
CONFERENCE COLLABORATION PROGRAMME

Special Issue Review Protocol

The Criterion: An International Journal in English | Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

This protocol governs the peer review and editorial management of all manuscripts submitted to special issues produced through the RCELL Conference Collaboration Programme. It applies without modification to both journals. All parties involved in the special issue process — editorial office staff, Guest Editors, peer reviewers, and submitting authors — are expected to be familiar with and to act in accordance with its provisions.

1. Purpose and Governing Principle

This protocol sets out the complete peer review and editorial management process for manuscripts submitted to special issues of The Criterion: An International Journal in English and Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal under the Conference Collaboration Programme.

Its governing principle is straightforward: a manuscript submitted to a special issue is treated in every material respect as a manuscript submitted to a regular issue of the journal. The special issue context does not modify the review standard, alter the decision criteria, create any presumption in favour of acceptance, or exempt any submission from any stage of the standard editorial process.

This protocol exists to make that principle operationally concrete — to specify the process clearly enough that no ambiguity can arise between what the journal does and what a conference organiser or Guest Editor might expect it to do.

Participation in a conference collaboration does not create a privileged submission status.

2. Entry into the Review Workflow

2.1 The Submission Pathway

Manuscripts submitted to a special issue must be submitted through the journal's standard submission portal. There is no separate or expedited pathway for special issue submissions. All authors — whether invited following a conference collaboration or submitting independently — use the same system and encounter the same submission requirements.

Authors must indicate at the point of submission that their manuscript is intended for a specific special issue. This designation allows the editorial office to route the manuscript appropriately but does not alter any aspect of how it is subsequently handled.

2.2 Submission Eligibility

To be eligible for submission to a special issue, a manuscript must meet all of the following conditions:

- The author must have been formally invited to submit by the editorial office or, under instruction from the editorial office, by the Guest Editor using a journal-approved invitation letter.
- The manuscript must be a substantially developed extension of the conference paper or presentation. A lightly revised or near-identical version of the conference paper does not meet the submission threshold. Detailed requirements for extended papers are set out in the Extended Paper Requirements document.
- The manuscript must not be under simultaneous review at another journal or publication venue.
- The manuscript must not have been published previously in any form, including in conference proceedings, institutional repositories, or online platforms, unless prior written approval has been obtained from the Editor-in-Chief.
- The manuscript must conform to the formatting and length requirements specified in the RCELL Manuscript Submission Standards.

2.3 Submission Deadline

The editorial office will establish a submission deadline for each special issue at the time the collaboration is confirmed. This deadline is communicated to the Guest Editor and, through the Guest Editor or the editorial office, to invited authors. Manuscripts received after the submission deadline may be declined without review at the editorial office's discretion. Extensions may be granted in exceptional circumstances on written request to the editorial office.

3. Stage 1 — Initial Editorial Screening

3.1 Purpose of the Screening Stage

All submitted manuscripts undergo an initial editorial screening before assignment to peer review. The purpose of this stage is to determine whether a manuscript meets the minimum threshold for external review. It is not a judgement of scholarly merit; it is an assessment of whether the submission is complete, appropriately formatted, ethically compliant, and sufficiently within the journal's scope to warrant the commitment of reviewer time.

3.2 Screening Criteria

The editorial office will assess each submission against the following criteria during the screening stage:

Criterion	Basis for Assessment
Scope	Does the manuscript fall within the stated scope of the journal and the special issue theme?
Formatting	Does the manuscript conform to the formatting requirements specified in the Manuscript Submission Standards?
Length	Does the manuscript meet the minimum word count of 3,000 words and comply with abstract and keyword requirements?
Language	Is the manuscript written in English of a standard adequate for scholarly review? Non-English quotations must be translated.
Originality	Has the manuscript been submitted to or published in any other venue? All submissions undergo plagiarism screening at this stage.
Blind Compliance	Have author-identifying information, acknowledgements, and tracked changes been removed from the manuscript file?
Extended Paper	Does the manuscript demonstrate sufficient development beyond the conference presentation to meet the Extended Paper Requirements?
Ethical Conduct	Are there any apparent ethical concerns — such as undisclosed conflicts of interest or evidence of research misconduct — visible at this stage?

3.3 Plagiarism Screening

All manuscripts undergo plagiarism screening as a standard component of the initial editorial screening stage. The editorial office uses the journal's established plagiarism detection procedures. Manuscripts that exceed the journal's acceptable similarity threshold, or that show evidence of copied or insufficiently attributed content, will be declined at the screening stage. The editorial office will notify the author of the outcome and, where appropriate, of the basis for the decision.

3.4 Outcomes of the Screening Stage

Following initial editorial screening, a manuscript will be assigned one of the following outcomes:

- Proceed to peer review — the manuscript meets screening criteria and is assigned to independent reviewers.
- Return for revision before review — the manuscript is close to meeting screening criteria but requires minor formatting, structural, or technical correction before it can be reviewed. Authors are given a defined window for resubmission.

- Declined at screening — the manuscript does not meet one or more screening criteria in a manner that cannot be addressed by minor revision. Common grounds include insufficient development beyond the conference paper, significant plagiarism, or material outside the journal's scope. Authors receive notification with the primary basis for the decision.

A screening decision is not an editorial decision on scholarly merit. A manuscript declined at screening may, in principle, be reworked and resubmitted, subject to the special issue submission deadline. The decision does not constitute peer review and is not recorded as a rejection in the editorial peer review record.

3.5 Guest Editor Role at the Screening Stage

Guest Editors are not involved in the initial screening process. Screening is conducted entirely by the editorial office. The Guest Editor will be informed of the total number of manuscripts that have proceeded to peer review once the screening stage is complete, but will not receive information about individual screening outcomes.

4. Stage 2 — Peer Review

4.1 Review Model

All manuscripts that pass the initial screening stage are assigned to double-blind peer review. This means that the identities of reviewers are not disclosed to authors, and the identities of authors are not disclosed to reviewers. This model applies without exception to all submissions, including those where the author's identity may be known to the Guest Editor or to the editorial office through the conference.

Authors must ensure that their submitted manuscript file contains no information that could identify them to a reviewer — including author names, institutional affiliations in the text, acknowledgements, self-citations formatted in a manner that reveals authorship, or metadata in the document file. Manuscripts that are not properly anonymised will be returned for correction before review proceeds.

4.2 Number of Reviewers

Each manuscript submitted to a special issue of *The Criterion* is assigned to three independent peer reviewers, consistent with the journal's standard review policy. Each manuscript submitted to a special issue of *Galaxy* is assigned to two independent peer reviewers. This distinction reflects each journal's established practice and applies to special issue submissions without modification.

4.3 Reviewer Selection

Reviewers are selected by the editorial office on the basis of subject expertise, availability, and the absence of conflicts of interest. The selection process observes the following principles:

- Reviewers must hold appropriate academic qualifications and have a demonstrable scholarly record in the relevant field.
- Reviewers must not have a current or recent co-authorship, supervisory, or close institutional relationship with the submitting author.
- Reviewers must not be members of the conference organising committee or have been directly involved in the conference from which the submission originates.
- Reviewers must not have reviewed the same manuscript in a prior submission to any journal.
- Reviewers must disclose any potential conflict of interest upon receiving the review invitation and must decline the assignment if a conflict exists.

The Guest Editor may recommend reviewers for specific submissions. All recommendations are subject to the conditions above. The editorial office is not obliged to act on any recommendation and may assign reviewers entirely independently of Guest Editor input. Reviewer identities are not disclosed to Guest Editors at any stage.

4.4 Review Criteria

Reviewers are asked to assess manuscripts against the same criteria used for regular journal submissions. The review form used by the journal specifies these criteria. For reference, they include:

Review Criterion	Description
Originality and Contribution	Does the manuscript make a genuine and identifiable contribution to scholarship in its field? Does it advance, complicate, or meaningfully engage with existing research?
Argument and Analysis	Is the central argument clearly articulated and consistently sustained? Is the analytical approach appropriate and rigorously applied?
Engagement with Scholarship	Does the manuscript demonstrate adequate and accurate engagement with relevant existing literature? Is the literature review appropriately current and critically engaged?
Methodology	Where applicable, is the methodological approach clearly described, appropriate to the research question, and applied consistently?
Structure and Organisation	Is the manuscript logically organised? Does the structure support the argument effectively?
Writing Quality	Is the manuscript written to a standard appropriate for publication in an international peer-reviewed journal? This includes clarity, precision, academic register, and command of English.
Citation and Referencing	Are all sources properly cited using MLA 9th Edition? Is the Works Cited list complete and accurate?
Scope Alignment	Is the manuscript appropriately aligned with the scope of the journal and the special issue theme?

4.5 Review Timeline

Reviewers are asked to submit their assessments within twenty-one days of accepting a review assignment. Where a reviewer requires additional time, an extension of up to fourteen days may be granted by the editorial office. Where a reviewer is unable to complete a review within the extended period, the editorial office will seek a replacement reviewer.

The editorial office will communicate expected timelines to the Guest Editor at the commencement of the review stage. Given the time-sensitive nature of special issue publication schedules, reviewers are selected in part on the basis of confirmed availability within the required window.

4.6 Guest Editor Role During Peer Review

During the peer review stage, the Guest Editor's role is limited to the following:

- Responding to specific queries from the editorial office regarding the thematic relevance or conference context of a submission.
- Recommending reviewers when requested to do so by the editorial office.
- Flagging any ethical concerns that come to the Guest Editor's attention to the editorial office.

Guest Editors do not have access to reviewer reports, review assignments, or the review status of individual submissions. They do not participate in the review process in any evaluative capacity. Guest Editors do not evaluate manuscripts independently of the peer review process.

5. Stage 3 — Editorial Decision

5.1 Decision Authority

All editorial decisions are made by the Editor-in-Chief of the relevant journal. No other party — including the Guest Editor, the conference organiser, or the editorial board — holds final decision authority on acceptance or rejection. This applies to every submission regardless of the reviewer recommendations received.

5.2 The Four Decision Categories

Following the completion of peer review, each manuscript receives one of the following four editorial decisions:

Decision	Criteria for Outcome	Required Author Action	Revision Window
Accept	The manuscript meets publication standards in its current form. Minor copy-editing changes may be requested prior to typesetting.	Respond to any copy-editing queries. Return corrected proof within the agreed window.	Proof corrections: 7 days.

Minor Revision	The manuscript is of publishable quality but requires limited revisions — clarification of argument, correction of referencing, or minor structural adjustments — that do not require re-review.	Address all reviewer and editorial comments. Submit a detailed response letter alongside the revised manuscript.	21 days from decision notification.
Major Revision	The manuscript shows scholarly potential but requires substantial development — significant restructuring, additional research, or fundamental revision of argument — before it can be considered for publication. Acceptance is not guaranteed after revision.	Address all reviewer and editorial comments comprehensively. Submit a detailed response letter and a tracked-changes version of the revised manuscript.	45 days from decision notification. Revised manuscript returns to peer review.
Reject	The manuscript does not meet the scholarly standards required for publication, the concerns identified cannot be resolved through revision, or the manuscript is outside the scope of the journal or special issue. A rejection decision is final.	No action required. Authors may seek publication elsewhere.	Not applicable.

5.3 Decision Communication

Editorial decisions are communicated to authors by the editorial office through the journal's official communication system. Decision letters include the full reviewer reports (anonymised) and, where applicable, specific guidance from the editorial office on required revisions.

Guest Editors are not involved in communicating decisions to authors. They are not copied into decision letters. The Guest Editor will receive a summary of decision outcomes for the special issue as a whole once all first-round decisions have been issued, to support their planning of the editorial introduction.

5.4 Special Issue Volume Considerations

The number of papers required to constitute a publishable special issue does not influence editorial decisions. If the number of manuscripts that meet publication standards is insufficient to constitute a full issue, the editorial office will consult with the Guest Editor and the conference organiser on the available options. These may include publishing the accepted papers as a themed cluster within a regular issue, extending the submission invitation to additional presenters, or, in exceptional circumstances, delaying the issue

pending further submissions. Under no circumstances will the acceptance threshold be lowered to achieve a target volume.

The principle that acceptance decisions are made solely on scholarly merit cannot be modified by the needs of the publication schedule. An insufficient number of accepted papers is an editorial outcome, not an editorial failure. It will be managed transparently and in good faith.

6. Stage 4 — Revision and Resubmission

6.1 Responding to Revision Requests

Authors who receive a Minor Revision or Major Revision decision are required to submit a revised manuscript accompanied by a detailed response letter. The response letter must address every point raised by the reviewers and the editorial office, specifying the changes made and, where the author has chosen not to adopt a recommendation, providing a scholarly justification.

Revised manuscripts submitted without a response letter, or with a response letter that does not address the reviewer comments systematically, will be returned to the author before the revision is processed.

6.2 Re-Review of Major Revisions

Manuscripts that received a Major Revision decision are returned to peer review upon resubmission. Where possible, the same reviewers who assessed the original submission will be invited to review the revised version. Where original reviewers are unavailable, the editorial office will assign new independent reviewers. The revised manuscript is assessed against the same criteria as the original submission.

A Major Revision decision does not guarantee acceptance of the revised manuscript. If the revision does not adequately address the concerns identified, the revised manuscript may receive a further Major Revision decision or a Reject decision.

6.3 Minor Revision Handling

Manuscripts that received a Minor Revision decision are assessed by the editorial office upon resubmission. Where the revisions are straightforward, the Editor-in-Chief may confirm acceptance without returning the manuscript to the external reviewers. Where the revisions raise new questions or the extent of change is significant, the manuscript may be returned to one or more reviewers for a further assessment.

6.4 Revision Deadlines

Revision deadlines are as specified in Section 5.2. Authors who require an extension must request this in writing from the editorial office before the deadline passes. Extensions are granted at the editorial office's discretion. Manuscripts not resubmitted by the deadline, without an approved extension, will be treated as withdrawn from the special issue. They will not automatically be considered for subsequent regular issues.

7. Handling Ethical Issues Arising During Review

7.1 Plagiarism and Self-Plagiarism

Where evidence of plagiarism or excessive self-plagiarism is identified after a manuscript has entered the review workflow — whether by a reviewer, the Guest Editor, or the editorial office — the review process will be suspended pending investigation. The editorial office will assess the extent and nature of the similarity and will communicate its findings to the author. Where plagiarism is confirmed, the manuscript will be rejected and the matter recorded in the editorial record. Serious or deliberate plagiarism may result in the author being barred from future submissions.

7.2 Duplicate Submission

Where a manuscript under review is found to be under simultaneous consideration at another journal or to have been published elsewhere in substantially the same form, it will be rejected immediately. The editorial office will notify the Guest Editor that the manuscript has been withdrawn from the special issue for ethical reasons, without disclosing the specific nature of the breach to the author's institution unless the severity of the case warrants it.

7.3 Authorship Disputes

Where a dispute arises regarding the authorship of a submitted manuscript — including questions about undisclosed authors, disputed contributions, or the inclusion of individuals who did not contribute substantively to the work — the editorial office will follow COPE guidelines for authorship disputes. The review process will be suspended until the dispute is resolved. The editorial office will not adjudicate authorship disputes but will require the authors to resolve the matter and provide a clarified authorship statement before review proceeds.

7.4 Reviewer Misconduct

Where the editorial office identifies evidence of reviewer misconduct — including breach of confidentiality, failure to disclose a conflict of interest, or the misappropriation of ideas from a reviewed manuscript — the reviewer will be removed from the review assignment and from the journal's reviewer pool. The manuscript will be assigned to a replacement reviewer. Where reviewer misconduct has materially affected the review process, the editorial office will take such remedial steps as are appropriate, including commissioning additional independent reviews.

8. Final Acceptance and Publication Preparation

8.1 Final Acceptance Confirmation

A manuscript is considered finally accepted only when the Editor-in-Chief has issued a formal written acceptance confirmation to the author. This confirmation is distinct from a

Minor Revision or provisional acceptance; it constitutes the editorial office's definitive commitment to publish the manuscript in the designated special issue. Authors should not make public announcements of acceptance until this confirmation has been received. Authors should not announce acceptance publicly until publication confirmation is issued.

8.2 Copy-Editing and Proofing

Accepted manuscripts undergo copy-editing by the editorial office. The copy-editing process addresses typographical errors, citation formatting, consistency of style, and compliance with journal presentation standards. Copy-editing does not extend to substantive revision of the manuscript's argument, structure, or scholarly content.

Authors will receive a proofread version of their manuscript for review prior to publication. Authors are asked to check proofs carefully and to return any corrections within seven days. At the proof stage, only correction of errors is acceptable. Substantive changes to the manuscript content will not be accommodated at the proof stage except in exceptional circumstances agreed with the Editor-in-Chief.

8.3 DOI Assignment

A DOI (Digital Object Identifier) is assigned to each accepted article upon final publication. DOIs are assigned by the editorial office in accordance with the journal's established procedures. Authors will receive their article's DOI in the publication confirmation.

8.4 Special Issue Compilation

The ordering and presentation of articles within the special issue is determined by the editorial office in consultation with the Guest Editor. The Guest Editor may propose a thematic ordering of accepted papers; the editorial office will consider this recommendation and implement it where practicable. Final decisions on issue structure, including the ordering of articles and the placement of the editorial introduction, rest with the editorial office.

9. Process Summary

The following table provides a consolidated reference summary of the complete special issue review process from submission to publication.

Stage	Phase	Responsible Party	Key Actions	Typical Timeline
1	Submission	Author	Submit via portal; indicate special issue; remove author identifiers.	Ongoing to deadline
2	Initial Screening	Editorial Office	Check scope, format, originality, blind compliance, and extended paper standard. Run plagiarism check.	3–5 working days per submission

3	Reviewer Assignment	Editorial Office	Select and invite independent reviewers. Notify Guest Editor of review commencement.	3–7 working days post-screening
4	Peer Review	Independent Reviewers	Assess manuscript against published criteria. Submit written report and recommendation.	21 days (extendable to 35)
5	Editorial Decision	Editor-in-Chief	Review all reports. Issue Accept, Minor Revision, Major Revision, or Reject decision. Communicate to author.	Within 7 working days of final report received
6a	Minor Revision	Author / Editorial Office	Author revises and submits response letter. Editorial office assesses revision.	Revision due: 21 days. Assessment: 7 working days
6b	Major Revision	Author / Reviewers / EIC	Author revises and submits response letter. Returns to peer review. New decision issued.	Revision due: 45 days. Re-review: 21 days. Decision: 7 working days
7	Final Acceptance	Editorial Office / Author	Final acceptance issued. Copy-editing conducted. Author reviews proof.	Proof turnaround: 7 days
8	Publication	Editorial Office	Issue compiled. DOIs assigned. Special issue published online.	Per agreed publication schedule

10. Appeals

An author who considers that a rejection decision was made on procedural grounds — for example, that a manifest conflict of interest on the part of a reviewer was not identified and managed, or that the review process deviated materially from this protocol — may submit a written appeal to the editorial office within twenty-one days of receiving the decision.

Appeals must be made on procedural or factual grounds and must be supported by specific evidence. Disagreement with the scholarly judgement of reviewers or the Editor-in-Chief does not constitute grounds for appeal.

Appeals are reviewed by a senior member of the editorial board who was not involved in the original decision. The outcome of the appeal is communicated in writing within thirty days of receipt. The outcome of the appeal process is final.

The appeals process exists to protect the integrity of the review record, not to provide a secondary route to publication. An appeal that succeeds on procedural grounds does not

automatically reverse the rejection decision; it may result in the manuscript being submitted to an independent review process.

11. Relationship to Other Programme Documents

This protocol should be read in conjunction with the other governing documents of the RCELL Conference Collaboration Programme. Together, these documents constitute the complete framework for the management of conference-linked special issues:

Document	Relationship to This Protocol
Conference Proposal Template	Establishes the collaboration before this protocol is activated. Quality of conference review process is assessed through the proposal.
Guest Editor Guidelines	Defines the advisory role through which the Guest Editor interacts with this protocol. Authority limits defined there are operationalised here.
Extended Paper Requirements	Specifies the development standard that manuscripts must meet to pass Stage 1 screening under Section 3.2 of this protocol.
Collaboration Agreement	The binding instrument that commits both parties to the process governed by this protocol.
Manuscript Submission Standards	The formatting and length requirements referenced at Sections 3.2 and 4.1 of this protocol.
Publication Ethics Framework	The COPE-aligned ethical standards that underpin Sections 3.3, 4.3, and 7 of this protocol.

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