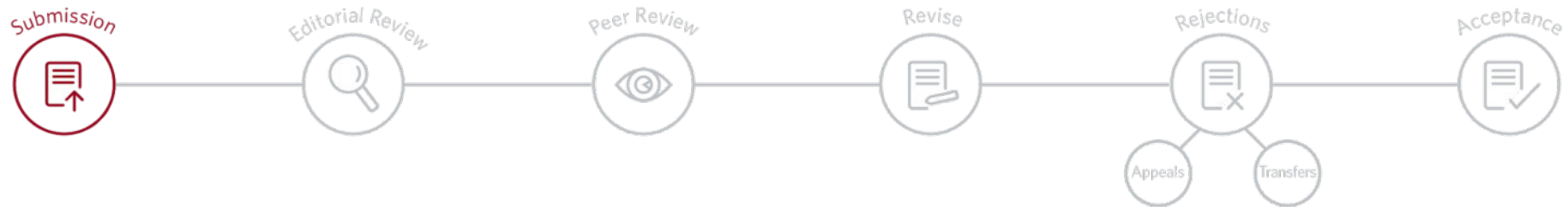
Try: ‘We introduce an approach’ or ‘We discover an unexpected mechanism’

Instead of: ‘This is the first example of’ or ‘This has never been shown before’

Try: ‘We address this gap in understanding by...’

THE COVER LETTER

Mediocre ones don't make a difference, good ones can make a difference



What sets one apart:

- Tailor to the journal
- Don't just copy the abstract
- Be explicit and sell the work (save the subtlety for the paper)
- Explain the importance
- Put the work in context
- Tell me **exactly** what your work does over previous literature

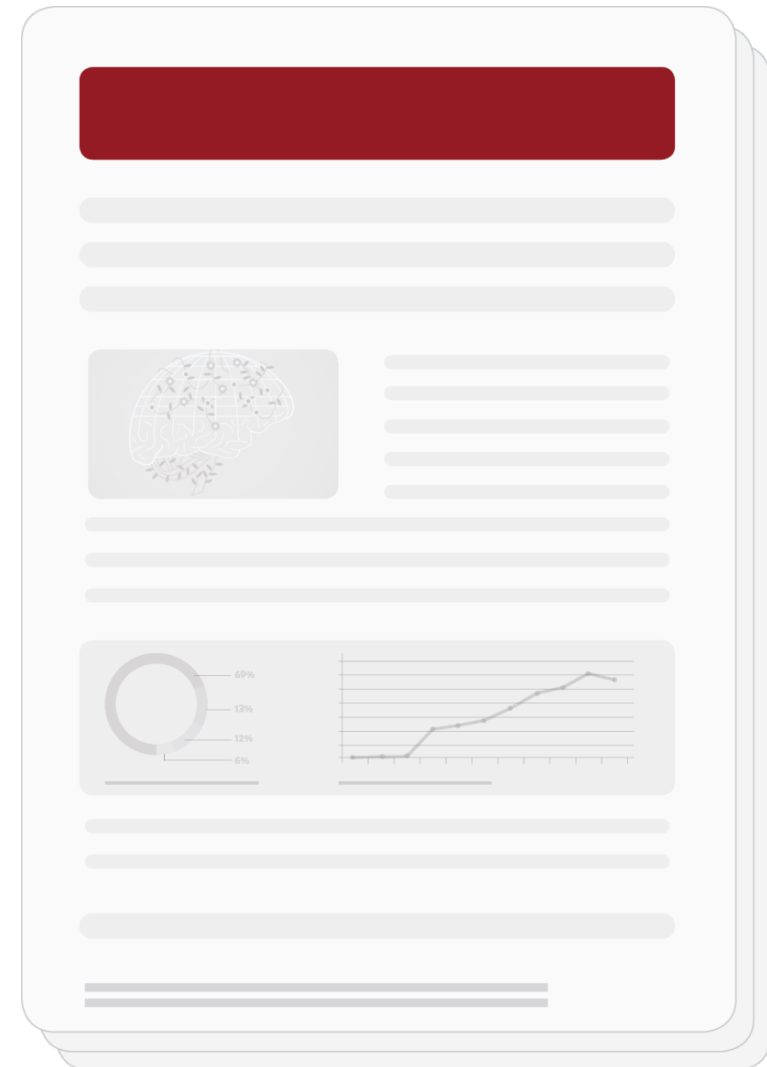
This is where you should mention:

- Your suggestions for reviewers
(we check for conflicts of interest)
- Any reviewer exclusions, people in opposite 'camps'
(we always honor exclusions)
- Any related papers submitted elsewhere or in press
(we may ask to see these)
- Any competing papers or other special circumstances

TITLE: DRAW THE READER IN

Don't underestimate the importance of a good title – it'll receive many more views than the paper or even the abstract

- Convey the **main message** of the work
- Be **descriptive but concise** - every word should add value
- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Avoid language like 'novel', 'new'
- Avoid too many adjectives ('A facile, mild and scalable synthesis of extremely stable and water-soluble bimetallic nanoparticles')
- Include **keywords** to enhance discoverability (but don't make it sound like a list of buzzwords)



ABSTRACT: HOOK THE READER

Reviewers only get to see the title and abstract before they agree to review. Most people form an opinion right after reading the abstract

Do

- Make the **question being addressed** clear
- Summarize your **most important findings**
- Mention any **critical methodology** used
'We use *in situ* liquid cell TEM to...'
- Note the **implications** of your work

Don't

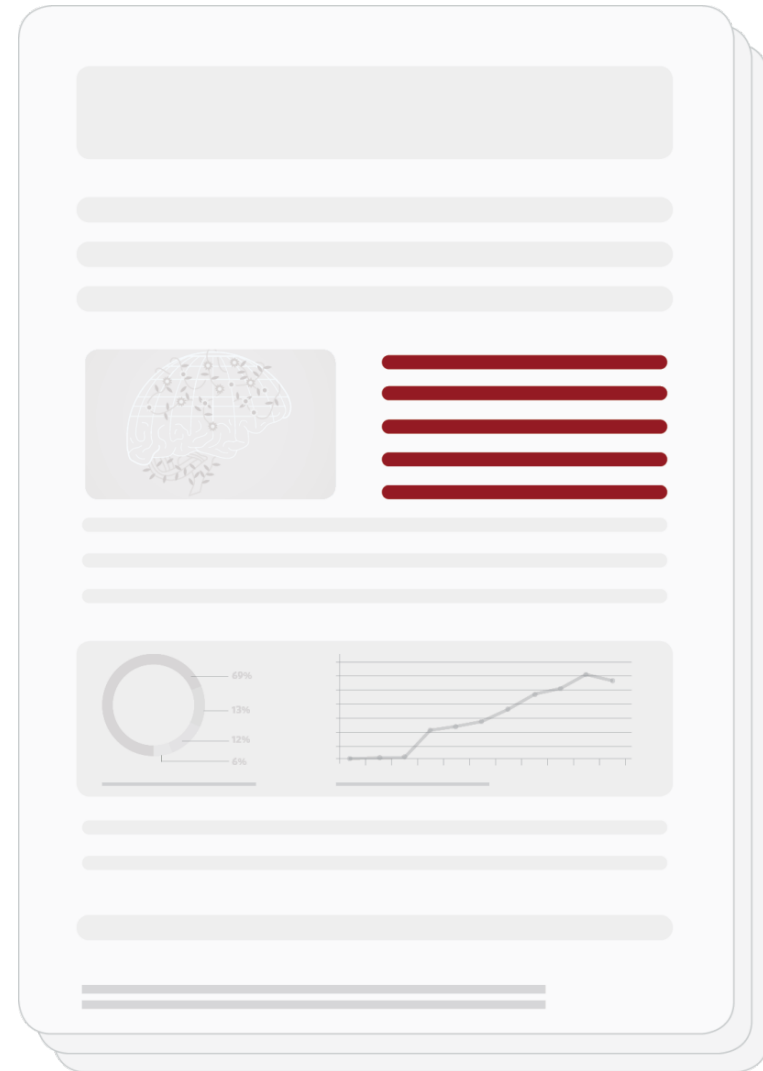
- Provide detailed methodological information (unless it's a methods paper)
- Use uncommon abbreviations and unnecessary acronyms
- Specifically reference figures



THE INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

The editor may not be an expert in this specific area – make it easy for us

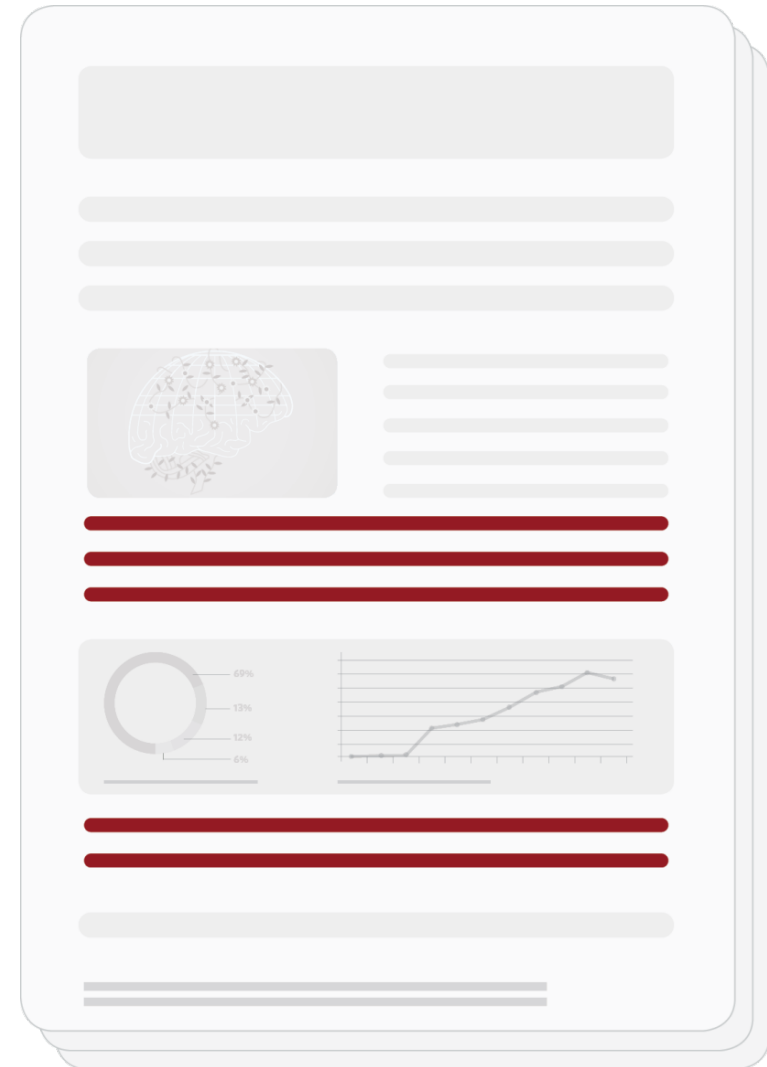
- **Introduce the question.** What motivates this study?
- **Set the background**, moving from general to specific information
- Don't assume knowledge
- Be selective, but scholarly, with citations. We often use these to get up to speed on the area!
- **Summarize the findings briefly** as a lead into the Results – it keeps the reader focused on the main message



RESULTS: THE HEART OF THE PAPER

Focus on flow and the right balance of detail

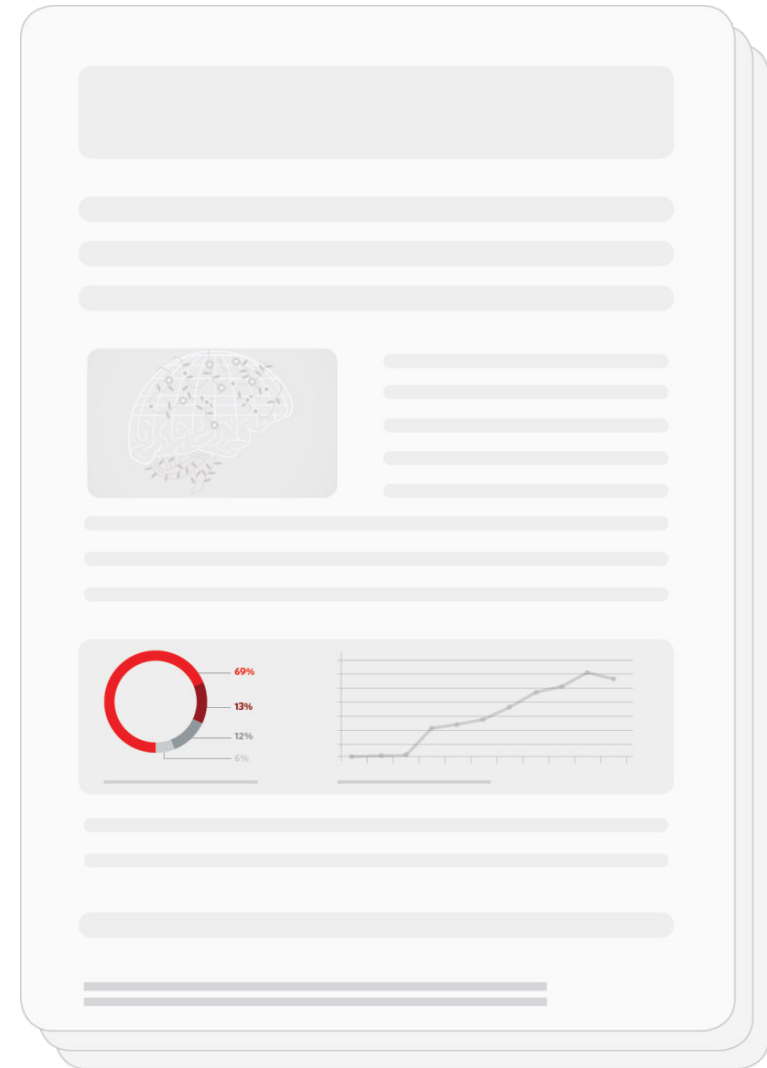
- Order experiments **logically, not chronologically**
- Use **subheadings** to guide the reader through the story – and to outline your writing
- All subheadings should **relate to the main takeaway** of the work
- Include **essential methodological detail** – but only enough to understand how you arrived at the results
- Don't drown the reader in details here (save those for the Methods)



FIGURES: YOUR DATA ON DISPLAY

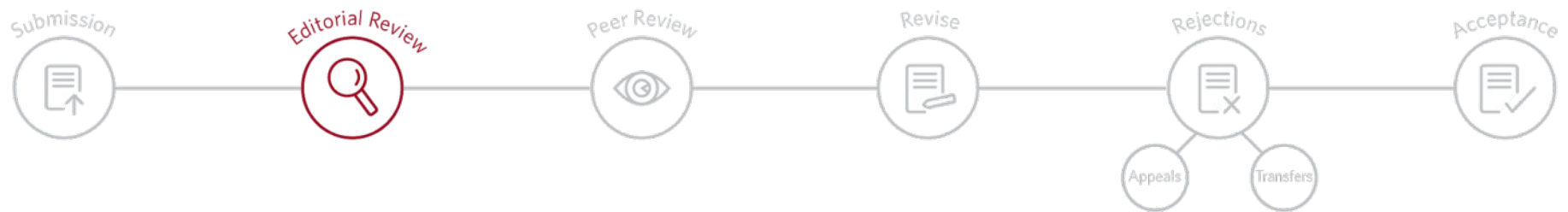
A quick skim of only the figures should generally convey the story

- Clarity in the figures and tables is more important than beauty
- As with Results, **present in a logical order**
- Keep them focused: ideally, **each figure should present a single concept/result**
- Use diagrams for complex ideas or methods
- The caption should concisely describe the figure such that the reader doesn't need to refer to the text



CONVINCING THE EDITOR

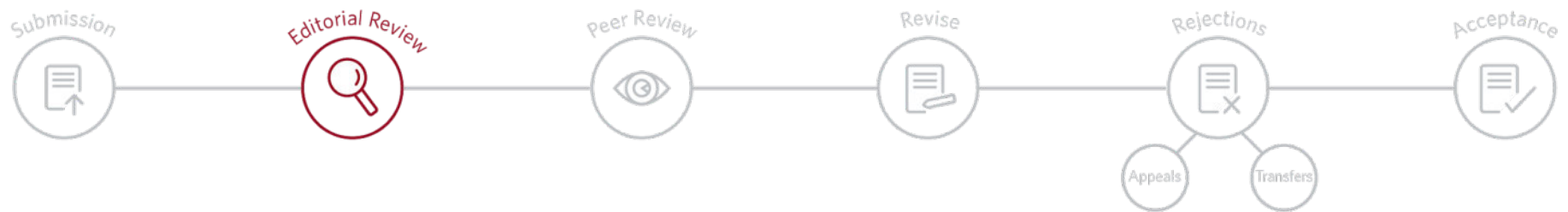
INITIAL EDITORIAL EVALUATION



Your handling editor is your advocate.

- The editor is assigned based on expertise. All have PhDs in the general field, but may not be experts in the specific area
- The editor reads the manuscript in its entirety and assesses whether the manuscript is potentially suitable for the journal
- The decision on whether to send the paper to peer review is made by the handling editor, often in consultation with other editors on the team
- Cross-disciplinary papers are read by multiple relevant editors

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?



We look for papers with **potential**.

We recognize that the technical quality of a paper may improve during peer review, and we **judge the impact of the final product**.

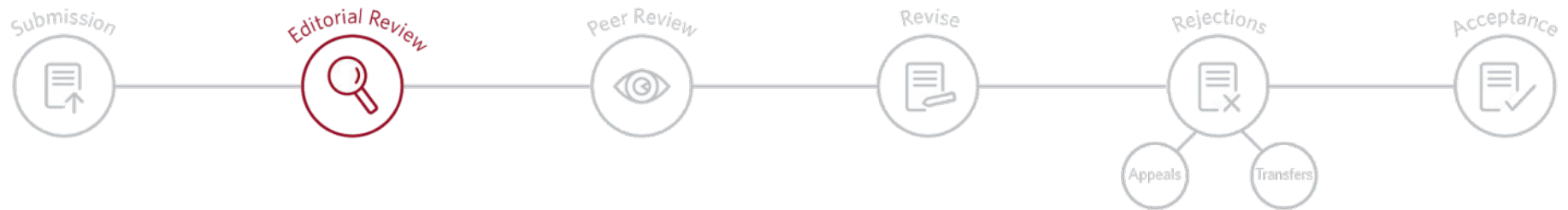
Most important:

- Significance and impact of the findings
- Degree of advance
- Relevance to the journal's readership
- Support for conclusions
- Quality data

Less important (at this stage):

- English language/grammar
- Adhering to journal style
- A complete or perfect set of data – there should be enough to support the conclusions, but the technical quality will improve through review

A STRONG CONTENDER FOR REVIEW



It will:

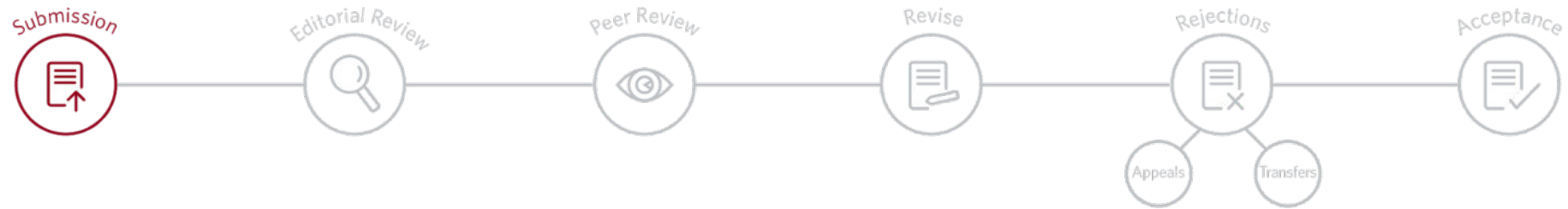
- Address an **important question** for the field or **solve a problem**
- Tell us something **new and interesting**
- Represent a **substantial advance**
- Present **strong data**
- Rule out alternative explanations to arrive at definitive conclusions

It may also:

- Approach a problem in a **clever** or unusual way
- Approach a problem rigorously and **systematically**
- Describe an **unexpected** finding
- Be practically or technologically **useful**
- Show that results or approach are **general** across systems

WHAT EDITORS LOOK FOR

The essential



- Every paper should have the potential to provoke our readers to think:

"WOW! I didn't expect that!"

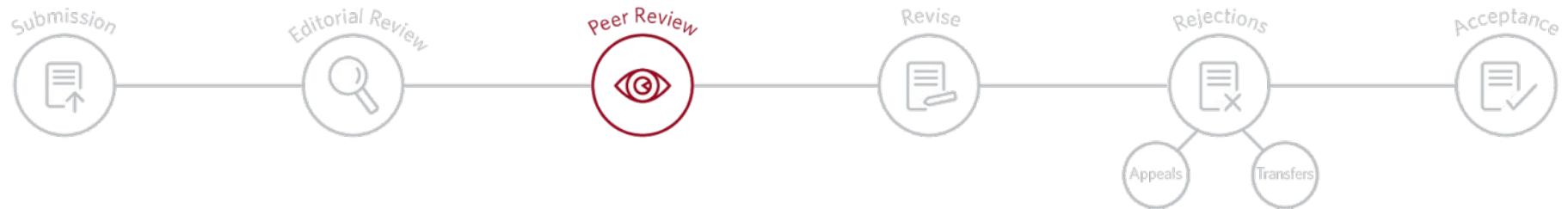
"WOW! That's clever (and useful)!"

- Key criteria for every submission: **the research question**, the **data**, and the **conclusions**.
- First decision within a **week**
- Editors go for impact, not impact factor.

PEER REVIEW

HOW WE CHOOSE REVIEWERS

The better the reviews, the better the paper will become



A good peer reviewer has:

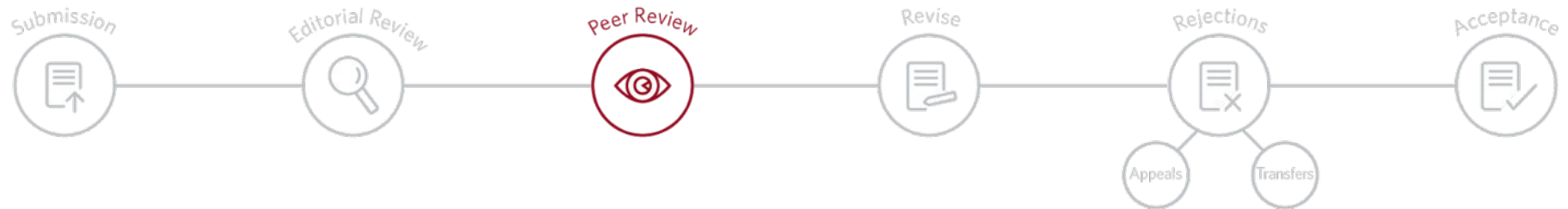
- Technical expertise and knowledge of the field
- History of being fair and constructive
- Good attention to detail but can also see the big picture
- Efficiency and reliability
- Familiarity with journal standards
- No conflicts of interest

Factors we consider:

- Always honor author exclusions
- Involve as many reviewers as needed, usually three but could be more
- Cover all relevant expertise
- Seek to increase diversity in the reviewer pool
- Are alert to inappropriate reviewer behavior

THE ROLE OF A REVIEWER

Are they gatekeepers or advisers?



Reviewers **assess** technical issues:

- The conclusions are supported
- The data are of high quality and appropriate controls have been used
- The approach and analyses meet the standards in the field
- The authors provide sufficient methodological information

Reviewers **advise** on editorial issues:

- The extent of scientific advance or overlap with previous work
- The interest to the field
- The potential impact on future research

TRADEMARKS OF GOOD REVIEWS

Some advice for peer reviewers

- **Support your recommendation with evidence, not vague opinions**

The editor will rely on this evidence to support tough decisions

‘This lacks originality because X (J. Phys. Chem. C, 2018) used a similar approach...’

‘The method is flawed, because NMR is not able to distinguish between...’

- **Make your feedback constructive and informative**

Think of your role as a peer mentor, not a gatekeeper

Even if the paper should be rejected, try to offer suggestions for improvement

- **Challenge even those you consider ‘more senior’**

Everyone is a peer in this process, don’t feel forced to back down

- **Remember that someone is on the other side**

Don’t write anything you wouldn’t want you (or your students) to receive

- **Confidential concerns can be mentioned to the editor**

But don’t hide all concerns from the author

HABITS OF GOOD REVIEWERS

These improve the speed and quality of review

- **Don't overcommit**

Review only if you have the time and desire to spend time with the paper

It's okay to say no

- **Keep deadlines in mind**

Ask for extensions if you need them - this is often no problem

If you can no longer review, please tell the editor, don't just disappear

- **Recommend newer colleagues**

Make the reviewer pool (and your community) more inclusive

- **Use the opportunity to train your students and postdocs**

But give them the credit - provide their contact info and let us invite them

- **Consider transparent peer review initiatives**

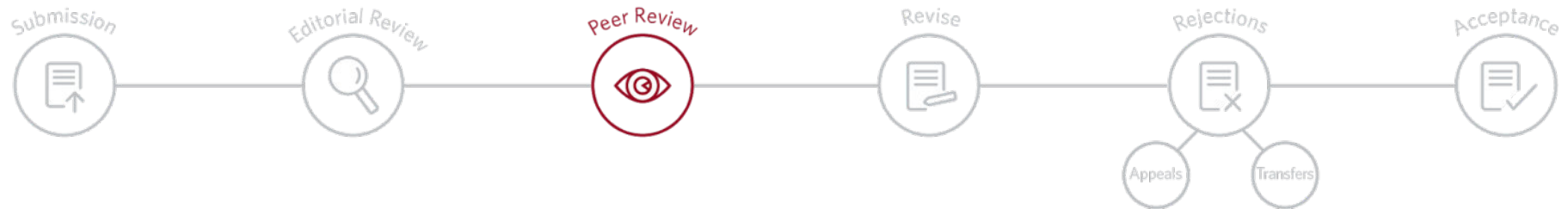
Some journals publish peer reports, which can be valuable for the community

QUICK ASIDE: WANT TO BE A PEER REVIEWER?

If you're an early career researcher and you want to review papers, help us find you

- We are always looking for new reviewers, but we want to know that you're real and qualified (and we need your email address)
- Make a website – include your research background, publications, and contact info. A Google Scholar page works if we can find your email
- Send an email to the relevant editor to let them know you're interested in reviewing papers on xyz topics
- Give editors your business card at conferences
- At the very least, make sure your expertise and email are listed on your PI's website (if you're a postdoc or senior student)

HOW POST-REVIEW DECISIONS ARE MADE

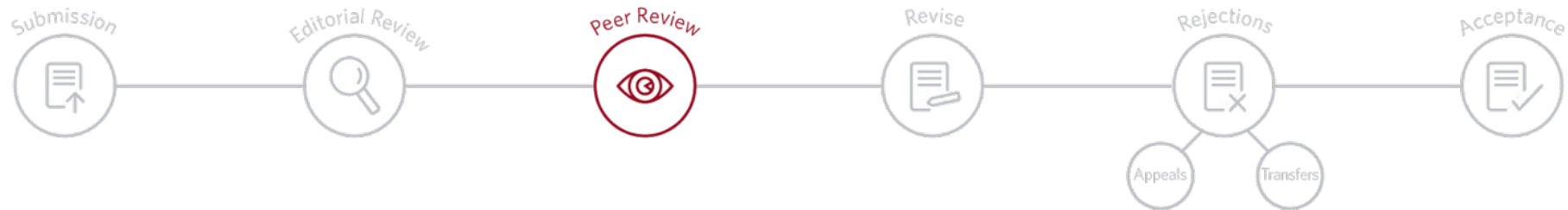


Editors, not referees, take the ultimate responsibility for decisions.

- We often face contradictory recommendations
- We don't count votes; we consider arguments
- We consider reviewer expertise as it pertains to their comments
- We make our own decisions and do overrule reviewers, both positive and negative
- We use our judgment on which of the reviewer requests are feasible

HOW WE DEAL WITH MIXED REPORTS

How powerful is the editor really? How powerful is ‘Reviewer 2’?



On editorial issues:

- We decide the significance based on our own opinion and the referees’ advice
- We may decide a paper is interesting despite low enthusiasm from reviewers. This is why clear communication to the editor is important!
- We may decide, based on the referees’ reports, that a paper does not meet our editorial criteria – even if they recommend publication

On technical issues:

- We generally do not overrule technical issues on our own
- We may enlist the advice of an arbitrating referee
- We may overrule certain referee requests based on our editorial criteria
- You may end up needing to soften claims or add caveats if reviewers disagree

THE DECISION TO REJECT OR REVISE

The first post-review decision is primarily editorial

Editorial considerations are most important at this stage

- How enthusiastic are we to publish this? Do we like it enough to be patient while more experiments are being performed?
- For borderline decisions, a goal is to avoid multiple rounds of review. Is the required work within scope of a revision?
- It's rare for a paper to improve in editorial interest over many reviews – if there is not enough enthusiasm in the beginning, we are likely to reject. This saves you from an 'editorial reject' down the road

Technical validity decides the scope of the revision or rejection

- Are there major concerns that directly affect the claims?
- How much work is required?
- How likely will a revision address these issues?

REVISIONS

WHEN YOU ARE INVITED TO REVISE



The goal of peer review is to improve papers. Think of the reviewers as your collaborators, not as obstacles to jump over.

- Always do a good job the **first** time. Otherwise, you hurt your credibility with both the reviewers and the editor
- Reviewers get upset when they feel their hard work has been ignored
- While we do give authors opportunities to improve their work, we try to avoid numerous rounds of review and ineffective revision cycles
- Aim to address the major issues, particularly those emphasized by the editor
- If you have questions, consult with your editor. We want to resolve disputes

AN EFFECTIVE POINT-BY-POINT RESPONSE



- Always thank the reviewer and keep language civil
- Address the requests with new data when possible - don't just argue or dismiss them
- If you cannot address a specific point, explain why
- Be humble: If you think the reviewer has misunderstood something, consider that the paper may not have been clear enough
- If you take issue with a comment (or the referee), keep the response letter diplomatic, and raise complaints in the cover letter to the editor
- Don't cherry-pick reviewers' comments
- Make it easy on the reviewer: Make it clear what revisions you made to the manuscript

HOW TO DISAGREE DIPLOMATICALLY

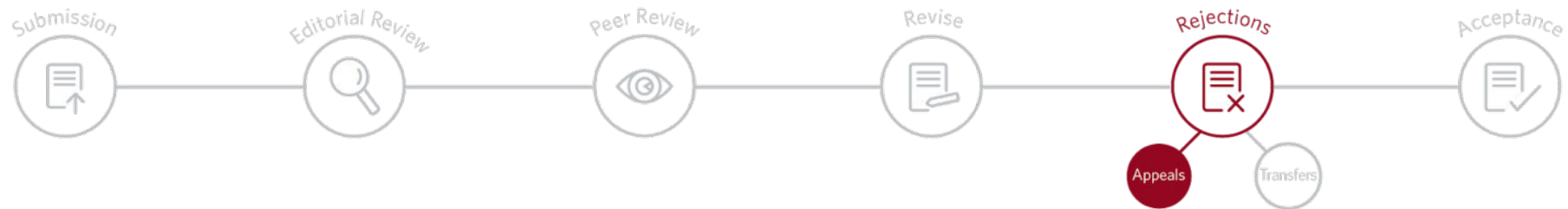
Always respond as though the reviewer has good intentions

	Instead of...	Use...
Reviewer makes an incorrect argument or seems to have misunderstood something.	‘The reviewer is wrong!’ ‘This clearly shows a lack of understanding of the field.’	‘We thank you for this comment, although we respectfully disagree.’ ‘It is possible that the reviewer misunderstood this point.’
Reviewer suggests something difficult to do or out of scope.	‘This is an unreasonable suggestion.’ ‘This is NOT the point of the paper.’	‘This is a good suggestion. However, we weren’t able to perform these experiments because...’
Reviewer finds novelty lacking.	‘The reviewer clearly misses the point.’ ‘Our work is obviously different from X.’	‘We apologize that the advance was unclear. To clarify...’

APPEALS

UNHAPPY OR DISAGREE? WHEN TO APPEAL

We consider appeals in cases where the main concerns can be convincingly addressed



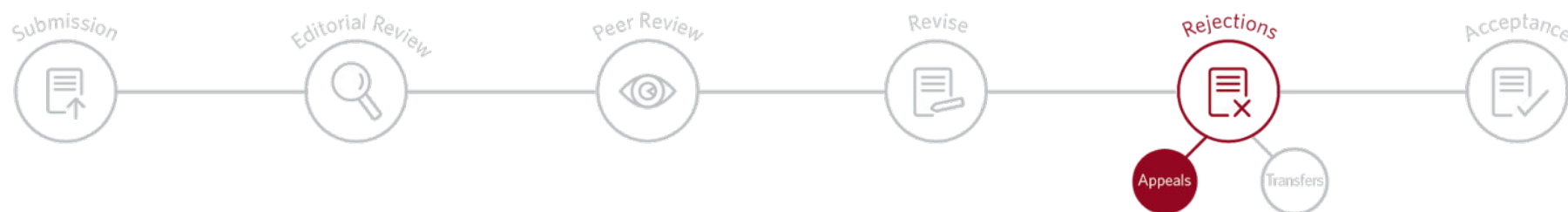
Reasons to appeal

- You have additional data that address all of the concerns
- There were factual errors in the reviews or the editor's comments that you can specifically refute
- You have evidence of reviewer bias that you can substantiate

When appealing is not the best choice

- Decisions based on novelty or importance are difficult to overturn
- You want to get this published quickly – appeals are given lower priority and can take a long time, and are not always successful

HOW TO APPEAL



- Consider your case **realistically**
- Wait several days to **take emotion out of it**
- Argue scientifically with **new data** to support your case
- Address all issues raised in review – treat it as a full revision
- Discuss how the findings fit with previous work in the field
- Detail the specific contribution of the work to the field as well as its possible impact

More advice from the editors of *Inorganic Chemistry*:

The Five Stages of Rejection. [10.1021/acs.inorgchem.8b00900](https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.inorgchem.8b00900)

HOW NOT TO APPEAL

Poor appeals can hurt your reputation to reviewers and editors

Don't:

- Treat this as a free 2nd chance – appeal wisely
- Cherry-pick phrases from the reports or take phrases out of context
- Make unsubstantiated or unspecific claims of bias
- Make statements about your reputation or publication record
- Make general statements on the importance of a field ('nanoparticles are a hot topic!')
- Refer to 'celebrity endorsements'
- Emotionally manipulate the editor
- Rewrite the paper cosmetically, hoping to get a different editor or reviewers
- Try to guess the referees' identities
- Criticize previous papers published in the journal

THE LANGUAGE OF APPEAL

If your appeal sounds like this... rethink

‘Do you know who I am?!’

- I review for so many *Nature* journals, I know your standards
- You reject all my work but I’ve had publications in other high-impact journals
- I have so many citations in this field
- This work was received really well at a conference, X and Y praised it

Emotional pleas or threats

- My student needs to graduate
- I need this paper to get tenure/for my career
- We put so much work into this, it took us 5 years
- I’ll never submit to you again

‘I have no facts to support this, but’

- Referee 2 clearly doesn’t know this field
- Referee 2 is biased and has a vendetta against me

SUMMARY OF ADVICE

- Select a journal wisely, and write for that journal
- Make sure your paper has a clear message and isn't an assortment of observations
- We look for papers with potential and are willing to help develop a paper
- Don't oversell. Be honest!
- Editors, not referees, make the final decisions
- Make the most of your opportunity to revise; don't argue around it. Referees can see through that too
- We consider appeals of rejections in cases where the concerns can be addressed convincingly, but use these wisely
- Always feel free to discuss concerns with your handling editor

Thanks!

@NatureComms

about the image:
Submitted by the authors of
Nat. Commun. **10**, 3525 (2019)

