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Desk review explained: Editorial judgement, fit, and publishing

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Introduction

For many authors, the editorial desk seems to be something of a black box. A manuscript is submitted, a period of silence follows, and then a decision arrives. When that decision is a desk rejection, it can feel abrupt, impersonal, or difficult to interpret. For editors, however, the desk review is rarely quick or casual. It is one of the most careful and consequential moments in the publishing process.

This Editorial is an attempt to make that moment more visible.

Over the past six months, a striking proportion of submissions to the *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching (JALT)*, approximately 96%, have not progressed beyond initial editorial screening. Stated plainly, that figure can sound discouraging. It may invite assumptions about rising barriers or increasingly narrow definitions of quality. Yet neither explanation reflects what is actually happening at the editorial desk. The purpose of this Editorial is to explain why desk rejection occurs so frequently, how those decisions are made, and what they mean and do not mean for prospective authors. We also describe common pitfalls and make a case for stylish academic writing.

Editorial judgement before peer review

In scholarly publishing, desk rejection (also called desk review or editorial rejection) is the decision by a journal editor to decline a submitted manuscript without sending it for external peer review. At this initial screening stage, editors assess whether a manuscript aligns with the journal's aims and scope, meets baseline expectations for academic quality and ethical compliance, and is sufficiently developed to warrant detailed evaluation by reviewers (Goyal et al., 2024). Desk rejection, therefore, represents the first editorial checkpoint in the publication process, filtering out submissions that are unsuitable for review because of issues such as scope misalignment, fundamental methodological limitations, or lack of readiness for peer review (Goyal et al., 2024).

This definition matters as it clarifies what desk rejection is and what it is not. It is not a peer review conducted in ab-

-breviated form, nor is it a definitive judgment on the scholarly worth of a study. Rather, it is an editorial decision about appropriateness and readiness, with a view to ultimately guiding the author(s) to rethink some aspects of their original submission.

At JALT, desk rejection is accordingly practiced in line with this definition above – it is not intended as a substitute for peer review, nor as an early verdict on intellectual value. Editors ask practical but consequential questions. For example, is this manuscript clearly aligned with the journal's remit? Does its structure and argument genuinely reflect the article category it claims to be? Has it reached a level of refinement where external reviewers can engage productively with its ideas, rather than be diverted by issues of framing, scope, or ethical compliance?

Seen this way, desk review is not about deciding whether research is 'good enough' in the abstract. It is about deciding whether this journal is the right home for this manuscript at this stage of its development.

This stance is not new. From its early years, JALT has resisted equating quality with exclusivity. In an Editorial, Rudolph and Yeo (2019) rejected "[measuring] the quality of a peer-reviewed journal by the number of rejections" (2019, p. 5). Less than two years later, in another Editorial reflecting on the journal's development, Rudolph and Tan (2021) observed that while rejection rates had risen as submissions increased, these were not regarded as indicators of prestige or scholarly value. Instead, JALT positioned itself as inclusive and developmental, particularly for authors working at the margins of dominant academic publishing systems, and explicitly cautioned against metric-driven understandings of quality (Rudolph & Tan, 2021). The current Editorial continues that ethos, albeit under very different submission conditions for the present day.

Where desk review fits in the JALT process

The JALT's editorial workflow follows a familiar trajectory in academic publishing, moving from editorial screening to double-blind peer review and, for accepted manuscripts, through copyediting and production.

The desk review is the first point at which a submission is read as a potential contribution to the journal. At this stage, editors consider alignment with the scope, clarity of scholarly purpose, suitability of the article type, and adherence to baseline expectations around research ethics and academic integrity. Only manuscripts that are well-matched to the journal and sufficiently refined to benefit from expert external critique proceed to peer review.

Those that do not are declined early. While this can be disappointing, it is often the most constructive outcome available. A desk-review decision allows authors to receive an initial editorial assessment of suitability and readiness, enabling them to consider next steps whilst their work is still at an early stage of the submission process. It is important to consider this early feedback as a process of continuous improvement from the perspective of the author(s).

Manuscripts that pass desk review enter double-blind peer review, where attention shifts decisively. Questions of fit recede, and reviewers focus instead on contribution, coherence, methodological soundness, and scholarly significance. Normally, this stage of the review engages discipline or content experts in aligned areas of scholarship. These experts, who function as "gatekeepers of scientific knowledge", are essential to maintaining the intellectual rigour and integrity of their research area (Sizo et al., 2025, p. 1). Successful papers then move through copyediting and into JALT's rolling online-first publication stream. Online-first is an online pre-publication pathway that enables the rapid dissemination of research into academic discourse, ahead of the release of the complete issue (Springer Nature, 2024).

From this perspective, desk review is not a procedural hurdle. It is a threshold moment that shapes everything that follows. It is to ensure that peer review is implemented where it can do the most good.

Why desk rejections have become more common

The recent increase in desk rejections at JALT is closely tied to the journal's growth. Submission numbers have surged steadily, the geographic spread of authors has widened, and interest in topics such as generative artificial (GenAI), digital pedagogy, and applied learning has intensified. These developments mirror broader trends in higher

education research publishing in the post-pandemic period (Butler-Henderson et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2020).

At the same time, they have brought a broader range of interpretations about what JALT publishes. Many submissions treat education or learning as expansive categories, encompassing school contexts, discipline-specific studies, and language-focused research, without a clear engagement with higher-education pedagogy. Others arrive with strong intentions but are framed in ways that do not align with the article classifications or scholarly conversations the journal supports.

JALT is explicitly concerned with teaching and learning in higher education, across disciplines, with an emphasis on applied practice and scholarly insight. When manuscripts fall outside that focus, however strong they may be in other respects, desk rejection becomes the measured editorial response.

What JALT has published, and what that suggests for authors

For authors who are looking for a clearer sense of the kinds of work that align well with JALT's editorial interests, it is useful to look not only at submission guidelines but also at the journal's publication record.

A data-driven study published in JALT analysed all articles appearing between January 2021 and December 2023, using topic-modelling techniques (Bala & Mitchell, 2024). The analysis identified 17 recurring topics clustered into four broad areas: technology and digital learning in higher education; applied and professional learning contexts, including clinical and work-integrated settings; pedagogical strategies and educational outcomes such as feedback, assessment, and learner development; and the social and emotional dimensions of learning shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath (Bala & Mitchell, 2024). These clusters reflect the journal's interdisciplinary orientation and its sustained interest in research that connects educational practice with conceptual insight.

For prospective authors, these patterns provide a helpful reference point. They do not prescribe what must be studied, but they do illuminate the kinds of questions, contexts, and contributions that have resonated with the journal's readership in recent years.

Patterns in desk-review decisions

In an earlier Editorial, Rudolph and co-authors (2023) had referred to Danelle Stevens's (2019) brilliantly-titled book *Write more, Publish more, Stress less!* and her top ten reasons for desk rejections:

- (1) a mismatch with the journal's scope or objectives, (2) inappropriate article format such as being overly journalistic, (3) unsuitable length, (4) non-adherence to journal or academic writing standards, (5) poor language usage including grammatical and punctuation errors, (6) lack of significant content or prolix elaboration of obvious points, (7) inadequate contextualisation for an international readership, (8) weak theoretical framework, (9) shoddy presentation with apparent lack of proofreading, and (10) inclusion of libellous or unethical content" (Rudolph et al., 2023, p. 7; see Stevens, 2019, Table 9.1, p. 156).

Looking across editorial decisions over time and more specifically to JALT, several recurring considerations emerge. These are not newly introduced criteria, nor are they unevenly applied. They reflect long-standing editorial expectations that authors sometimes underestimate.

The most common issue is misalignment with the scope. Manuscripts centred on school-aged learners, narrowly framed TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) or EFL (English as a foreign language) studies, or policy analyses detached from higher education teaching contexts frequently fall into this category.

A second pattern involves genre confusion. Submissions may be labelled as empirical research but read as descriptive accounts, reflective narratives, or loosely structured literature reviews. Each of these forms has value, but only when framed, theorised, and argued in ways consistent with its declared article type.

Editors also encounter manuscripts that are competently executed but merely offer limited advancement of e-

-existing knowledge. Studies that replicate well-established findings, remain tightly localised, or gesture towards implications without fully developing them may not yet be positioned to contribute meaningfully to the journal's readership.

Questions of methodological maturity and rigour arise regularly. Over-reliance on simple surveys, thin qualitative analysis, or misalignment between research questions and methods often signal that a paper would benefit from further development before peer review.

There are also non-negotiable thresholds. Submissions that raise concerns about originality, attribution, or appropriate ethical practice cannot proceed to further consideration. As part of routine editorial assessment, manuscripts are scrutinised via text-similarity tools, such as Turnitin, to identify substantial overlap with previously published work or inadequate citation practices. Where similarity reports indicate extensive unacknowledged borrowing, patchwriting, or reuse of material without clear attribution, editorial intervention is required. These decisions are not judgments about author intent but reflect the journal's responsibility to uphold established expectations around originality and transparency in academic writing.

Submitting to JALT: A reflective pause

Authors considering submissions to JALT may find it useful to pause over three questions prior to uploading a manuscript:

- Does this paper clearly speak to teaching and learning in higher education, in ways that resonate beyond a single context or discipline?
- Does the article type I have selected genuinely reflect how the paper is structured, argued, and evidenced?
- Has the manuscript reached a level of conceptual, methodological, and ethical readiness where peer review will enhance it rather than rescue it?

When uncertainty remains, authors are encouraged to use the journal's published guidance and latest articles as reference points while evaluating the suitability of their work for JALT. Careful attention at this stage can help reduce avoidable misalignment and support more informed submission decisions.

Stylish and pleasurable academic writing

We encourage more authors to read and heed the advice on academic writing of excellent authors such as Helen Sword (2012, 2017, 2023), Steven Pinker (2014) and Dannelle Stevens (2019). Sword, in particular, has shown that stylish academic writing with pleasure is possible (2012, 2023). Strunk and White's generic *The Elements of Style* is so admirably succinct that it literally fits into a pocket. Sword has also written a small book, *The Writer's Diet* (2007), which comes with a test that authors can take free of charge at <https://writersdiet.com/writing-test/>. Authors can then discover whether or not they overuse be-verbs, zombie nouns (nominalisations that suck the lifeblood from potentially lively prose), propositions, ad-words (adjectives and adverbs) or "waste words" such as "it, this, that, there" (Sword, 2007).

For many academics, 'stylish academic writing' sounds like an oxymoron. In an interview with JALT, however, Sword reveals that most 'bad' academic writing stems not from deliberate obfuscation, but from insecurity and fear—yet the most successful writers she studied associated their craft with *pleasure* (Sword et al., 2024).

A closing word

This Editorial has not been written to push authors away from JALT. On the contrary, it demonstrates a commitment that has been present since the journal's early years: openness, fairness, and scholarly care (Rudolph & Tan, 2021). JALT continues to welcome submissions from a diverse community of researchers, educators, and practitioner-scholars. What matters is not conformity, but alignment and enlightenment.

Desk rejection, when exercised thoughtfully, is not a blunt instrument. It is a form of editorial responsibility. It respects authors' labour, safeguards reviewers' time, and helps maintain the journal as a coherent intellectual space. By making that responsibility more visible, we hope to make the path to publishing with JALT clearer, more navigable, and more humane.

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