Reviewers are at the heart of the *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research* (*PCJ*). If not for their service, the journal quality would be seriously compromised as would its mission to support the educational and professional development of authors. Reviewers provide an expert evaluation for authors and the journal editor. Through this evaluation the authors learn to strengthen their skills as researchers by specifically receiving feedback on the content of their scholarly arguments, the applicability and accuracy of the methods chosen, and the implications of their work. Reviewers also provide important guidance to the journal editor, also a scientist, who may need support from expert colleagues on content and methods. As I close my first year as Editor in Chief of the *Psi Chi Journal*, I am more grateful than ever for the role reviewers play in the scientific community. This guidance document is intended to provide support to reviewers by describing the review process, clarifying expectations, and addressing some common challenges.

**The Review Process**

Each manuscript submitted to *PCJ* is assigned to three peer reviewers. Each reviewer is asked to return an evaluation within four weeks to ensure a timely review process. Three peer reviewers provide evidence of convergence or divergence of opinions on the quality of the scholarship in any given manuscript. When timeliness is compromised the journal editor may choose to move forward with only two peer reviews in addition to her evaluation.

When reviewers are first assigned a manuscript, they are asked to provide a numerical and a narrative review. The initial assignment e-mail contains two attachments: the manuscript submitted and the Reviewer Rating Form. Key questions for reviewers center around impact and quality. Impact is addressed by answering questions such as: Does the manuscript make an original contribution to the literature? What are the implications of the findings for future applications and/or further research? Quality can be assessed with related questions: Are scientific arguments presented in a logical, sequential, and concise manner, citing most current research? Is there theoretical grounding for the variables selected? Are the methods used the most appropriate for the questions/hypotheses presented? Are the analyses carried out without error? Are the conclusions grounded within the scope of the findings (e.g., not overreaching)? Critical to this process, reviewers are also asked to consider the primary author’s developmental level (i.e., undergraduate, graduate, faculty) in making these judgments.

**Reviewer Tasks**

When returning a review, reviewers are asked to return (a) the Reviewer Rating Form, (b) confidential comments to the editor, and (c) comments to authors.

**Reviewer Rating Form**

The *PCJ* Reviewer Rating Form is structured for reviewers to provide ratings in five specific areas on a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranges from 1 (*inadequate*) to 4 (*outstanding*). In this form, reviewers are also asked to provide the editor with a general recommendation for acceptance, revision, or rejection. The five specific areas correspond with sections expected in a scientific manuscript. Each area is considered below.

The **introduction** ratings are: (a) Articulates a clear purpose for the study; (b) Cites literature to support inclusion of all variables of interest; (c)
Cites most relevant literature within each area; and (d) Clearly states hypotheses/research questions. Some key questions in making these ratings are: Did the author clearly state why the study is being conducted? Is the reason supported by previous literature and/or theory? Does this research extend prior research or contribute knowledge to a new area of inquiry?

The methods ratings are: (a) Description of participants; (b) Description of materials/measures; (c) Description of procedures; and (d) Description of research design. Often times reviewers catch omissions of proper descriptions of procedures (i.e., did the author provide sufficient information so that the study can be replicated by simply reading the manuscript?). Reviewers also often note missing information on reliability and validity of measures, and they might challenge authors on reliabilities that are below the accepted standard of .70.

Results ratings are: (a) Concordance of research design to the aims and the problem addressed; (b) Technical quality of statistical analyses (e.g., carried out without apparent error); (c) Statistical analyses suitability to answer question of interest; and (d) Appropriateness of tables or graphs (e.g., only necessary graphs/tables, accurate content). Reviewers evaluate if results truly answer the questions posed at the outset of the study. Of critical importance in this section is the technical quality of the execution and presentation of results, specifically, are the correct analyses carried out?, and is sufficient information included to accurately reflect the results (e.g., did the author state the specific analyses conducted? Are effect sizes reported?)? It is common for authors to miss important details in the results, especially in the tables.

In the discussion, reviewers rate: (a) Conclusions were supported by the data and not over-generalized; (b) Results were integrated with prior findings/theory; and (c) Provided implications for current or future scholarly activities (e.g., research, practice). Discussion sections can be challenging to write. Reviewers guide authors to ensure that the manuscript transcends its specific results without overstating its impact. Authors are tasked with connecting the findings with broader research, practice, and/or theory. In the discussion, reviewers ensure that authors don’t simply review results, but place them in the context of current knowledge with explicitly stated limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Finally, general ratings are provided on: (a) APA Format, (b) Writing style (e.g., grammar, punctuation); and (c) Clarity and succinctness of writing. Scientific writing follows specific rules that are captured in the American Psychological Association (APA) Manual of Style (6th ed.; APA, 2010).

While oftentimes authors have cursory knowledge of APA reference style, they need guidance to attend to other sections of the manual of style. For example, authors can often benefit from being prompted to review and carefully apply the Journal Articles Reporting Standards (JARS) on p. 247 of the APA manual (APA, 2010). JARS specify the content and organization of an empirical manuscript. Authors often need support in shaping their abstracts to be both concise and specific about statistical findings as outlined in 2.07 in the APA manual. And, yes, references are often in need of much repair. Reviewers gently guide authors back to the APA manual (e.g., prompting a review of a section rather than making changes for the author) for them to make necessary changes.

Scientific writing is concise and logical (APA, 2010, sections 3.05–3.11). Scientific writing requires careful attention to bias (APA, 2010, sections 3.12–3.17). Reviewers evaluate the writing itself and provide support for authors to learn how to communicate their research findings. A few examples:

• Authors that write in a manner that places priority on references over content can be guided to shift focus to content (e.g., instead of, “Domenech Rodríguez, Baumann, and Schwartz [2011] found that Latino parents responded well to a culturally adapted intervention;” an author would prioritize content by writing, “There is evidence that Latino parents have strong engagement when an evidence-based intervention is culturally adapted for them [Domenech Rodríguez, Baumann, & Schwartz, 2011].”)

• Authors often forget that subheaders (APA, 2010, segment 3.03) can provide effective transitions across topic areas. Reviewers can prompt authors to use subheaders.

• An introduction can be written as an annotated bibliography rather than a logical narrative. Reviewers might prompt authors to structure the introduction following the logical arguments rather than as a long list of references with brief, un-integrated summaries.
• Tables and Figures might need significant revisions. Authors may need to be prompted to the APA manual, and may also need access to other resources as models for the content and style of tables and figures (e.g., Nicol & Pexman, 2011).

The final portion of the Reviewer Rating Form prompts reviewers to make a recommendation: (a) Accept as is/with minor revisions; (b) Revise, with encouragement to resubmit; or (d) Reject. This recommendation is only documented in the Reviewer Rating Form. The Reviewer Rating Form is only seen by the journal editor and possibly an associate editor. This is a tricky request. Ultimately the journal editor is tasked with emitting a final decision for any submitted manuscript. Authors can be confused by multiple recommendations and even discouraged by one reviewer’s recommendation to “reject” in the context of a “revise and resubmit” decision from the editor. For these reasons, reviewers are asked to provide their recommendation to the editor only in the Reviewer Rating Form or in the section for confidential comments to the editor.

Confidential Comments to the Editor
In this section of the review, reviewers can speak with candor in narrative format. These comments are solely for the PCJ editor. Typically comments to the editor are brief and contextualize the narrative review in some important way. For example, a reviewer may clarify that the positive, upbeat nature of their review was deliberate and for the purpose of stimulating further engagement from the author, but that the reviewer has grave concerns about the suitability of the piece for publication. Another reviewer may clarify for the editor which portions of the manuscript are consonant with his or her expertise and which are not and potentially require further consultation from an expert. Yet another reviewer may state that despite her many and detailed comments, she is extremely enthusiastic about a particular manuscript. Confidential comments to the editor are never shared with authors.

Comments to Authors
Narrative reviews (i.e., “comments to authors”) vary tremendously in length, content, and tenor. Reviewers for the PCJ also have the option of returning comments on the original manuscript, which certainly affects the lengths of narrative reviews. Helpful reviews are well organized, clear and specific, and encouraging.

Organization. Helpful reviews are organized by the major evaluation sections (i.e., introduction, methods, results, discussion, general). Under each heading, independent points are enumerated. Authors are asked to address each reviewer comment when revisions are invited. It makes an author’s (and editor’s) job much easier when recommendations/comments are organized numerically. Serial numeration has the added benefit of giving a unique numerical identifier to each comment.

Helpful reviews utilize a structure that supports the author’s engagement with the review process. For example, beginning their narrative comments with strengths and ending their narrative review on a hopeful note (e.g., acknowledging an interesting idea, a clever methodology, strong write up, excellent effort) can encourage the author to “listen” to what the reviewer is saying in the body of the review.

Clarity and specificity. Helpful reviews provide specific, clear guidance especially in areas where the reviewer has given low ratings. Authors will not know the ratings that they received on the Reviewer Rating Form. However, in order to meet the standard for publication, authors will need to make revisions in areas that address the most significant weaknesses. Helpful reviews provide this guidance. Sometimes reviewers return specific references or resources to assist the authors. These are extremely helpful.

Encouragement. Helpful reviews are encouraging, stressing what authors have done well as much as what they need to improve. Pointing out what the authors have done well will teach them what strengths to build upon and create a nice balance to the needed critical comments. This is nicely addressed in Scott’s (this issue) recommendations for a collegial approach and attention to developmental considerations.

In providing critical feedback, helpful reviews tell authors what to do instead of what not to do. For instance, instead of “avoid passive voice” a reviewer can prompt the author to “use the active voice.” Instead of “the literature review is disorganized,” a reviewer may state: “Please reorganize the literature review to reflect the importance of your variables of interest.” Instead of “you are missing reporting information in your analyses,” try this: “Please add information on effect sizes in your analysis.” Many of us in academia were taught by pointing out the deficiencies in our work; helping authors by stating what to do is a skill that takes
patience and practice to develop.

**Review length and location.** Reviews vary considerably in scope and depth of recommendations. There is no magic number of pages for a review. Typically, reviews are one to two pages in length when there is only a narrative review. Because *PCJ* reviews have the option to provide comments on the manuscript itself, some narrative reviews can be as brief as a sentence (i.e., “see attached comments”). Reviewers who choose to mark-up manuscripts are encouraged to enable settings to mask their review so that tracked changes and comments are present without any reviewer identification (e.g., in the Word menu follow this path: preferences to personal settings to security to privacy options; then click on “remove personal information from this file on save”). Reviews can be as long as four pages, single-spaced.

Some reviewers vary the amount of comments depending on their final recommendation to the editor for acceptance, revision, or rejection. It is important for reviewers to remember that the final decision rests with the editor. As such, the more comments are provided to the author, the more opportunity the author will have to make revisions if they are requested from the editor. A possible exception to this rule occurs when a reviewer identifies a fatal flaw. For example, an author intended to examine the relationship between participant sex and outcomes of a dieting intervention in an experimental study with a treatment and control group. In the process, the researchers neglected to divide participants (n = 40) equally and most men (e.g., all but three) are in the control group, most women (e.g., all but five) in the intervention group. They nonetheless run analyses and conclude that there is a significant sex difference in response to the intervention. If a reviewer uncovers such a flaw, he or she may opt to provide a brief review that focuses on supporting the author’s knowledge of research methods and implementation of experimental interventions and forgo detailed comments about other areas.

**Review Challenges**

There are a great many challenges that reviewers face when approaching the evaluation task. This section is not intended to be exhaustive but rather seeks to address some commonly experienced challenges. Reviewers are encouraged to contact me when they face new or different challenges. As a member of the *PCJ* family, I am available to support, encourage, and trouble-shoot with my colleagues.

Some common challenges are timeliness, expertise, scope or review, and tenor of review.

**Timeliness.** Reviewers are often experts in their field and are quite busy. It is not uncommon for a reviewer to ask for a little extra time. Although rare, it is also possible that new responsibilities (e.g., stepping into a Department Chair role) or unexpected changes (e.g., death in the family) make it impossible for a reviewer to complete an assigned review. In these cases, it is helpful to the editor if the reviewer communicates as early as is feasible. Nonresponsiveness delays the review process unnecessarily and can signal to the editor a lack of interest in continuing to review for the journal. It is important to note that lengthy explanations are not necessary. A simple e-mail informing the editor of the reviewers’ inability to complete the review will suffice (e.g., “I regret to inform you that due to unexpected demands I will not be able to complete my review of ms #xx-xxx. Please re-assign it to another reviewer. I would like to continue to review for the journal.”).

Some reviewers are concerned that if they do not accept a review, they will be removed from the reviewer pool. It is extremely rare for a reviewer to be withdrawn from the reviewer pool without prior communication with the journal editor. As journal editor, I understand that reviewers may not always be available to conduct reviews. For this very reason, the initial review assignment at *Psi Chi Journal* requests confirmation of availability.

**Expertise.** One of reviewers’ greatest assets is their expertise. However, one manuscript can require multiple levels of expertise. Worse yet, manuscript submissions are unpredictable and sometimes there are not sufficient content experts to assign three reviewers to one manuscript, so reviewers are asked to operate outside their area of expertise. It can be embarrassing for a doctoral level reviewer to acknowledge limitations in technical and/or content knowledge. Yet it is impossible to know all content and all methods in a field as diverse as psychology. For that reason, when recruiting new reviewers at *PCJ*, we ask them to identify both content and methodological expertise. If a reviewer is ever uncomfortable with their ability to review, it is critical that he or she notify the editor with this concern. There is no need to expose vulnerabilities in this process, simply communicating “I am afraid this manuscript falls well outside my areas of expertise. I am concerned that I cannot provide a rigorous review” will suffice. In cases where a reviewer is being routinely assigned...
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manuscripts outside of his or her area of expertise, it would be desirable to approach the editor and confirm that the reviewer’s areas of expertise are correctly categorized.

**Scope of review.** Some reviewers worry about what they can and cannot ask of authors. It is not unusual for reviewers to recommend that authors consider further data collection, an alternate study, or different data analyses. All of these are appropriate recommendations; it is most helpful to frame these as such, and not as mandates or conditions for publication.

Other reviewers might enjoy a paper but comment that it “reads like a thesis” or like a “research methods paper” rather than a journal article. This is an excellent comment and one that can be addressed by pointing the author to the Journal Article Reporting Standards (APA, 2010). It is helpful to acknowledge the good work that authors are doing and encourage them for seeking to disseminate research conducted for program requirements. The concern is legitimate and authors can provide specific recommendations for how to transform the writing into a more suitable format.

Finally, some reviewers raise ethical concerns such as the potentially inappropriate use of deception or a lack of acknowledgement of institutional approval for the research. Prompting authors for further information to contextualize these concerns is extremely appropriate and an absolute necessity. A project that is perfectly executed in its conceptualization, methods, analysis, and write-up is still fatally flawed if the appropriate considerations for the protection of human participants were not observed.

**Tenor.** Many reviewers have been trained in an academic context that privileges criticism and competition to encouragement and collaboration. Reviewers often ask for feedback on their reviews, especially noting the purpose of a journal to educate, support, and promote professional development. At PCJ we strive to provide a positive and educative experience to all authors, especially undergraduate students who may be submitting a manuscript for the first time. Following the guidelines provided here (e.g., say what to do, be specific) is a helpful step toward a positive tenor.

Even when a manuscript has a fatal flaw (e.g., a key variable was not measured), a reviewer can provide a narrative that (a) helps the author see the fatal flaw, (b) provides some ideas for how to remedy it in future research, and (c) end with a welcoming message to return to us with future work. Some reviewers may even feel comfortable acknowledging that the scholar is just getting started on a long and arduous developmental journey toward becoming a scientist and specify the ways in which they are on the right track.

**Benefits and Conclusions**

Reviewers are critical members of an evaluative team that ensure the high quality and timely publication of the PCJ and a positive educational experience for PCJ authors. Without their expertise and support, the publication of the journal would not be possible. In exchange for this support, reviewers are members of an academic family that extends far beyond the borders of their institutions. Reviewer status can be included on their curriculum vita and mentioned in promotion and tenure packets as an important service activity. Reviewers also benefit from strengthening their skills as educators in the area of research and publication. Hopefully reviewers’ involvement with the peer-review process in PCJ prepares them to better mentor their own students in the publication process as well as become better able to draft their own scholarly publications.

As the Editor in Chief for *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, I am indebted to reviewers for their commitment to the Journal and for their dedication to the authors.

**References**

