

Chapter-34

Characteristics of Good Reviewers and what they should know about reviewing

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Peer Review in scientific writing has a good old history and according to reports it was already being used in 1751 by Royal Society of Edinburgh for the assessment of scientific manuscripts. However, biomedical journals started using it much later. It is important that the Reviewers should not become “*Censors*” or “*inquisitors*” who limit the advancement of knowledge by rejecting research work.”¹

Reviewers or Referees are not expected to reject papers but their comments should guide the authors to improve their manuscripts if possible and guide the editor’s decision. They are not expected to tear apart the papers but must try to offer constructive ideas how to improve the manuscript. If possible, provide them some relevant references on similar studies which the authors would find useful. The reviewers should refrain from concentrating on what the study could show but their focus while reviewing the manuscript should be on what it actually shows. They should not consider the academic stature of the scientist, authors being reviewed.²

While reviewing a paper, one should set aside one’s own scientific biases, aim to improve the paper and also refrain to copy the author’s work to publish their own manuscripts. If possible, do improve the English language, Grammar and even rephrase some sentences if you have time but if the manuscript needs extensive rewriting, do not waste much of your time in improving it. Postdocs are considered as the best reviewers

since they are well versed with literature and politically naïve enough to tell the Truth.

Some aspects on which a reviewer should concentrate are as follows:²

1. Is there any innovation in the study?
2. How does its findings relate to other studies?
3. Are methods appropriate to the questions being addressed in the study?
4. Has the authors done proper literature search and adequately cited relevant references?
5. Is the data valid and supports the conclusions drawn from the study?
6. If you do not have time or the expertize to do a good review, it is much better to decline immediately.
7. Substantiate the critical comments in your review with supporting evidence, references.
8. Those reviewers who opine that the manuscript sent to them for review was not good enough and also fail to offer constructive suggestions to improve the manuscript is the worst thing a Reviewer can do.
9. Respect the author and remember they have put in lot of efforts conducting the study and writing the manuscript.

Start a review by summarizing the design and main findings of the study in the beginning of the evaluation report. Reviewers who evaluate the manuscripts are often considered judges but it is important that they should treat each manuscript as they would their own manuscript to be treated by the reviewers.¹

Some authors feel that some time the goalposts are moved during revision which frustrates them. Make sure that while reviewing do not write anything which would be damaging if their identity is disclosed. You must know your limitations and avoid overestimating your capacity to review papers in different disciplines or multidisciplinary papers. You should know where their expertize lies. Finding good reviewers is an uphill task and the editors are always looking to find this rare commodity.

Some reviewers might think that time spent on reviewing is a wastage but it can have long term benefits. It offers an

excellent opportunity to build relationship with the journals in which they wish to publish their own manuscripts and at times they may help their colleagues get their manuscripts published in these journals. After evaluating the whole manuscript, identify its strength and weaknesses. While preparing the report what you wish to communicate to the authors and the editor will not be exactly the same as they need different feedback.

Those journals which use electronic manuscript management systems require the reviewer to do quantitative and qualitative evaluations apart from giving specific comments for authors and they should be directly addressed to the Editor.

Reviewers have to perform different roles. First they should inform the authors about strength and weaknesses of the manuscript, suggest ways how the study can be improved. Guide the editor whether to accept, reject or send the manuscript to the authors for revision. A good review should not contain anything which will put the editor in a difficult situation.³

Reviewers should be mindful of their conflict of interest and look at the ethical aspects of the study. Make sure that the study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the hospital or Institutional Review Board. Judge whether the manuscript is important, scientifically valid and appropriate for publication in the journal. Those reviewing a manuscript must be expert in that particular subject and capable of generating analytical reviews, offer constructive criticism.

In the evaluation report if possible, the reviewers should specify the page, line number and paragraph. Those who do review with track changes on the manuscript are considered the best as the manuscript with reviewer's comments are sent back to the authors as an attachment while requesting them to revise it. Avoid writing vague comments and tell the authors what exactly you are talking about. "You may be asked to re-review the manuscript once it is revised by the authors. Remember authors are not mind readers and vague comments from reviewers will force them to try it."³

A good review always concludes with concrete suggestions. While writing the report, make sure you have been as objective as possible. It is not only your but the reputation

of the journal for which you are reviewing is at stake. Your objective should be to ensure that bad science does not end up in the literature.

It must also be remembered that being on the Reviewers database of a prestigious journal is both a privilege and a responsibility. The whole Peer Review process is based on Trust and credibility. An elaborate peer review report is just like designing a study and writing an original article. As such it requires the same high standards.

REFERENCES

1. Alfonso F. Editorial. *Neurologia*. 2010;25(9):521-529.
2. Gewin Virginia. Rookie Review. What the novice peer reviewer needs to know before combing through a submission. *Nature*. 2011;478:275-277.
3. Annesley TM. Writing an Effective Manuscript Review: The 6 “Bes to Success. *Clinical Chemistry*. 2013;59(7):1028-1035.

SELECTED READINGS

1. Peer Review in Health Sciences edited by Fiona Godlee and Tom Jefferson. BMJ Books, BMJ Publishing House, London. 1999.

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1. Shaukat Ali Jawaid
Chief Editor,
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