**FOR PEER REVIEWERS**

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**1. The peer review process**

The peer review process is a key element in ensuring that the editor's decision regarding acceptance or rejection of submissions is objective and well informed. Two, and sometimes three, peer reviewers are usually selected because they have specialist knowledge or expertise in the topic covered in the submission and because the editor has confidence in their judgement and ability to write a constructive report.

Papers submitted to a journal generally pass through an initial sifting process. The editor or assistant editor reads the paper and decides if it is suitable to be sent to peer reviewers. Papers may be rejected at this point because they are clearly not relevant to the journal, because they are so poorly presented or written that the meaning and logic of the discussion is obscured, because the study methods are unquestionably so flawed as to render the findings useless etc. Most editors are fairly generous in the initial sifting process and send papers for review if they think the paper stands a chance of publication.

**2. The aims of peer review**

The primary aims of the peer review process are to:

* maintain quality control
* protect the reputation of the journal
* 'ration' space in as objective and transparent a manner as possible.

A well-managed journal should, however, have additional aims:

* to communicate effectively with peer reviewers and provide reviewers with feedback
* to assist new reviewers to acquire the skills and confidence necessary to produce useful reports.

**3. Responding to a request to review a paper**

Peer reviewing can be a rewarding activity in itself and it can be seen as a mark of professional esteem.

You will normally be approached by letter or email with a request to review a paper. The full paper or an abstract may be attached. The letter will indicate a time scale for completing the review - around three to six weeks is common. It is important to respond quickly to the request especially if you are unable to undertake the review as the editor will have to ask someone else. A mark of a good journal is the speed and efficiency of the review process and you have a part to play in this. If you are unable to review the paper, some journals may ask you to recommend another reviewer. Usually, journals welcome recommendations and are happy for you to pass the paper to a colleague or involve another person in the review. However, it is good practice to keep the editor fully informed and to ask permission to pass on the paper if you are unsure of journal procedures.

**Conflict of interest**

Apart from the fact that you are too busy, not interested, or feel you lack the knowledge to undertake the review, withdrawal may occur because of a conflict of interest. This can arise if, for example, you have a history of debate with the author(s) over conflicting perspectives or interpretations of policy or practice; on the other hand, you may have a close link with the author. For example, it would often be considered inappropriate to act as reviewer for manuscripts emanating from within you own institution, or if you are a member of an appointments panel for a post for which an author has applied. If, for any reason, you feel unable to provide an impartial review, you should discuss the problem with the editor. Some journals aspire to a 'blind' review process whereby authors' names are removed from the paper. In almost all journals, reviewers' names are not passed on to authors. In reality, it is often possible to spot a submission's authorship or institutional base and so the reviewer has a responsibility to consider whether this might affect recommendations to the editor.

**4. Journal guidelines for reviewing journal submissions**

Most journals provide guidelines for reviewers and most ask for confidential comments for the editor as well as comments which can be passed on to the author(s) of the paper.

Standard evaluation forms typically consist of lists of evaluative statements with ratings. Ratings may be simple 'yes' / 'no'; or 'excellent' / 'good' / 'poor'; or a numerical scale etc. Examples of common evaluative statements include:

* The paper contributes to new knowledge.
* The paper's interpretations and conclusions are justified by the evidence presented.
* The aims are clearly presented.
* The methods are clearly described, appropriate and rigorous.
* Ethical issues are acknowledged and discussed.
* Statistical analyses are accurate and appropriate.
* Tables, figures, diagrams are clearly presented, necessary, accurate, easy to understand.
* The findings are accurately and fully reported.
* The writing style is appropriate, grammatical.
* The study limitations or problems are addressed.

You should also check that authors have submitted their papers in the format required by the journal. This may involve the inclusion of an abstract and keywords, restrictions on the number of words used in the paper and referencing style.

Most journals also ask the author(s) to provide a statement declaring that the paper has not been published or submitted elsewhere. Some journals request a statement signed by all authors and may ask authors to declare sources of funding, especially if there may be a conflict of interest (e.g. where the study was funded by the tobacco or alcohol industry). Peer reviewers should check that authors have complied with such requirements. General guidance regarding format, word length and submission procedures are usually found on the journal's website or printed in the journal.

Clearly, the criteria you apply in assessing a submission will vary depending on the type of paper. A research report will be evaluated differently from a literature review or a policy analysis, for example.

**5. Recommendations regarding publication**

Having completed the evaluation, you will generally be presented with a choice of recommendations e.g.

* Accept
* Reject
* Accept with minor revision
* Revise and resubmit

While your recommendation provides a valuable guide for the editor, it is the editor's responsibility to take account of the peer reviews together with any other considerations - such as the importance of the paper in relation to the journal's readership or the available space - and make a final decision.

**6. Writing the review**

Peer reviewers' comments should reflect, elaborate on, and augment the evaluative statements and the final recommendation. Although a good review, however presented, is always welcome, it is helpful to type your comments whenever possible or write very clearly.

The standard forms and evaluative statements provide useful guidelines for issues to consider in the review. However, reviewers should feel free to comment on any aspect of the submission.

You may, for instance, have read very similar papers and recognise the study - perhaps by the same author(s) - and you may want to check on this with the editor or draw attention to similar publications. Many journals are reluctant to publish material which is already in the public domain unless the new submission offers something substantially different. If previously published work is presented as if it is new, there is a duty to inform the editor of the situation. Similarly, if you see or suspect plagiarism or another form of unethical conduct by authors, the editor must be informed (in confidence) of your concerns; in such cases, it is not sufficient to recommend rejection on the grounds of insufficient novelty or addition to existing knowledge.

If you are unsure about some aspect of the paper - the accuracy and appropriateness of the statistics, perhaps - but do not feel competent to comment, mention this in your remarks to the editor. If necessary, the editor can then obtain another opinion.

New reviewers sometimes feel that they must find something critical to say about a submission. Although a 'perfect' submission is rare, do not feel obliged to find fault; if the paper is excellent, say so! Similarly, you might think that there is nothing specific wrong with a submission except that it is extremely boring! Perhaps the writing style needs attention, or the paper adds little to current knowledge or the sample is too small and local to interest a wider readership. Again, tell the editor what you think.

**7. Comments for the authors**

While you can feel free to express reservations, doubts and feelings in confidential remarks to the editor, you should try to provide a constructive evaluative report for the paper author(s). Since most authors will be asked to carry out revisions and a considerable number of authors will have their submissions rejected, the aim is to provide comments and suggestions which will enable authors to improve the submission and possibly publish elsewhere if not in the journal originally selected.

Comments for authors vary enormously from a few words to two or three pages of advice. (Although the latter is uncommon). Some journals always compile a reply which includes both reviewers' and editor's comments in one report - and sometimes this is necessary if reviewer's reports are inappropriate. However, other journals like to forward the reports along with a letter from the editor. As long as comments are relevant, clearly expressed and polite, they are likely to be appreciated.

Try to avoid negative generalisations which are not linked to the text submitted. For instance, one reviewer wrote: 'This paper reads like an undergraduate essay'. Another reviewer returned a paper from a non-English speaker with the comment, 'Until this is written in proper English, I do not think it should be reviewed'. Although such remarks may be warranted, they are not helpful and can not be forwarded to authors. Take the utmost care to comment upon the manuscript that has been submitted and not upon the authors; do not make critical remarks about their capability, competence, or knowledge of the subject.

One important point, is to take account of the author(s)' intentions. It is not helpful to be told that you should have used a control group if you state that, for whatever reason, you decided not to do so! If the author(s) report that the study concerned women's smoking habits, it may not be possible to comply with a request to compare female with male smoking habits….and so on.

**8. Rejecting a submission**

Common reasons for rejecting a paper include:

* Unsound methodology
* Unsound theory, rational or logic
* Failure to add anything new to the knowledge field or to provide new insights
* Faulty interpretation of data or source materials
* Poor quality data
* Badly written or poorly presented work
* Conclusions are not supported by the data.

It is helpful, especially if rejecting a paper, if you can recommend ways in which the submission may be adapted for the journal. For instance, you may feel that a paper is not important enough for a full article but might make a brief research note. A paper rejected as a research article may be more successful as a commentary or viewpoint. You may also be able to recommend a more suitable academic or professional journal. Do note that many journals ask reviewers not to express an opinion in their comments for the authors as to whether or not the submission should be accepted; that is a decision taken by the editor and opinions upon it should be in the confidential comments for the editor.

**9. What happens after the peer review is submitted?**

Submission of your review may not be the end of the story. If you have recommended substantial changes and resubmission of the paper, you may be asked to look at the revised paper when it is returned to the journal. If this happens, you will be required to make a decision regarding the extent to which the author(s) have taken account of peer reviewers' comments and whether the resulting changes have brought the paper up to a publishable standard. Do not expect authors' to comply with all the suggestions made or to agree with and incorporate all the suggested changes! Sometimes reviewers misinterpret data or miss information reported in the original submission and authors are quick to point this out. Sometimes authors simply disagree with some of the reviewers' comments. Many journals ask authors who are resubmitting a paper to include a statement saying how they have addressed reviewers' comments. This is helpful when checking through the new submission.

**10. Feedback to reviewers**

You should expect to receive some feedback regarding your review. Often feedback takes the form of a standard 'thank you' letter and a copy of the reports provided by other peer reviewers. Generally, you are also informed of the final decision regarding acceptance or rejection. If you do not hear from the editor, you can ask for feedback. Good reviewers are a valuable resource and most editors will be very willing to communicate.