So, Where Is My Manuscript?

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After serving as the assigning senior editor for PLANT DISEASE for approximately 1 year, I feel somewhat qualified to write this editorial. In 1986 we received 463 papers, and approximately 70% of those manuscripts will be accepted for publication in PLANT DISEASE. I believe most members of APS recognize that the time involved in having a paper reviewed is usually 2 to 3 months. If review takes longer than 3 months, is something wrong? But what could be wrong? After all, the author spent a great deal of time doing the research and preparing the paper. Why isn't it accepted, and where is it? Most important, could it be lost?

As a scientist, I certainly empathize with those views (especially when I am completing my list of publications for promotion). So, back to the question, "Where is my manuscript?" Well, there are generally two or three reasons for a delay. When a paper is submitted to PLANT DISEASE at APS headquarters in St. Paul, it is first "logged in" and then the original and two copies are sent to me. They usually arrive on Friday or Monday, and I read each paper and assign two reviewers. The third copy is then sent to one of the six other senior editors. When both reviewers accept or reject the paper, the process usually moves fairly fast. The most common cause of delay is a split review. If one reviewer accepts and the other rejects, the senior editor usually sends the paper to a third reviewer. Then the senior editor must review the paper plus the peer reviews and make a decision. We stress punctuality, but editors are busy people and have volunteered their time. Hopefully, the process can be completed in 3 months, but it can take longer and meanwhile the author is waiting. For me, the most time-consuming papers are the rejected ones, especially when the decision was split. I do not like to have a paper rejected or to reject a paper. When the scientific criticism is merited, however, then I must reject the paper. Writing a rejection that is helpful to the author is the most time-consuming part of a senior editor's job, as it should be. I perceive my role as senior editor as one of making every effort to assist a scientist to bring his or her work to publication, not to stop publication, as some perceive. The credibility of the journal also is very important, however, and the high standards we set for ourselves must be maintained.

During spring semester in 1986, Cleo D'Arcy and I taught a course on "professionalism" in plant pathology. One of the topics was "How to Reduce the Chances of Having a Manuscript Rejected." Here are a few suggestions that we, as authors, should remember. First, make sure the paper is proofread by someone who can recognize incorrect grammar and misspelled words. (I'm terrible at spelling, but improving.) There is no excuse for misspelled words, especially if one has access to a word processor. Second, be sure to double-check the MATERIALS AND METHODS section carefully. If the study involved field work, be sure it was done for more than 1 year and, if possible, in more than one location. PLANT DISEASE has adopted the "unofficial" policy of requiring at least 2 years of field data for publication of the results. I am aware that a few papers based on 1 year and one location have been published, but they are the exceptions. If the study was done in the greenhouse, growth chamber, or laboratory, how many replications were done and *was the experiment repeated*? Frequently, the author did repeat the experiment but failed to mention that. This leaves the reviewers and the senior editor with a problem. Often, the paper will be rejected unless the author can answer the criticism. Incomplete and poorly written MATERIALS AND METHODS sections are two of the most common reasons for rejection. Both can easily be avoided by careful writing.

Once the paper is written, the author should review it carefully for inconsistencies. For example, if the abstract states that 25 isolates of a pathogen were evaluated but the tables show only 23, what happened to the other two isolates? By checking numbers carefully throughout the manuscript, the author can avoid many such errors.

I should mention one problem that occurs on rare occasion. I recently received a call from an author who wanted to know why he had never heard from me concerning a revised paper. I looked in my logbook and assured him the paper had been accepted and sent to headquarters in St. Paul over 2 months ago. He said he hadn't received an acceptance card. I told him I would do some checking. I called headquarters and was told the paper had never been received. I then went to my file drawer marked "accepted papers" and located the file. The paper was in the envelope, ready to be mailed. I had inadvertently filed rather than mailed the accepted paper. This is why I do not mind having authors check on their manuscripts after 3 months. Fortunately, we haven't lost any papers this first year, but we could have.

Serving as a senior editor is both an interesting and a challenging job. I have never read such a wide diversity of research papers. Most are very well done, but the review process can be very time-consuming. Remember, the external reviewers, associate editors, senior editors, and even the editors-in-chief of PLANT DISEASE and *Phytopathology* are not grossly overpaid for their services. We have research, extension, and teaching programs, but we try to do our best.