

On the value of being a journal reviewer

Peer-review assessment of manuscripts is generally accepted to be an appropriate way to help the editorial staff of scientific journals to reach informed decisions about which papers to accept for publication. It is also a means by which reviewers can contribute to the effective translation of new ideas into print. Implicit in this statement, however, are two assumptions: first, that editors can recruit skilled reviewers to guide the journals' decision-making efforts; and second, that reviewers will take the time to do a credible job of this unpaid, usually unsung work.

Over the past 15 years I have had the opportunity to work with a number of editors of journals in our broad fields of childhood disability and rehabilitation. From them I have received the distinct impression that finding reviewers, and obtaining timely and helpful reviews, is a perennial challenge. Even people who accept the request to write reviews often have to be reminded many times before they submit their work. This in turn disadvantages authors, who feel that they wait too long for reviews and are too often (in their opinion) rejected on the basis of reviews they judge to be excessively critical or uninformed.

The question might well be asked: why bother to take the time to be a reviewer at all? For most people this role is an add-on to their already full plate of responsibilities as busy practitioners, researchers, and/or author. Of course, it is exactly because people are known in these several roles that they are asked to be peer reviewers in the first place! Although not always identified as such, being a reviewer is a sign of peer acceptance, and is a role that should be better recognized and valued than is typically the case in the academic community.

From this writer's perspective, there are a number of reasons why reviewing for a journal should be considered an activity of great personal value to the reviewer. First, it is an honour and a privilege to be offered the chance to preview the work of our colleagues, and to pass judgment on the relevance and scientific merit of others' efforts.¹ Reviewers are asked to evaluate the quality of the arguments and the data in a manuscript, and then to judge the contribution and relevance of the content to the existing body of knowledge in the field. The expectation is that the reviewer is familiar enough with the literature to be able to provide perspectives on the proposed paper in the context of existing work.

Second, it is a reasonable assumption that work that actually gets published represents the top 20–30% of what is submitted for consideration. Thus, in reviewing new submissions a reviewer has the opportunity to read and consider work that at times may be of significantly lower quality than the journal ultimately publishes. There is considerable educational value in reading and reviewing work that is not appropriate for publication by virtue of methodology, content, findings, or literary style. One's critical faculties may be sharpened considerably by reading work that is less than excellent, in the process identifying how one's own work could be crafted to avoid the problems inherent in such manuscripts.

The corollary of this observation is the challenge of writing reviews that are instructive to authors and helpful to the editor. Whether or not a paper is recommended for acceptance, the tone and quality of a review can make a considerable difference to the authors. Replacing 'sharp' comments and casual dismissals with thoughtful constructive feedback can be very important. Johnson² has provided specific suggestions on ways that reviewers can be helpful to authors. My own practice – now increasingly feasible with online submission and review – is to provide my review comments, questions, and editing suggestions directly into the electronic manuscript using the 'track changes' function available in word-processing software. The 'paper' can then be returned to the authors, providing them with an indication of what issues arose in the reviewer's mind, in which order, in exactly which places in the manuscript, and with some editing suggestions embedded in the manuscript.

What else can be done to address the several challenges identified concerning manuscript review? One recommendation is that reviewers be expected to sign our reviews, a tactic that has been shown to be associated with higher quality and greater civility of tone.³ Journals should annually list their reviewers, to acknowledge formally the role they play in the publication process. Reviewers should be trained, or at least mentored, to become skilled reviewers.^{4,5} (One way this can be done is for reviewers to assign their students the task of preparing written critiques of papers that the mentor is reviewing at the same time, and, by comparing notes, use each experience as an exercise in training future reviewers.) Finally, academic institutions must be challenged to recognize formally, and to value, the role of 'Journal Reviewer' as a form of peer recognition, and as an activity that enables that faculty member to contribute to the translation of knowledge on the international stage.⁶

It is hoped that these few modest proposals will encourage future reviewers to engage in this fascinating and privileged role, to enhance both one's own scholarship, and to contribute to the betterment of the whole field.

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