Journal of Neurophysiology and the Neuroscience Peer Review Consortium (NPRC)

David J. Linden
The Solomon H. Snyder Department of Neuroscience, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD 21209 USA

We’ve all had the frustrating experience of having a manuscript go through the review process at a journal only to have it judged scientifically sound (or easily fixable) yet lacking in subjective novelty or general interest. What is the best course of action in this situation? In the summer of 2007, a working group of journal editors and publishers sought to create a new option: a system for authors whose manuscript received supportive reviews at one journal but was nonetheless rejected, to send a revised manuscript together with its first round reviews to a new journal for consideration. The notion was that this would speed up the review process, reduce the burden for reviewers and ameliorate the “moving target problem” in which a new set of reviewers, with new concerns must be satisfied. The framework for this process was formalized as the Neuroscience Peer Review Consortium (NPRC). Launched in January 2008 with 12 participating journals, including Journal of Neurophysiology, it now encompasses 42 titles including Journal of Neuroscience, Journal of Comparative Neurology, Nature Neuroscience, Journal of Computational Neuroscience and many others (you may see the complete list of participating journals and more information about the NPRC at http://nprc.incf.org/).

Here’s how it works. If your manuscript is rejected at an NPRC journal and you feel that the reviews are generally positive and constructive, you can submit your revised manuscript to a second journal within the NPRC family and request that the original reviews be transferred from the first journal to the second. This is a two step process: you must send an email to the first journal requesting the transfer and you must mention that you are doing an NPRC submission in your cover letter for the second journal. It should be emphasized that this is a strictly voluntary and confidential process that can only be initiated by the authors. There is no central database of submissions and reviews for NPRC journals into which editors can peek (or hackers can hack). If you decline to use the NPRC process, there is no way for the second journal to access the prior reviews or even to know that a prior submission occurred.

When reviewers for NPRC journals fill out their review forms online they are asked if they are willing to have their identity transferred to the editor of a second NPRC journal, should the authors employ the NPRC mechanism. About 86% of the reviews transferred to Journal of Neurophysiology have identified reviewers. Again, this process is strictly confidential: the NPRC reviewer’s identity is known only to the Chief Editor and the one designated Associate Editor for the new submission. When the Associate Editor receives an NPRC manuscript with accompanying reviews and point-by-point response, she has several options: 1) Accept without further review; 2) Request new reviews from the original identified referees for the first journal; 3) Seek new referees; 4) Seek some combination of new and identified old referees. This editorial decision (like most at Journal of Neurophysiology) is entirely in the hands of the Associate Editor.

How has this process worked at Journal of Neurophysiology? Since the launch of the NPRC in January 2008, we have received 72 NPRC submissions and have had 8 requests to transfer reviews of manuscripts rejected at JN to other journals. Interestingly, of these 72 NPRC submissions, 70 have been transfers from Journal of Neuroscience. These 72 NPRC
submissions represent about 3% of the total research article submissions we received in this period. However, this includes a slow ramp-up period at the outset, in early 2008, and NPRC submission are now running at about 5% of total.

How have NPRC manuscripts fared at *Journal of Neurophysiology*? In the first round, 10% have been accepted with no further review (compared with < 0.1% for de novo submissions), 57% have received a “major revision” decision, 19% a “minor revision” decision and 14% have been rejected. Most crucially, the final accept rate for NPRC manuscripts has been 80%. This is significantly higher than the 45% final accept rate for de novo submissions.

The mean time to final decision for NPRC manuscripts has been 73 days, which is not substantially different from the 82 days for de novo submissions (it should be cautioned that these decision time values are the means of populations with a highly skewed distribution). In sum, while some NPRC submissions entirely bypass additional review, most require an additional round, but the ultimate success rate of these submissions is far higher than manuscripts submitted de novo.

It is my hope that more authors will make use of NPRC submission to *Journal of Neurophysiology* when it is appropriate. How to know when this is? If your manuscript received negative reviews or the reviewers called for new experiments or analysis that you have not performed, then you would probably better off avoiding the NPRC process and starting afresh. In this situation, a new round of argument with the original reviewers is unlikely to sway either these reviewers or your new Associate Editor. However, if your manuscript previously received supportive reviews at another NPRC journal and these reviews either did not call for new experiments/analysis or if they called for new experiments/analysis and you have now added these to your revision for *Journal of Neurophysiology*, your manuscript will likely benefit from the NPRC mechanism and I encourage you to give it a try.