

How to Be a Good Editor

| Skills, Strategies, and Scenarios for Ecological Journals

John M. Drake

Odum School of Ecology, University of Georgia

Ecological Society of America 2026

Salt Lake City, Utah

July 3, 2026

The panel



John Drake
Ecology Letters



Volker Rudolf *The
American Naturalist*



Kathy Cottingham
Ecology

“Most of the manuscripts we send out for review, we end up rejecting — and that is the job working, not failing.”

Associate editors do the most consequential invisible work in science

Authors and reviewers get the public credit. The associate editor reads the manuscript, chooses the reviewers, weighs what comes back, and writes the decision that shapes what enters the literature — almost always without a byline.

Yet almost no one is ever taught how to do it

Most editors learn the craft by accident — a first assignment lands in the inbox, and the norms are absorbed by imitation, one decision letter at a time.

TODAY WE TRY TO MAKE SOME OF THAT TACIT KNOWLEDGE EXPLICIT.

What you will leave with

By the end of the session you will be able to:

- Exercise independent editorial judgment instead of counting reviewer votes
- Manage workload, reviewers, and turnaround without losing your evenings
- Write decisions that are clear, fair, and genuinely useful to authors
- Handle the hard cases — split reviews, hostile reviews, conflicts, and bias

How the next ninety minutes run

0:00	Introduction and objectives	<i>now</i>
0:10	Three editors, three journals	8 min each
0:40	Scenario exercises	small groups
1:00	Debrief — how editors actually decided	all of us
1:15	Open discussion and the future of the journals	everyone

Journal placement is sorting, not ranking

The journals in this room differ in who reads them and what they are for. A manuscript that is wrong for *Ecology Letters* can be exactly right for *Ecology* or *The American Naturalist* — same quality, different home.

A DECLINE IS OFTEN A ROUTING DECISION, NOT A VERDICT ON THE WORK.

John Drake

Ecology Letters — the distributed editorial board

Volker Rudolf

The American Naturalist — the society journal's mission

Kathy Cottingham

Ecology — consistency at scale

The exercises

Four real situations, lightly disguised

How the exercises work

- **Groups of four to five.** Each table takes the scenario on its card.
- **Twelve minutes.** Read it, then work toward a recommendation and a one-line rationale.
- **Pick a reporter.** One person will give your table's call in the debrief.

THERE IS NO ANSWER KEY. EXPERIENCED EDITORS DISAGREE ON EVERY ONE OF THESE.

Scenario 1 — The two-to-one vote

Two reviewers are enthusiastic and recommend acceptance. The third is scathing. Reading the paper yourself, you think the lone critic has found a flaw that sinks the central claim — and the two positive reviews never engage with it.

WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND, AND HOW DO YOU WRITE THE LETTER?

Scenario 2 — The diamond in the rough

A manuscript has a genuinely original idea and a one-of-a-kind dataset, buried under poor writing and a shaky analysis. The reviews are harsh and lean toward rejection. A clean decline would be the easy call.

DECLINE, DECLINE-WITH-RESUBMISSION, OR MAJOR REVISION? ON WHAT GROUNDS?

Scenario 3 — The useful, brutal review

One review is substantively excellent and also contemptuous — mocking the authors' competence by name. The science in it is too good to discard.

HOW DO YOU USE THE CONTENT WITHOUT PASSING ON THE CRUELTY?

Scenario 4 — The borderline desk reject

A paper from an under-resourced lab arrives in imperfect English on a regional question. Your instinct is a quick desk reject. The reviewers who come to mind are the same handful you always use.

WHAT CHECKS DO YOU RUN ON THAT INSTINCT BEFORE YOU ACT?

Debrief

What did you decide — and what did the editors do?

The throughline across all four

An associate editor's job is to exercise judgment, not to count votes.

- Decline well, and the rejection becomes a gift to the author
- The decision is yours to defend in your own voice, reviewers advise
- Watch the cases where bias hides — language, geography, reputation
- Move quickly; a slow fair decision still costs the author

If you want to be the one handling the papers

Not an editor yet? The path is less mysterious than it looks:

- **Tell a senior editor.** Make your interest known and be specific about your expertise — that is what they reach for when a matching paper lands.
- **Review, and review well.** A sharp, on-time review is the audition. Editors remember who writes them, and boards are built from that pool.
- **Know the local custom.** Some boards welcome a direct self-nomination; others prefer to extend the invitation themselves. When in doubt, ask — or let good reviewing do the asking for you.

Questions & discussion

THANK YOU — NOW GO WRITE A DECISION LETTER YOU WOULD BE GLAD TO RECEIVE.

Where the journals go next