

A Primer on Peer Review

Peer review is the watchdog of science, guarding the disciplinary gates of knowledge against inaccurate and insignificant information, while identifying and aiding passage for papers with rigorous science and innovation. Peer reviewers receive no compensation beyond an acknowledgement in their curriculum vitae; they conduct their weighty evaluations merely as “part of the ‘citizenship’ and responsibility of being a member of the scientific community” (Balistreri, 2007, p. 107).

Perhaps the volunteer nature of the role is partly to blame for the lack of preparation reviewers receive. Training for peer review usually happens on the job with only cursory instructions from the editor and perhaps a checklist accompanying the manuscript. It is not uncommon, however, for novice and experienced reviewers alike to be confused about their roles and commitment. Researchers studying the peer-review process have failed to identify meaningful predictors of peer-review quality (Callaham & Tercier, 2007; Jefferson, Rudin, Brodney Folse, & Davidoff, 2007). As an editor, however, I am convinced that the watchdog-of-science role is best served by clear communication between the editorial staff and expert referees. The following guidelines provide a primer for novice reviewers and important reminders for those with more experience.

1. Plan Adequate Time for the Review

Rockwell (2005) termed reviewers “journal consultants” who are “obligated to support and encourage publication of work of high quality while appropriately challenging flawed work” (p. 4). Thus, a cursory review can compromise the science. Reviewers are under no obligation to accept every request from the editor; when you’re too busy to do it well, decline the invitation or negotiate an extended due date. Editors understand and appreciate the time commitment involved and will work with you on timing whenever possible.

2. Alert the Editor to Ethical Concerns

Reviewers are obligated to alert the editor to plagiarism, self-plagiarism (Broome, 2004), and even what appears to be unintentional plagiarism (Foster, 2007). Because of the seriousness of a charge of plagiarism, reviewers are usually cautious about suggesting something may be wrong. Alert the editor even if you’re not sure. In Rockwell’s words, remember that “you are the agent of the journal, not the friend of the author” (2005, p. 12). Most journals offer the opportunity to send confidential remarks to the editor, and reviewers may choose to voice ethical concerns in that way rather than in remarks to the author. Few authors deliberately plagiarize, but many commit unintentional errors by failing to cite the source of their ideas. It’s up to the editor to determine if the error is egregious, warranting rejection of the manuscript and possibly notifying the author’s university, or something that can be corrected with proper citation.

Also alert the editor and/or the author to concerns about the ethical conduct of research, quality improvement, and program evaluation studies. This may be as simple as a missing statement about institutional review board (IRB) approval for collection and dissemination of human subjects’ data, or it may involve concerns for ethical conduct despite IRB approval.

3. Accept Responsibility for the Ethics of Peer Review

Acceptance of an invitation to review implies knowledge of and adherence to the ethics of peer review. Comprehensive discussions of peer-review ethics are available elsewhere (e.g., Rockwell, 2005), but three specific ethical concerns deserve mention here. First, immediately disclose any real or potential conflicts of interest, such as knowing the author(s), being from the same institution, possessing financial interests, or having strong biases about the topic or methods. Second, maintain confidentiality. Manuscripts are privileged documents that must be held in confidence

and should not benefit the reviewer in any way. Destroy paper and electronic copies following review to prevent accidental distribution of unpublished ideas. Manuscripts are not to be shared with students or colleagues (Rockwell). Third, ensure you know the journal's policies related to blind review. Construct your feedback to the author so that you remain anonymous. If you wish to contact the author, wait until the article appears in print so that your query is framed from the standpoint of a reader rather than a reviewer.

4. Ensure You Are Clear About the Editor's Expectations

Ideally, editors will clarify which aspects of the article they wish you to focus on, but if you are unclear, don't hesitate to ask. In general, I expect reviewers to consider three specific points. First, focus on the accuracy and significance of the content. Accuracy includes adequate evidence to support the paper's thesis; appropriate methods and interpretation; and consistency across the purpose, methods, and conclusion/implications. Authors' passions for a topic can lead them to overdrive their headlights by writing a conclusion or nursing implications section that overreaches the design and results. Sweeping claims of success are rarely supportable, and review comments are extremely helpful in convincing authors that less dramatic claims are not only publishable but are actually preferable. Accuracy also encompasses clinical credibility. Will this information be useful in clinical practice? Although accuracy is essential, it does not replace significance. An accurate paper is not worthy of publication unless it goes beyond the existing literature.

Second, ensure that feedback to the author is respectful, clear, and constructive. The quality of a review is directly related to the ability to convey respect for the author's scholarship. Anonymity is never license for disrespect. See Pierson (2007) for examples of constructive review comments. The most

constructive feedback provides sufficient detail to ensure clarity about the issues and the suggested solutions. Whenever possible, prioritize your comments so that authors know which suggestions you consider most critical to their revision.

Third, avoid taking on the role of copyeditor. Although some guidelines for reviewers suggest including such details, I find that comments about APA style, missing references, misspelled words, and sentence structure distract from more critical feedback. If it's a minor editorial concern, let it go; editorial staff will work with the author to improve appearance and readability. If, however, the paper is so poorly written that you are unable to fully review the content and significance, it is appropriate to provide authors that feedback and recommend that they seek assistance from a professional editing service before resubmission.

5. Maintain the Courage and Conviction of an Expert and the Open-Mindedness of a Scholar

Reviewers are invited to review because they are experts in the manuscript's specific content and/or methodology. Editors will attest that expert opinions differ more often than not. In fact, it's not unusual to receive peer-review recommendations ranging from "reject" to "accept as is." With the prevalence of electronic submission and review software among major publishers, it's increasingly common for reviewers to receive a notification of the editor's decision and blinded copies of all of the reviews. There are many positive aspects of such feedback, including appropriate acknowledgment of the reviewers' time and expertise, and the ability for reviewers to compare their impressions to those of other experts. It is important, however, to recognize that variation in expert opinion often reflects the state of the science and provides the editor with a preview of how this manuscript would play across the journal's readership. As you read other experts' review comments, avoid the tendency to "regress toward the mean" of those opinions. If you

submitted a thorough and thoughtful review, retain the courage of your original conviction rather than adjust your perspective to agree with the opinions of others. Science is best served when peer review reflects the breadth and depth of the field.

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