

Become a Better Reviewer

Peer review has been an essential element of credible scholarly publication for centuries, providing a way for subject experts to anonymously scrutinize the validity, novelty, and scientific integrity of articles submitted for public dissemination. Through comments and revision, peer review provides an opportunity to identify study limitations and to address them, thereby improving the quality of the final publication. Much has been written about the faults and limitations of peer review with calls for modifications and improvements. Nevertheless, modern peer review remains essentially unchanged for generations with no foreseeable replacement on the horizon. Despite its perceived shortcomings, anonymous peer review remains the benchmark for certifying scientific integrity.

From an author's perspective, peer review can seem to be a hindrance or an inefficient obstacle in the way of publishing. Ideally, authors could receive an instantaneous recommendation for publication from peer reviewers with no requests for revision along with an acceptance letter from the highest-ranking journal in the field. Such outcomes are rare and would unlikely serve the best interests of the authors, the journal, or the scientific community. Most often, decisions take time because reviewers (volunteers and practicing scientists or clinicians themselves) read submissions multiple times, consult recent publications, carefully consider the author's work in the context of the field, and organize constructive review comments and recommendations to the editors and authors. In short, careful and thoughtful reviews require experts in the field who are willing to serve as unpaid volunteers to devote time and effort to cultivating their scientific community. Their reflection and constructive criticism take time dedicated to refining the final article. In the end, the best publications result when both authors and reviewers sincerely commit their time and effort to the peer review process.

HINTS ON HELPFUL PEER REVIEW

The following recommendations can help reviewers provide more helpful reviews. Authors, too, may benefit from considering these points when preparing their work for review and when responding to reviewer recommendations for revision.

1. Be constructive

The most helpful and useful elements of a thoughtful review are actionable comments. When digesting the outcome of peer review, authors wish to know what (if anything) they can do to move their work forward to publication. Specific direction on expectations and acceptable responses to the points identified by the reviewers will help authors to meet the reviewer's standards, for example, additional experiments, a new analysis, different presentation of the data, or clarification of the methods. Identifying problems with the current submission is helpful, but recommended solutions are even better. Make clear your concerns as well as possible solutions. Nevertheless, authors must ultimately accept responsibility for finding satisfactory solutions or provide

reasonable, evidence-based arguments in response to a reviewer's recommendations.

2. Be collegial

Try to approach peer review as an academic discussion among peers who have topical expertise relevant to the subject matter of the submission. Remain strictly focused on identifying the merits and limitations of the work and improving the scientific quality of the submission wherever possible. Resist temptations to be destructive. Although not every manuscript is worthy of publication, attempt to provide a gentle disassembly with your review rather than a demolition. Graceful criticisms that identify shortcomings or limitations in a collegial tone can be both helpful and instructive, especially for junior authors. Anonymity can transform and embolden individuals who may otherwise be very civil and respectful; resist this temptation. Avoid writing anything that you would not say directly to another person. If conflict occurs over legitimate academic differences of opinion or interpretation, be respectful and professional.

3. Be realistic

Review the study before you with an eye toward improving that work whenever possible. Asking authors to conduct a different study or additional studies or provide extensive revisions to their existing work should be justifiable, not merely an exercise to satisfy curiosity. Carefully consider the implications of your recommendations. Will the authors be capable of responding to your concerns? Are you asking them to go back to the design board? Is there value to the research and clinical community if their current study is published? In some cases, authors may be required to start over, for example, if there was no control or comparison group when testing a new clinical intervention.

4. Be prompt

Most reviews can be completed in just a few days. If your reviews take longer than 7 to 10 days, chances are, you are not actively working on them for the majority of that period. Prioritize your review assignments as you wish for others to prioritize your submissions. Nobody likes to have their submission held hostage by a delinquent reviewer who promised to do the work and failed to meet the deadline. Thoughtful peer review takes time, but if you accept an assignment, make sure you can commit the time required to do a good job. Unresponsive reviewers are a source of frustration for both authors and editors. Do not be a part of the problem and, if you are, recognize that before you accept that next assignment. Clear communication with the managing editor to set realistic deadlines and expectations can avoid a lot of hassle for everyone involved in the peer review process.

5. Focus on the science

Reviewers are invited to participate in peer review because of their topical expertise. Reviews that focus on grammar

and editorial priorities or layout and graphics, are probably a missed opportunity. When language and grammar get in the way of the authors message, a simple comment to the editor clearly expressing the level of concern is all that is required. Line-by-line comments on word choice, punctuation, and grammar are a waste of everyone's time. It is an author's responsibility to ensure that his/her work is reader-ready and in final form so that reviewers and editors can focus on the merits of the scientific contribution and not the author's ability to communicate their work.

6. Provide justifiable recommendations

Reviewers are most helpful to editors when they offer recommendations that are justified by specific examples. As a corollary to this statement, reviewers do not make publication decisions; they provide recommendations for editorial decision support. It is not uncommon for editors to receive disparate reviews, with one reviewer praising the work and another condemning it. Adjudicating such a dichotomy can be tricky, and providing clear direction for the authors under these circumstances often requires walking a fine line between conflicting opinions from the reviewers. It is helpful for editors (and ultimately for authors, too) when reviewers make recommendations based on substantive facts. When

reviewers ask authors to make changes to their work, it is best to provide published evidence to support their position. Likewise, when authors respond to reviewers, they should provide substantive support for any counterarguments. This practice can help keep reviews and revisions focused on improving the science and the manuscript as the top priority.



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