

What Editors Expect of Reviewers

The *Journal* relies heavily on practitioners, educators and scientists to review papers submitted for publication. The journal referee system is an important mechanism for maintaining the quality of the professional and scientific literature. Reviewers can do a better job if they know what editors expect of them. Further, authors and readers of *Journal* articles should be aware of the care that is taken in selecting papers for publication.

Manuscripts are first read by the editors. Some are rejected without further review—for example, papers outside the scope of the *Journal*, or those of only marginal interest to begin with and further disgraced by poor writing. Others are accepted without outside review; these are principally brief reports on practice innovations. If a paper has an obvious deficiency (e.g., a sketchy methodology section in a research report), we may ask the author to revise it before sending it to reviewers. Most of the papers received, however, are sent to outside reviewers directly after staff review. Staff comments are kept on file and sent to the author later with the reviewers' critiques.

Either one or two reviewers are selected, depending upon our degree of knowledge of their qualifications and our confidence in their ability to evaluate the paper in hand. Sometimes it is difficult to find an individual who is qualified to review every aspect of a paper, and two must be chosen of necessity.

If possible, the identification of authors and their work affiliations are removed from a paper before sending it to reviewers. Reviewers' comments are sent anonymously to authors. We believe this reduces bias in the review process and encourages reviewers to give their honest appraisals.

The ideal reviewer is a careful reader and writer who is thoroughly familiar with the standards and requirements of professional-scientific journals. He also should be knowledgeable of the type of work reported in the paper. Reviewers of research reports should be well versed in the scientific method and statistics.

The basic responsibility of a reviewer is to advise us on the merits for publication of the paper in question. If the work is acceptable, the reviewer should comment on its importance and the priority that should be given to its publication. If the paper is not acceptable, the reviewer should tell us why. If the paper can be improved, the reviewer should detail suggested changes.

Here are some general suggestions for reviewers:

1. Be prompt. If you cannot prepare a critique within two weeks, return the paper to the editor immediately and suggest another reviewer.
2. Be objective. Do not succumb to the temptation to be protective of your own work. Editors readily recognize self-serving comments and will discount them accordingly.
3. Be specific. General comments such as, "This paper reflects a poor understanding of the subject and would not add significantly to the literature," without supporting documentation, are of little value to editors. It is time consuming to write a useful critique.
4. Avoid acrimony. Ask yourself, "Would I be willing to sign my name to this critique?"

Following are some questions that reviewers should ask about papers:

1. Does the title serve its purpose? Is it sufficiently descriptive and as succinct as possible?
2. Is the rationale for the study or report stated clearly?
3. Are the literature citations pertinent and, equally important, has only the pertinent literature been cited?
4. Are the study objectives stated clearly, and was the study methodology equipped to handle the objectives?
5. Are key concepts defined adequately so that someone else could repeat the work based on the report?
6. Are data reported clearly and without repetition? Are manipulations of the data correct?
7. Are statistical tests applied and interpreted correctly?
8. Are the conclusions appropriate in view of the study objectives and results?

Although reviewers should comment on faulty writing and organization, they should leave it up to the authors and editors to work out specific changes. Likewise, the editors will scrutinize the paper for conformance to *Journal* style. Because of pressure to publish more papers on a limited number of pages, advice on how manuscripts can be condensed is especially appreciated.

We encourage reviewers to type their critiques rather than noting all comments directly on the manuscript. Comments for the editors only can be placed in a separate cover letter. Reviewers should treat papers in confidence and discuss them only with the editors. Additional practical advice for reviewers is offered elsewhere.^{1,2}

The referee process does add to the lag time in publication. But if reviewers do a good job, the quality added is worth the price.

1. Anon: Review of manuscripts, In Council of Biology Editors: CBE style manual, 3rd ed. American Institute of Biological Sciences, Washington, DC, 1972, p 173-177.

2. Pyke DA: How I referee. *Brit Med J.* 3: 1117-1118 (Nov 6) 1976.

William A. Zellmer