

ACM TODS Associate Editor Manual

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Abstract

This document outlines the major duties of a *TODS* Associate Editor and provides some free, unsolicited advice. It summarizes the work flow of the Manuscript Central web-based manuscript tracking system used by ACM for its journals.

1 Introduction

The task of a *TODS* Associate Editor (AE) is a typical scholarly activity: a lot of work, for the benefit of the scientific community, with no pay and only the prestige of a title and the knowledge of a job well done as a reward.

In this document, I describe this task in some detail¹. The three goals are (1) to provide excellent service to the database community, while (2) maintaining the high standards that accord the premier database journal and (3) minimizing the AE's workload. As we will see, it is possible, with care, to simultaneously achieve all three goals.

In this manual, I first list the primary tasks of an Associate Editor. Section 4 provides the body of the manual, enumerating in detail the almost two-dozen steps in the *TODS* reviewing process. Discussion of special cases rounds out this manual.

2 Associate Editor Tasks

The primary function of an AE is to handle submitted manuscripts, "to provide clear, timely impartial feedback"². *TODS* is somewhat unusual in that full authority for accepting and rejecting papers resides in the AE. The AE doesn't make a recommendation to the Editor in Chief (EiC); rather, the AE makes the final decision. The EiC is involved only when requested by the author or by the AE, as discussed in Section 6.

¹Throughout this document, "you" refers to the reader, which is presumably an Associate Editor of *TODS*. "I" refers to the author of this manual, Richard Snodgrass, giving background experiences and viewpoints. First-person sentences should be interpreted as gentle advice, to be ignored if needed.

²<http://www.acm.org/pubs/rights.html>

Other tasks of an AE include the following.

- *Know the rules.*

It is important that the *TODS* Editorial Board be consistent in its process and in its decisions. To that end, ACM and *TODS* have both invested significant effort in documenting policy guidelines.

New AEs should carefully study the procedures, submission requirements, referee rights, and other information on the *TODS* web site³. In particular, AEs should read the information under “About *TODS*”, “For referees” and “For authors” on the web site. Note that this material is all publicly accessible.

AEs should also know and understand *TODS* policy, which is *not* publicly accessible. All new AEs should go to the “Editors-only” portion of the *TODS* web site and read the policy statements⁴. Usually included in these policy statements is background on the policy. It is critical that there be consistent handling of papers submitted to *TODS*.

AEs should also be familiar with ACM policy more generally, in particular the “Journal Editors Manual”⁵ and the “Rights and Responsibilities in ACM Publishing,”² as it is the AE who ensures most of these rights. In particular see the rights that ACM accords editors and the responsibilities that ACM assigns editors.

Finally, you should become familiar with the ManuscriptCentral site. This document explains how to use the site. There is also a more generic PDF manual available at the link entitled “Associate Editor Site Verification Guide.”

- *Work with the EiC to develop policy.*

Policy ultimately is determined by the EiC, but generally is developed in close discussion with the Editorial Board.

- *Promote TODS within the database community.*

The Rights and Responsibilities document mentions that ACM expects editors to “be an advocate for their publication and to represent the ACM well.”

- *Encourage authors to submit their best work to TODS.*

This encouragement can take various forms, from mentioning *TODS* when talking with colleagues to formally invited articles.

We now turn our attention to the reviewing process. But before we get into the nuts and bolts of handling submissions, I’d like to digress briefly.

³<http://www.acm.org/tods>

⁴This site can be reached from <http://www.acm.org/tods> clicking on “Editors only” or directly (<http://www.acm.org/tods/editors/index.html>). Note that this is an entirely different site than Manuscript-Central (which is at <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>).

⁵<http://www.acm.org/pubs/editors.manual.html>

3 Myths

Significant space will be devoted here to *turnaround time*, which is the time interval between the submission of a manuscript and the communication of the editorial decision to the author. It commences when the manuscript is received by the EiC (for *total* turnaround time), or when the manuscript has been assigned to and is received by the AE (for *AE* turnaround time). In either case, it ends when the AE sends the decision to the author by email. Turnaround time does *not* include the time the paper is in transit, nor the time the decision is in transit.

There are several prominent myths about the reviewing process. These myths have been exposed through interviews I have had with efficient AEs and EiCs of several ACM journals, and through my own experience.

Myth: A long turnaround time is the fault of slow reviewers.

On the contrary, it is possible to have a uniformly fast turnaround time, even when using many reviewers, of varying responsiveness.

Myth: The excessive length of TODS submissions, often 50 pages long, sometimes with extensive appendices, leads to long turnaround time.

With the proper procedures, it is possible to handle such long submissions in the same amount of time as a 25-page double spaced submission.

Myth: Some journals are known to have long review times, and so turnaround time for those journals will of course be longer.

Some AEs who have served on several editorial boards achieve a uniformly short turnaround time, independent of journal.

Myth: Reducing turnaround time puts an inappropriate burden on both reviewers and AEs alike.

A quite short turnaround time can be achieved while giving reviewers a full three months for a review, and with *less* work on the part of AEs than a longer turnaround time.

Myth: While authors might appreciate a short turnaround time, reviewers despise the pressure for a review.

Seemingly paradoxically, anecdotal evidence shows that reviewers of efficient AEs are a happier lot.

As a concrete example, as of October 2003, the average turnaround time for papers submitted to *TODS* that go out to reviewers is 3.9 months; including desk rejects lowers this average to 3.1 months. This average is for all the papers submitted over an entire year.

Let me be very clear about this: the responsibility for a short turnaround time, and the means to achieve this, is in the hands of a single person: the editor in charge of the paper. When you hear of an editor bemoaning slow reviewers, sloppy authors who write too long papers, and the community at large for its acceptance of long reviewing cycles, you have an editor who is not discharging his or her duties properly. And when a paper *you* have submitted takes an excessively long time to review, you know exactly who to blame, even if you probably don't want to confront that person directly.

The secret, if there is one, is in the process.

4 The Reviewing Process

I will outline the process imposed by the tracking system. We don't have much control over the process; it is dictated by ACM. Some of the details are dictated by ACM policy, such as the Rights and Responsibilities Policy; others are imposed by the EiC, generally after discussion with the Editorial Board. However, I have configured the system to the degree possible to be efficient for all concerned. At some points in this commentary, I've indicated an optional action by the AE.

The rough schedule is as follows.

Manuscript submitted There are no stated submission dates, except for papers invited from conferences.

Associate Editor identified Within a week of submission.

Reviewers identified Within a week of the AE being assigned the submission.

Reviews received Within three months of the reviewer being asked.

Editorial decision Within four months of submission. (I'll request four months, and expect at the outside, five months, and absolutely require a decision within six months of submission. But as mentioned, the reviewing process to be enumerated will result in a decision in four months.)

Revised manuscript received Within a week to six months from decision, a period dictated by the AE.

Reviewers permission obtained Within a week of submission of the revised manuscript. (In all cases, a reviewer should be asked before being sent a submission.)

Reviews received Within *two* months of submission (subsequent reviews take much less time).

Decision on revised manuscript Revised manuscripts require about a month less time, so I will request three months and expect four months.

Paper is published ACM requires three months to typeset, etc., an issue of *TODS*. So the minimum is three months, with the actual time depending on the backlog: how many papers are ahead of this paper (including special issues).

For the average paper, the first review takes four months, plus four months to revise, plus three months to review again, plus one month to produce the final version, plus six weeks of backlog and three months of production, or seventeen months total. In rare cases a paper is accepted on the first round and only takes eight to ten months. Papers invited for a conference are on a somewhat tighter schedule; papers that require more than two rounds can take up to two years to appear.

Now we turn to the details of the reviewing process.

1. The author submits their paper to the system (<http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>). To do so requires an account. This account is different from the author's ACM account. The author enters the following details.

Manuscript type of which the only allowable values are "Paper" and "Survey".

Institutions of the author(s).

Contributing Authors and affiliations and email addresses.

Paper title limited to 50 characters, with no special symbols, other than the character palette provided, which has Greek letters (lower and upper case), a few mathematical symbols, and minimal formatting (bold, italic, underlined, superscript and subscript).

Abstract limited to 100 words, again with no special symbols other than the character palette.

Computing Classification System which I was opposed to, as it seems premature at this point. Fortunately, the system accepts anything here.

Excluded referees up to four.

Comments to the Editor-in-Chief

The author is then instructed to upload one or more files, including the main body of the submission and optional cover letter, low-res image, high-res image, multi-media, or supporting document. My guess is that the vast majority of authors will upload just the main body. Each uploaded file can be designated as for review or not for review. Allowed formats are .doc, .pdf, .rtf and .ps. All are converted automatically to PDF. L^AT_EX files may also be uploaded; Manuscript Central (referred to hereafter as “MC”) will *not* convert those file. (I suggest requesting a PDF file if anyone tries to upload a L^AT_EX file.) Figures, in .jpg, .gif, .tif or .eps format are also allowed; the system will convert each of these into a smaller .jpg image and leave the original update “Files for Production.”

When the author selects “Submit Manuscript”, MC responds with a manuscript number, of the form **TODS-2004-XXXX**, where the last four digits are sequentially assigned, starting with 1 for that year.

2. MC responds with an email to the EiC; this email uses the template PaperSubmittedEIC (throughout this discussion of the process, the template designations used by MC will be indicated). It also sends an acknowledgment letter to the author (Paper Submitted Corresponding Author).

Dear ...:

This is to acknowledge receipt of your submission to Transactions on Database Systems (TODS), entitled "...".

I will assign your paper to an Associate Editor and will let you know soon who that person is.

Thank you for your interest in the ACM Transactions on Database Systems.

Richard Snodgrass
Editor-in-Chief, ACM TODS

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Finally, it sends an email to each of the contributing authors (Paper Submitted Contributing Authors). Several times in the past a paper has been submitted without one of the co-author’s permission (or even knowledge!). This email helps detect such anomalies.

Dear ...:

This is to acknowledge receipt of your submission to Transactions on Database Systems (TODS), entitled "... " by author names....

Thank you for your interest in the ACM Transactions on Database Systems.

Richard Snodgrass
Editor-in-Chief, ACM TODS

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3. The EiC invites an AE with an email (Assign Associate Editor). The EiC uses the area of the paper as the primary determiner of who should be assigned the paper, but also attempts to balance the load, taking into account (a) the number of papers the AE has handled in the past, (b) the number of papers the AE is handling, and (c) the number of major revisions expected soon.
4. When you receive this email, please respond (manually, with an email you send) within a day or two with a "yes" or a "no." Feel free to say no if there is a conflict of interest or some other reason you really can't handle this paper. (A conflict may be real or it may just be a possible conflict. In general, we should be conservative, and avoid even the *perception* of a conflict of interest.)

Note that the tracking system is not involved with this email response that you send. All email sent by the system is retained, and listed in the "Correspondence" portion of the display for that paper. As this "accept handling of the submission" email is a manual one, it won't be logged.
5. When an AE has agreed to handle a submission, by sending a "yes" email, the EiC sends (manually) an email to the corresponding author, giving the name of the AE who will be handling the paper, and CCing the AE.

Dear ... ,

This is to acknowledge receipt of your submission to TODS, entitled "...".

I am assigning your paper to ... ; I have sent the manuscript to him. He will let you know how the review is proceeding. We plan to have a decision to you within six months.

Please direct all your future correspondence to ...

Thank you for your interest in the ACM Transactions on Database Systems.

Sincerely,

Richard Snodgrass
TODS Editor-in-Chief

Submissions (co-)authored by a *TODS* AE are treated somewhat differently, in that identity of the handling AE is to remain confidential to all of the authors, to avoid any conflict of interest, as specified by *TODS* policy⁶. So the letter from the EiC in such cases does not mention the identity of this person. This letter also mentions that all correspondence between the authors and the handling AE should go through the EiC.

⁶<http://www.acm.org/tods/editors/AECOI.html>

6. Once you (as the AE) have agreed to handle the paper, you can go ahead and assign referees. Go to <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>, log on, and go to the “Editor Center.” Click on “Original Manuscripts: Manage Referees and Make Decisions” then “View Details” of the paper you have just been assigned. (You can do this even before you agree to handle a paper, for example, if you want to scan it first.)

Your first task is to decide if this is a desk reject. If so, go directly to “Make Decision.” However, in most cases, you will need to assign referees. When I receive a manuscript, I skim it to get a feeling for its chance of acceptance, as well as the difficulty of review. I also read the intro and conclusions, and skim the bibliography, to decide who would be the best referees. If the paper will be a difficult review, I send it to reviewers I especially trust. If the paper is really bad, I don’t burden reviewers, but simply desk reject the paper, sometimes after writing a review myself.

TODS policy requires three reviews for most papers (if the paper is quite poor, the AE can request only two reviews; if the paper is obviously unacceptable, the AE can desk reject it). I generally go with four reviewers, one more than required. If only three reviews are requested, and one of the reviewers is unresponsive, the AE is held hostage by the recalcitrant reviewer, a situation that happens rather frequently at other journals. One of the four reviewers is often someone I haven’t used before; I pick such people to broaden the reviewer pool. If I don’t have much experience with several of the reviewers, then I will ask a total of five reviewers, just for safety (more on this shortly).

You can select a referee through “Referee Search” if that person is already in the system, or click “Add New Referee” to create and assign a new reviewer. The “Assign Referee” button adds the referee to the list; the “Invite Referee” brings up an email template that you can edit. (You may want to look up related papers in the *SIGMOD Anthology* or use DBLP⁷ to find reasonable reviewers.)

All but one of the email messages sent by the system can be edited before being sent. (The exception is the email sent by MC to each of the reviewers once a decision has been made on the paper.) Most of these messages appear to be sent by the AE, even though MC actually sends the email (after logging it). I’ve set up the template to also CC the sender, so that you can see exactly what has been sent out (though the system also keeps track of that for you). Once you are comfortable with the system, you may want to edit out the CC.

See below for a discussion on the *TODS* “no overloading” policy, to be considered when selecting referees.

The AE invites each referee with an email message (Invite Referee) that specifies a deadline. It is *TODS* policy that a referee be given at least two months on a first formal review. I personally give my referees a full three months. There are two theories on this. One is that referees are deadline-driven, and so two months or three months is immaterial: they will do it the last week. The other theory is that some referees are insulted by short deadline requests, and simply ignore them. I’ve had experiences with journals that have taken eight to twelve months for a review of one of my papers, but then ask me to do a review in a few weeks. I tell such journals that I can get it done in three months, or not at all, but other referees just sit on the paper.

Email templates have portions automatically filled in by the system, like your return email address, the title and author of the paper, and the abstract. There are portions that you should fill in, indicated with “* . . . *”. (The elisions without asterisks are parts that MC fills in for you; you won’t see these elisions in MC.) For example, the referee invite letter has three such portions: “* *MORE HERE

⁷<http://www.acm.org/sigmod/DBLP>

IF NEEDED* *” (to motivate why you are inviting this particular referee), “* *THREE* *” (to state how many months you are giving this referee), and “* *DATE* *” (where you can fill in the date the paper is due). In all cases, you simply delete out this prose and replace it with whatever you want to say. You can also modify the rest of the email message in whatever way you see fit. Click on “Send Letter” and the letter goes out.

Dear ... ,

I have just received a submission to the ACM Transactions on Database Systems (TODS) entitled "...” by Attached is the abstract for this paper.

I would appreciate your guidance as to whether this paper is acceptable for publication in TODS. **MORE HERE IF NEEDED**

Would you be willing to review this paper within **THREE** months, by **DATE**?

Sincerely,

...
TODS Associate Editor

P.S. ACM TODS recognizes that reviewing is a service to the profession. As such, TODS strives to not overload referees with TODS reviews. Specifically, TODS will not expect referees to formally review more than one TODS paper in any twelve-month period. Other rights are listed at

<http://www.acm.org/tods/Referees.html#rights>

Abstract:

...

You should send out the initial requests for reviewers within a day or so of receiving the paper. Any delay at this point simply increases turnaround time while not reducing your workload one iota.

The email message is written carefully to ask the referee whether they are willing to review the paper (this is *TODS* policy) and specifying a deadline for the review from them (also *TODS* policy). It is helpful to edit the message to explain why you think they are the perfect reviewer (generally in glowing terms; flattery helps here).

This email message includes an important postscript letting reviewers know their rights. (I don’t know of any other journal that does this.) Note that this postscript is carefully worded: “TODS will not *expect* referees to formally review more than one TODS paper in any twelve-month period.” But that doesn’t mean that a reviewer who is or has already reviewed a paper cannot be asked if s/he would be willing to review another one, with the stated understanding that they shouldn’t feel compelled to. What I do is add a sentence to the effect of, I know you are (or have been) reviewing another TODS submission. But I thought you would be especially interested in this submission, because ... However, if you are overloaded with reviewing, just let me know and I’ll find someone else.”

7. The AE waits for the responses, and sends followups after a few days. A followup is a manual email. The followup email sends a perhaps not-so-subtle indicator that the AE is organized and expects a fast response.
8. The reviewer responds to your email with a “yes” or a “no.” This is a manual email, outside of the system. If the reviewer states that they cannot do the review, respond very nicely (with a manual email). It is much better to receive a “no” to your request now than a “yes” followed later with a very late review. It is helpful to keep records, and stop asking if you receive repeated rejections from a prospective reviewer. (As of 2003 I have made over 500 requests for reviews, with 56 “too busy”

and 7 who just never responded, implying that over 85% of prospective reviewers agreed to do the review, which is really astounding to me and provides a striking indication of the professionalism of our community.)

At this point, the tracking system does not enforce the twelve-month policy for requesting reviews (although it could, because it has all the needed information). So we are relying on referees to tell us when they have previously reviewed a paper in the past twelve months. If they do so, expect that they are telling the truth, and thank them generously for their other review.

When a reviewer declines, click the “Declined” button to tell MC the status of the reviewer. This doesn’t send any email automatically; you should send a manual email with something like “OK, thanks for letting me know. I’ll find someone else.”

When I receive a declination, I immediately go down my list (I generally start with a list of 5 or 6 names, and ask the first four). The tracking system should be used to send the initiation email, because it keeps records for you.

9. If the reviewer says yes, with an email sent to you, you respond with an acknowledgment sent through MC (Referee Agreed) giving details on how to do the review, and explicitly stating the deadline again. You do this by clicking on the “Agreed” button. This opens another email, acknowledging the reviewer, and providing information on how to access the system. This has only one replacement needed: “**REQUESTED DATE**”.

Dear ... ,

Thank you for agreeing to review the paper entitled "... " which has been submitted to ACM Transactions on Database Systems (TODS).

I would like to know if you believe this paper meets the standards of a TODS publication. If you like, you may return the manuscript with your suggested changes indicated to me.

To provide the authors with a timely response, I request that your review be returned within three months. I would greatly appreciate it if you could arrange for me to receive the review by **REQUESTED DATE**. Rest assured that we will pursue rapid reviewing of your TODS submissions with similar vigor. If you have difficulties with this deadline or are unable to review the paper, please let me know as soon as possible.

Please visit <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com> to view this paper and enter your review. This submission is paper TODS-200X-XXXX.

If you have never used this system before, you will need to specify your email address (the one listed above) as your User ID. The system will offer to send you a password, which you can then modify.

Anonymous verbatim copies of your review will be sent to the author. Copies of all completed reviews for a given paper will be sent to all reviewers of that paper. You will also be informed of the disposition of this paper. As you are aware, all manuscripts are to be treated confidentially. Please do not distribute or reference a manuscript under consideration.

I thank you in advance for your effort in maintaining a high quality archival journal and for adhering to the tight reviewing schedule. Your help and advice are appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you.

Papers for TODS must be of high quality and fall within the scope of the journal. There are four main ingredients to an acceptable paper.

1. The technical quality is high.
2. The relevance to the database community is high.
3. Interest and novelty is high.
4. The presentation is effective.

More referee guidelines may be found at

<http://www.acm.org/tods/Referees.html#Guidelines>

I ask that you read these guidelines, as they provide important considerations to be taken into account when reviewing a submission. Should you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

...
Associate Editor, ACM TODS

For a revision under review, the AE clicks on “Agreed” for each referee to send them a request for them to review this revision. (I know: this is highly counter-intuitive; the button should be something like “Request Subsequent Review”). The email message (Referee Agreed Revision, below) is much shorter than the original request, for the same reviewers should be used as with the original submission. For the second and subsequent reviews, you can specify a deadline shorter than two months.

Dear ...,

Thank you for preparing a review of the paper entitled "...".

I have just received a revision of this paper. By TODS policy, the original reviewers are requested to examine the revision to see if it is acceptable for publication in ACM TODS.

To provide the authors with a timely response, I request that your review be returned within two months (I imagine that this review will be much faster than the first time around!). I would greatly appreciate it if you could arrange for me to receive the review by **DATE**.

Please visit <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>. This submission is paper TODS-200X-XXXX.

Sincerely,

...
Associate Editor, ACM TODS

10. Within a week, you should have four or five reviewers who have agreed to referee the paper. It is helpful to then send a manual email to the author, giving a date (about three weeks after the deadline promised by the reviewers) for a decision. This dramatically reduces the concern of the author, because it (again, not so subtly) conveys to the author that you have things under control. It is good form to let authors know when they can expect a decision.

I use the following for my manual email.

This is to acknowledge receipt of your manuscript, entitled "...," which you submitted on ... for publication in the ACM Transactions on Database Systems. Your paper has been assigned to me for processing.

I have sent your paper to several reviewers. The decision on whether the paper should be published will be made on the basis of their reports.

I expect that a review of your paper will be completed within a few months. I will let you know as soon as a decision has been made. In any case, I will contact you by ... to let you know of the status of the review.

Again, if this is a manuscript authored by one of the AEs, such correspondence should be sent indirectly, through the EiC.

The total time you will have invested thus far, including responding to emails, is perhaps two hours.

The system does not handle reminders, so that duty requires you to keep track of things. I keep a calendar, with three dates, all on Mondays: one for a letter reminder (sent one month after the reviewer agreed to the review), one for an email reminder (sent two months after the reviewer agreed, or equivalently, one month before the review is due), and one the day after the deadline for the review, asking for the status. I then forget about the paper.

11. If a referee responds way later to a request for a review, the system can send a (Referee Late to Accept) email, which is a gentle “thanks, but no thanks.” It is very important to always treat authors and referees kindly, even when they do aggressive or abusive or irresponsible things. The journal lives and dies by its authors and referees; treat them as you would like to be treated.
12. (Optional) Each Monday, I check my *TODS* calendar, which is a simple text file listed in date order. When the first date rolls around, I send a message to my secretary (in retrospect, I could even have my secretary check this date for me). She prepares the (hard copy) referee reminder letters, I sign them, then forget about the paper again. You may wish to do things entirely by email, and just send a manual email reminder note. (I’m not sure a postal letter is needed, though I think it puts reviewers on notice, because we all get so little postal mail now.)

Here is what I send out for the first reminder.

Dear . . . ,

Thank you for agreeing to review the paper entitled “. . .” for the *ACM Transactions on Database Systems*.

This is just a friendly reminder. I would greatly appreciate your arranging for me to receive the review by Monday, . . . Please go to <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com> to enter your review.

All of the reviewers have agreed to this deadline, and I plan to respond back to the authors within a day or two of receiving the reviews. If completing your review by that date now looks unlikely, please contact me immediately so that I can locate another reviewer.

I realize that doing a quality review takes significant time, and I appreciate your willingness to take on this important task.

Sincerely,

This serves to make the commitment more firm, and adds a sense of urgency to the review.

13. When the second date rolls around, I send out a second reminder to each reviewer, this time by email.

Thank you for agreeing to review a TODS submission. If by chance you never received the paper, please let me know immediately.

Please go to <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com> to enter your review.

Your efforts in reviewing this paper in a timely fashion are most appreciated.

Sincerely,

Rick

This takes all of fifteen minutes. I then forget about the paper again.

14. The referee goes to the system to view the paper (and most likely print it out) and later to enter their review. The review is done on-line, but the reviewer can attach files (such as output from \LaTeX or Word). When the review is submitted, MC sends an email (Review Submitted) to you.

Dear . . . ,

. . . has just submitted a review for the paper “. . .,” by . . .

This review may be viewed at <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>

Sincerely,

ACM ManuscriptCentral

MC doesn't send a thank you note to the reviewer. You can do this manually if you want.

Dear . . . ,

Thank you for your (adjectives here) review of the paper ". . ." by . . .

Sincerely,

. . .

Associate Editor, ACM TODS

The reviewer can later go into MC and view their review.

15. The AE goes into MC, which shows that the review has been received. Clicking on the paper then on "View Review Form" opens up another window with the review.

Some reviews have prose (e.g., "very little contribution") inconsistent with the overall recommendation (e.g., "minor revision"). The AE should go back to the reviewer on such reviews, because it is important that both the AE and the author understand the review. Some reviewers want to hide behind an overly positive summary recommendation that is inconsistent with the body of their review; (gently) do not let them do so. In the past, I've asked a reviewer if I can change their review to "Reject", because it seemed that they didn't want to see it again. If they say "Major Revision" then they have to feel that it is fixable and that they would be willing to review it again. Unfortunately, MC doesn't allow reviews to be changed after they are submitted, so such interactions must be outside of MC.

Some reviews are simply inadequate or inappropriate: they are too short, or use inflammatory language, or otherwise do not reflect well on the reviewer or on the journal. It is important to work with the reviewers to obtain a review that is appropriate. Again, this must be handled outside the system.

Occasionally it is useful to engage in a discussion with two or more reviewers, if the reviewers disagree and if you feel that a discussion might shed light on the reviews and help you with your decision. ACM policy⁸ has this to say.

"Editors and administrators of ACM publications must keep the identities of all reviewers of particular manuscripts hidden from authors, other reviewers, and the public. Identities of reviewers may be divulged to members of a publication's Editorial Board or to ACM staff as needed to solicit expert advice in special circumstances. In such cases, identities of a reviewer may also be made known to other reviewers of the same manuscript, provided that the consent of all affected reviewers is obtained. Reviewers must also maintain the confidentiality of reviewer identities, as well as the reviews themselves, that are communicated to them at any time."

16. It is important to get on late reviewers. On the day following the deadline for the reviews of a paper, I generally have received two or three reviews. The AE should manually send a short email to the laggards, asking (gently) about the status of the review, and mentioning that other reviews are in hand. If they ask for an extension, give one, but only for a week. If the reviewer says that it will be two weeks or more, thank the reviewer and then gently cancel the review. I generally call reviewers only when they have not been responsive, as a last resort.

⁸http://www.acm.org/pubs/reviewer_anonymity.html

17. If you originally asked for four reviews, you can easily cancel one, and still have the required number. A few times I have received an adequate number of reviews, and so have nicely canceled a reviewer who hadn't yet started the review. An AE can dis-invite a referee by clicking the trashcan, which sends a (Disinvite Referee) email. You are not given an opportunity to modify this message.

Dear . . . ,

It turns out that your review of "##title##" for ACM TODS is no longer needed. One less thing to worry about!

Sincerely,

. . .
Associate Editor, ACM TODS

18. If two or more reviewers flake out (hopefully a very infrequent situation), there is the alternative of asking a knowledgeable friend for a fast review, in a week or two. This is a big favor to ask, but a reasonable one if done rarely. Or you can do a review yourself.
19. Once all the reviews are received, the AE reads through the reviews and composes the decision letter. This step takes the most time of all. The AE clicks "Make Decision" then "Post Decision" which brings up a "Comments to Editorial Center" and a Final Decision. Click on "Finalize Decision" to bring up the decision letter.

If this manuscript has been authored by an AE, the email addresses for the decision letter should be changed to remove all the authors, and be sent instead to the EiC, who will forward it to the authors. **Note:** the AE should also remove his or her email address from the decision letter, as the decision letter will be visible to the author. The easiest thing to do is to have the letter from and to the EiC. The EiC, after sending this letter to the authors, will forward a copy to the AE, for their records (that email will be out of the scope of MC).

The most time-consuming task of an AE is to deal with vague or conflicting reviews. Sometimes the AE even has to go back and read portions of the paper to make sense of the reviews. Your insight and experience is what you are paid for (!) in your role of AE. It might help to recall that the reviewers are just providing advice to you, advice you can disagree with or at times ignore altogether. (In such cases you need to explain your decision to the authors, so that they understand it.) This is the most subjective part of the entire process, and necessarily so.

There are four possible editorial decisions.

Accept The paper is fully acceptable, perhaps modulo a few minor corrections. It is fine to request the final version to check to ensure that those corrections—indicated very specifically in your letter—have been made adequately.

Minor Revision The paper is very close, but you want to see one last version before accepting the paper. This indicates to the author that you are serious about the changes you requested. Minor revisions rarely go back to the reviewers, and even if they do, it's more for a sanity check than a formal review.

Major Revision Major revisions are given more time (but again, no more than six months); four to six months are the norm. Major revisions also generally go back to the reviewers for a formal review, though that is not required—it is your call.

Reject It turns out that most papers are rejected on the first round; somewhat less than half are rejected on the second round (it is rare for a paper to go more than two rounds and still be rejected).

We now examine each decision letter in turn.

The decision letter for accept is as follows. There are several places where the AE needs to change the letter: “**NUMBER**” of reviews (MC knows that but doesn’t know how to put it in the letter), “**PERIOD FROM INITIAL SUBMISSION TO NOW**” (which MC also knows, but which you have to compute yourself), “**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS IF NEEDED**”, and “**DATE**”, which you calculate as one month from today (it is important to give this deadline, otherwise authors can take forever to prepare their final version of their accepted paper). You are free to allow more or less time for the final version.

All of the decision letters include the referee comments (that portion to be communicated to the author). All are CCed to the EiC.

Dear ...,

I have received **NUMBER** reviews, attached, of your paper entitled "..."
which you submitted for publication in the ACM Transactions on Database
Systems. Attachments to these reviews may be available at
<http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>

The reviewers were quite prompt with their reviews, reducing the period from
initial submission (on ...) to final decision to less than **PERIOD
FROM INITIAL SUBMISSION TO NOW** months.

On the basis of the reviews and my own reading of the paper, I am pleased to
accept the paper for publication in ACM Transactions on Database Systems. I
feel that this paper is very well written and makes an important
contribution. The high quality of this paper is consistent with that
associated with TODS. You are to be commended for the manner in which you
responded to the initial reviews in this version of the paper.

****ADDITIONAL COMMENTS IF NEEDED****

The reviewers did have some minor comments. Please finalize your manuscript,
addressing these issues, and send it to me. I ask that you do so within one
month, by **DATE**, as we are attempting to reduce the time to publication.

Note that the ACM Publications Board has decided to adopt the Computing
Surveys style of references. Please ensure that your final manuscript is
consistent with that style. Also, please format your final version according
to the directives found at

<http://www.acm.org/pubs/submissions/submission.htm>

At your earliest convenience, please forward to Mr. Jono Hardjowirogo, at
ACM Headquarters, the following materials needed in order for us to proceed
with the publication production of your paper:

* Postscript or PDF file of the final version of your article for reference
and copy editing

* Original File (in LaTeX or Word) for processing

* All original artwork in .eps format as close as possible to their final
publication size

Once your paper has been scheduled for publication in a specific issue, you
will be notified by ACM HQ. You will receive a copyright release form and
other relevant documents (e.g., page charge form, reprint order form) from
ACM. You will also be informed as to when you can expect to receive the
proof of your paper, so that you can go over it prior to
publication. Finally, you will be contacted by Professor Curtis Dyreson, ACM
TODS Information Director, so that he can put an electronic version on the
web as soon as possible.

I thank you for selecting TODS to publish the results of your work.

Sincerely,

...
Associate Editor, ACM TODS

MC also send a letter to Jono Hardjowirogo, ACM Publisher, informing him that the paper has been accepted, CCing the EiC. (This letter, Decision To Publisher, can be modified by the AE.) Since this letter is not sent to the authors, it need not be changed even if the identity of the AE is confidential.

Jono,

The following manuscript has been accepted for publication in the ACM Transactions on Database Systems.

Identifier: TODS-2004-XXXX
Title: ...
Authors: ...

The authors had been instructed to submit the final manuscript and its corresponding illustrations directly to you at the ACM HQ.

Sincerely,

...

For a minor revision, the following letter is sent. There are four adjustments needed: “**NUMBER**”, “**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, AS NEEDED**”, “**two (2)**” and “**DUE DATE**”. The number of months needed for a minor revision is up to you (as long as it doesn’t exceed six months). However, if only a minor revision is needed, then presumably the author can complete that revision rather quickly. Recognize that the author will take all the time you give him or her, independent of the amount of time the revision will actually take. State an appropriate amount of time. Most minor revisions should be given only a month or two.

Dear ...,

I have received **NUMBER** reviews, enclosed, of the revision of your paper entitled ..., which you submitted for publication in the ACM Transactions on Database Systems.

These reviews, all by recognized experts in the field, have obviously been prepared with care.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, AS NEEDED

The reviews agree that this is an interesting paper that makes a substantial contribution. On the basis of the reviews and my own reading of the paper, I am pleased to accept the paper for publication in TODS, conditional on receiving a revision that addresses the concerns identified in the reviews.

Please send one copy of your revision to me by email. I ask that you include comments to each of the reviewers, with the reviewer identified by number, indicating how you have addressed each of the points raised in the review.

We are now trying to minimize the time to publication. This requires help from both the reviewers and the authors. Please ensure that I receive the revision within **two (2)** months, that is, by **DUE DATE**.

I thank you for selecting TODS to publish the results of your work.

Sincerely,

...
Associate Editor, ACM TODS

For a major revision, the following letter is sent. There are five adjustments needed: “**NUMBER**” of reviews, “**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, AS NEEDED**”, “**NUMBER**” of months for the revision (which by *TODS* policy cannot exceed six months), and the “**DUE DATE**”.

For major revisions, it is important to provide feedback to the author. You need to indicate fairly specifically what is required to achieve an acceptable paper (though the author may decide not to do what is required, or not be able to do what is asked). Here you can indicate which objections raised by the reviewers are serious and must be addressed, which are optional, and which you don't agree with (in the end, the acceptance decision is yours and yours alone, so all three categories of comments are very useful to the author).

It is helpful to employ prose in your letter that refers to the paper, not the author, and to the review, not the reviewer. For example, "The paper's understanding of . . . needs to be improved" will be accepted better than the roughly equivalent "The author's understanding of . . . needs to be improved" and "The reviewer did not read the paper carefully" could be better stated as "The review covers part of the issue well, but . . .". The idea is to avoid making your letter personal. A person who writes a bad paper or bad review is not a bad person, necessarily! Note that reviewers will see your letter to the authors, so be diplomatic to them and to the authors.

Dear . . . ,

I have received ****NUMBER**** reviews, enclosed, of the revision of your paper entitled "...", which you submitted for publication in the ACM Transactions on Database Systems. (Attachments to these reviews may be available at the URL mentioned below.)

These reviews, all by recognized experts in the field, have obviously been prepared with care. The reviews appear to agree on the following points.

****ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, AS NEEDED****

On the basis of these evaluations, I suggest that you substantially revise the paper, addressing the comments of the reviewers, and submit the paper for another round of review. It appears that there is the possibility that you can satisfactorily resolve the problems present in this draft, thereby achieving a paper suitable for publication in TODS.

I ask that you also include comments to each of the reviewers, with the reviewer identified by number, indicating how you have addressed each of the points raised in the review.

We are now trying to minimize the time to publication. This requires cooperation from the reviewers and the authors. The reviewers have done their part, by preparing their reviews in such a timely manner. Please ensure that I receive the revision within ****NUMBER**** months, that is, by ****DUE DATE****. To submit your revision, please go to <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>

If I do not hear from you within this period, I will assume that you do not wish to revise the paper, and any future revision will be considered as a new submission.

Thank you for submitting your paper to ACM Transactions on Database Systems.

Sincerely,

...
Associate Editor, ACM TODS

For a rejection, the following email is sent. There are only two adjustments: "****NUMBER****" of reviews and "****ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, AS NEEDED****" Note that the reason given is "inadequate contribution." For many papers, there will be a different reason, so be sure to edit this message so that it conveys the appropriate reason. The authors have made a good-faith effort to produce an acceptable paper (assume this, even for horribly-written papers), and so the journal owes it to them to provide a carefully-stated rationale for this (often quite painful) editorial decision. You can go over your objections and rationale at great length, or you can simply point to the reviews, if they are adequate.

Desk rejections are a special case, because there generally aren't attached reviews. In this case, your rejection letter should be more substantial, basically a mini-review.

It is important to realize that it is not your job to tell the author how to write an acceptable paper. That skill can only be learned through much practice and appropriate mentoring; many authors never achieve a *TODS* paper. The rejection letter should focus instead on the inadequacies of the paper, so that the author has a clear understanding of the editorial decision.

Dear ... ,

I have received ****NUMBER**** reviews, attached, of your paper entitled "...," which you submitted on ... for consideration for the ACM Transactions on Database Systems. Attachments to the reviews may be available at <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>

These reviews, all by recognized experts in the field, have obviously been prepared with care.

****ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, IF NEEDED****

The reviewers agree that the topic is highly relevant to *TODS* and that the paper is well written. There were many specific concerns voiced, which probably could be addressed in a rewrite. However, the reviewers were also unanimous in their assessment that the paper makes an inadequate contribution. It appears that even a substantial revision will not satisfy the reviewers on this, the most important consideration.

On the basis of the reviews (and my own reading of the paper), I regret that I cannot further consider this paper for publication in *TODS*.

I hope you will find the reviews useful in revising the manuscript for publication consideration in another outlet.

I thank you for your interest in *TODS*.

Sincerely,

...
Associate Editor, ACM *TODS*

It is often useful to end the rejection letter on a positive note. I have heard cases where young scholars have simply given up after a particularly scathing review or rejection letter. Tell the author something you like about the paper (which can sometimes be challenging to identify!) and encourage the author to press on. As a personal aside, here is a note I received that illustrates this point.

Hi Rick—

I thought that I'd fire off a quick email and let you know that the paper I'd submitted to *TODS* in the Fall (that was rejected) was accepted by Just wanted to thank you for the encouraging note that you sent after the paper was rejected. For someone who is just starting out, it is easy to feel like it's the end of the world when a paper you'd spent months writing and worrying about gets a short, abrupt rejection. Your note took a lot of the sting out. I definitely appreciated it.

20. For a major or minor revision, once the author submits their revision, MC sends the following email to the handling AE (Revised Paper Submitted Associate Editor).

... ,

A revision entitled "... " has been submitted by ... as *TODS-200X-???.R1*.

Please make your editorial decision for this paper within three months.

Thanks,

Rick

As mentioned in Section 4, revised manuscripts require less time to handle, so I will request three months and expect four months. By *TODS* policy, you should use the original reviewers, except perhaps for reviewers who were comfortable with the paper the first time around.

To send a request to a review, click on the “Agreed” button by the reviewer’s name.

21. Once a decision is made by the AE, MC sends an email to each of the reviewers (Decision and Thank You to Referees), with the (non-confidential portion of the) reviews attached. There are no AE-editable portions of this email message.

You should forward a copy of your decision letter to each reviewer separately, as mentioned in the automatic letter sent out by MC. It is best to do this from within MC, by clicking on the reviewer’s name, and pasting the decision letter.

Dear ...,

Thank you for your review of the paper “...” by ...

The success and quality of *TODS* is due primarily to researchers like yourself who understand the importance of a timely, careful review, whether it is a paper of your own or one of a colleague. I realize the effort that such reviews require, and I appreciate your help and cooperation.

All of the reviews are attached. The resolution for the above paper will be sent to you in a separate email.

%TODO: may be seen at <http://acm.manuscriptcentral.com>

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Sincerely,

...

Associate Editor, *ACM TODS*

22. (Optional) You may want to periodically (say, once a year) send a letter to the reviewers you used during that time, thanking them once again for their help. When I do this, my secretary does the mail merge.

In summary, you will spend perhaps three hours the week you receive the submission, less than an hour during the next three months, and a few hours the last week, a total of less than one day per submission.

If you follow this process, you will spend almost no time nagging laggard reviewers, no time apologizing to irate authors who have waited too long for a decision, and no time apologizing to the EiC for a late decision. You will have few papers on your desk, because submissions are processed and filed within a few days. And you will have the satisfaction of knowing that your reviewers feel appreciated for work well done and your authors will appreciate the fast response you provide for their submissions.

When an author submits a major revision, the entire process starts again. The revision should be submitted through MC so that a complete record is kept of the interaction.

Generally the author provides a single document that responds to all the reviewers’ comments, though occasionally a response is prepared for each reviewer. In that case, my recommendation would be to send all to each reviewer, as each reviewer has seen all the reviews, and might be interested to read how the authors responded to a concern of one of the other reviewers. However, this is your call.

When an author goes in MC in the “Author Center”, they see a table “Submitted Manuscripts”. The column “Processing Status” shows a short message. This status starts out as “Submitted”. When the EiC has passed the manuscript on to an AE, the status changes to “With Associate Editor”. When the first referee is assigned, the status changes to “With Referees”. When the first referee submits their review, the status changes to “With Associate Editor”. (This is a little strange, because the AE is probably waiting for the remaining reviews.) When the AE has made the editorial decision, the status changes to “Decision (View Letter)” and the author has access to the decision letter and the reviews.

5 Psychological Factors

I've found it is important to motivate people, primarily reviewers, to do the right thing. The following psychological considerations are central to the process.

- Potential reviewers should not receive papers before their assistance with a submission has been confirmed. Doing so annoys reviewers, and invariably increases turnaround time. Doing so is also against ACM policy.
- Reviewers, in accepting the paper, implicitly commit to the stated review deadline. Those few who agree to review the paper, but mention that they probably won't be able to make the deadline, are politely thanked, but are not sent the paper.
- Reviewers are given a reasonable time to review the paper. I always give first submissions three months of reviewing time, and revised submissions two months, though some AEs give less time. (*TODS* policy requires two months for an initial review.)

Some journals, including some prominent ones, request a ridiculously short reviewing period, like a few weeks or perhaps a month. In my view, this backfires. The reviewer thinks, "this is an inappropriate request, so I will just ignore it, and take however long it takes," thus resulting in very long turnaround times.

- The letter reminder and the email reminder both ask the reviewer to let me know if anything has transpired that would cause them to miss the agreed upon deadline. This forms an implied acceptance of the deadline by the reviewer. So when the deadline rolls around, the reviewer has agreed to the deadline *three* separate times, and so is much more likely to meet that deadline, to avoid the shame of missing it.
- When I contact laggard reviewers by email the day after the deadline, that sends a message that I am very organized and expect them to adhere to the deadline. Contacting them a week after the deadline would not have this effect. When a reviewer does not respond to email within a day or so (this is often a bad sign—they usually haven't even started reading the paper, much less writing up their review), I phone them.
- I thank reviewers four times, always explicitly: when they accept a paper for review, when they submit their review, when I send them the editorial decision, and later, by letter. It is important that they understand that I know how much work a good review entails, and that I appreciate their effort.
- I sometimes use printed correspondence; when I do, I often put a note at the bottom. Close personal interaction is key. I enjoy the exchange, as I often get to know the personality of the reviewer through their review and also our email exchanges, which makes the whole process very satisfying.
- Reviewers appreciate seeing the other reviews of the papers they read. This over time helps them to calibrate their reviews, and settles the community on a somewhat uniform standard.
- I always promise that I will treat their submissions with similar responsiveness, to emphasize the multiple roles we all play.
- I am happy to write promotion letters for my reviewers, especially ones who have done a good job.

- The projected decision date I give authors is always several weeks later than I expect to have that decision, for two reasons. One, I don't want to exceed this deadline, if the reviewing goes slower than expected. Also, I don't want authors sitting by their computers anxiously awaiting the decision. Rather, I want to surprise them with an answer weeks before they were expecting it. Even if the decision is negative, and it usually is, I think the authors take it better if the reviews are well done, if there are several of them, and if the reviewing was done quickly.

6 Special Cases

Desk rejects have already been discussed. You have the authority to desk reject (that is, reject without sending to reviewers) any submission. However, it is good form to provide at least a paragraph or two about why the paper is unacceptable.

You also have the authority to reject a paper after getting one or more quick short reviews, if you are unsure about the paper.

The underlying notion is that the reviews are primarily advice to you about the editorial decision. Normally three reviews are requested, but if fewer reviews are needed for you to make an informed and appropriate editorial decision, that is fine.

Submissions authored by a current AE have also been dealt with in the above process.

There are several *TODS* policies about papers invited from conferences (currently *EDBT*, *ICDT*, *PODS* and *SIGMOD*, as well as a general policy)⁹. These policies concern time frame, whether or not (some of) the original program committee members who reviewed the conference submission should be reused, instructions to provide to the reviewers, and other details. When you handle such a submission, please consult the relevant policy. (For example, you'll need to modify the Review Agreed to email that is sent to reviewers to mention that the submission was invited but that a normal review is requested, and to ask them to explicitly address the 30% rule. There is no special template for such an email.)

You may also invite submissions to *TODS*. Informal invitations (e.g., "I really enjoyed your paper in ... and hope that you can submit a follow-up paper to *TODS*") can be surprisingly effective. As an Associate Editor, you have considerable credibility. Ask the author to let you know when they submit the paper, so that you can request that the EiC assign it to you. Submissions that result from such informal invitations are handled exactly as other submissions.

As mentioned on the first page of this manual, the final editorial decision is yours to make. Very rarely, an author disagrees with a decision (for some reason, always a rejection decision). There is a formal appeal process instituted by ACM and *TODS*¹⁰. This process allows, but does not require, handing over the appeal to the EiC. If the author is not satisfied, the author can go higher, to the chair of the ACM Publications Board. You should know that I will not question your judgment on a particular paper.

7 Summary

There are three points in this lengthy document I would like to emphasize yet again.

1. Manuscript Central provides a work flow, described exhaustively here, for processing submissions. I think you'll find it to be a natural one, once you acquire a little experience with it.

⁹<http://www.acm.org/tods/editors>

¹⁰<http://www.acm.org/tods/Authors.html#Appeals>

2. The submission guidelines state that “The Editorial Board is committed to provide an editorial decision within six months.” Following the process described here should enable you to meet this commitment, indeed, to complete in under four months.
3. Your primary function is to render clear, timely impartial feedback in the form of an editorial decision on a submission. This decision is yours and yours alone.

Finally, thanks again for agreeing to serve the research community as an Associate Editor.

8 Acknowledgments

Thanks to the many past AEs who provided many corrections and improvements to this manual.