

Best practices for peer reviewers



Table of contents

- 01** Accept only as many peer review assignments as you can do justice to
- 02** Ensure that your review comments are based on a thorough understanding of the manuscript
- 03** Write your comments in a systematic manner
- 04** Write specific and well-reasoned comments
- 05** Do not shy away from pointing out potential ethical problems
- 06** Remember to share positive feedback where relevant
- 07** Use a professional, courteous tone

Introduction

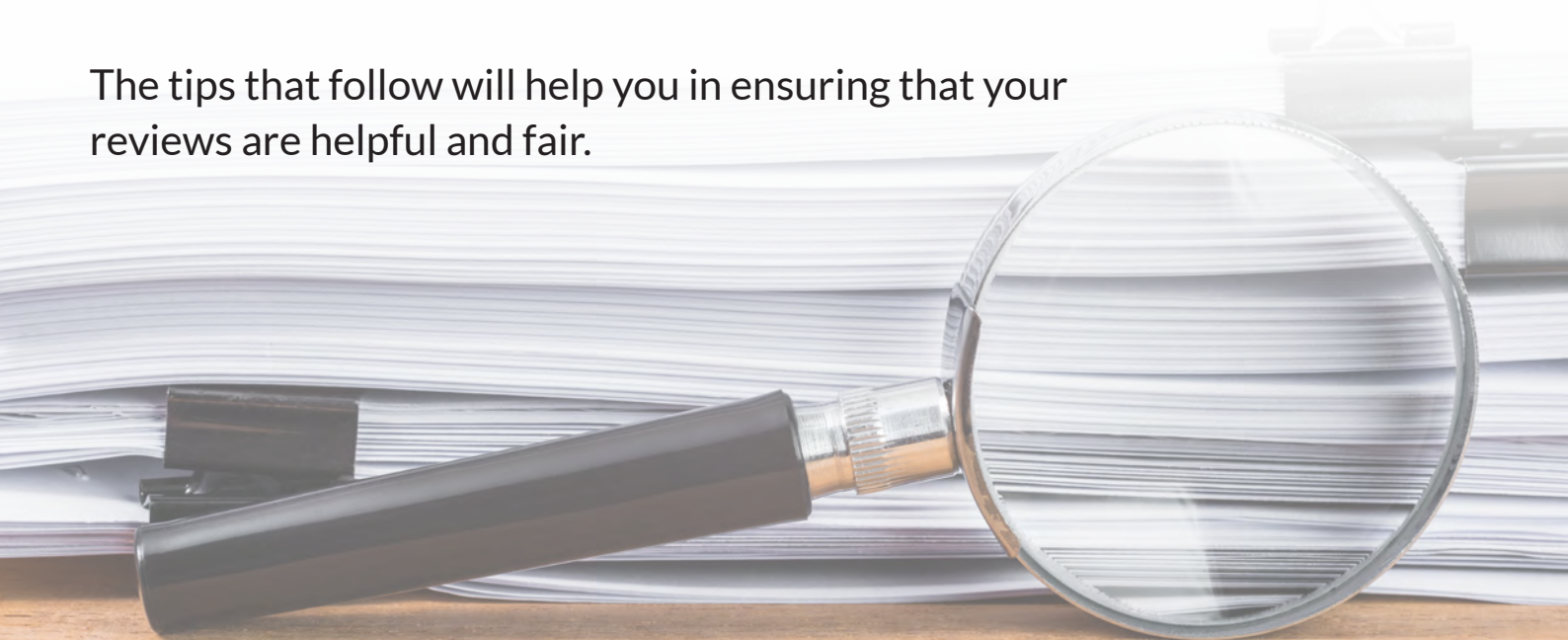
Being a peer reviewer is an honor and a special privilege that allows you to be at the forefront of academic developments. It is a unique recognition that identifies you as not only an expert in your field but also someone who can contribute to better research through fair and critical evaluation and feedback.

The most important purpose of a peer review is of course to recommend to the journal editor whether the article is worthy of being published in the journal. And for this, the journal editor requires a thorough, in-depth evaluation and specific comments that will help him or her in deciding whether to accept a manuscript.

The comments help both the editor and the author understand what will improve the quality of the article, if it needs revision before being accepted, or what it lacks, if it is to be rejected.

Furthermore, there's another aspect that is just as important to consider: the effect that any negative comments have on the morale of researchers.

The tips that follow will help you in ensuring that your reviews are helpful and fair.



01

**Accept only as many
peer review
assignments as you
can do justice to**

Your reviews should demonstrate accountability, integrity, orderliness, and empathy. Reject any peer review invitation if

- You believe you cannot devote enough time to provide detailed, specific, balanced comments and the editor says the review deadline cannot be extended
- If the manuscript is from a subject area that you are not very familiar with and if you believe you cannot provide any valuable comments
- If there are (or if you suspect there are) any conflicts of interest, for example, if you recognize the author as a co-worker from your lab or if the author is related to you

These are ethical obligations of any peer reviewer.

When declining review invitations, do so politely and explain your reasons to journal editors. This will help them consider your expertise and preferences the next time they think of asking you. Always respond to invitations, irrespective of whether you can or cannot accept a review. A lack of response may appear unprofessional or indicate lack of interest in reviewing altogether.

02

Ensure that your review comments are based on a thorough understanding of the manuscript

Incomplete understanding of a manuscript on a peer reviewer's part can make the author receiving the comments question the validity of the review and share negative feedback with the journal editor. To avoid situations like this, read the entire manuscript without skipping any sections, preferably in a single sitting. If you are relatively new to peer reviews, try to go over the manuscript and your assessment more than once. If you feel that you may not have understood the study completely because of poor language quality, mention this in your comments.



03

**Write your
comments in a
systematic manner**



Begin your report by writing an overview based on your impression of the work, whether it will contribute to existing knowledge in the field and will be of interest to the target audience. Then write comments about specific aspects, categorized into major and minor comments.

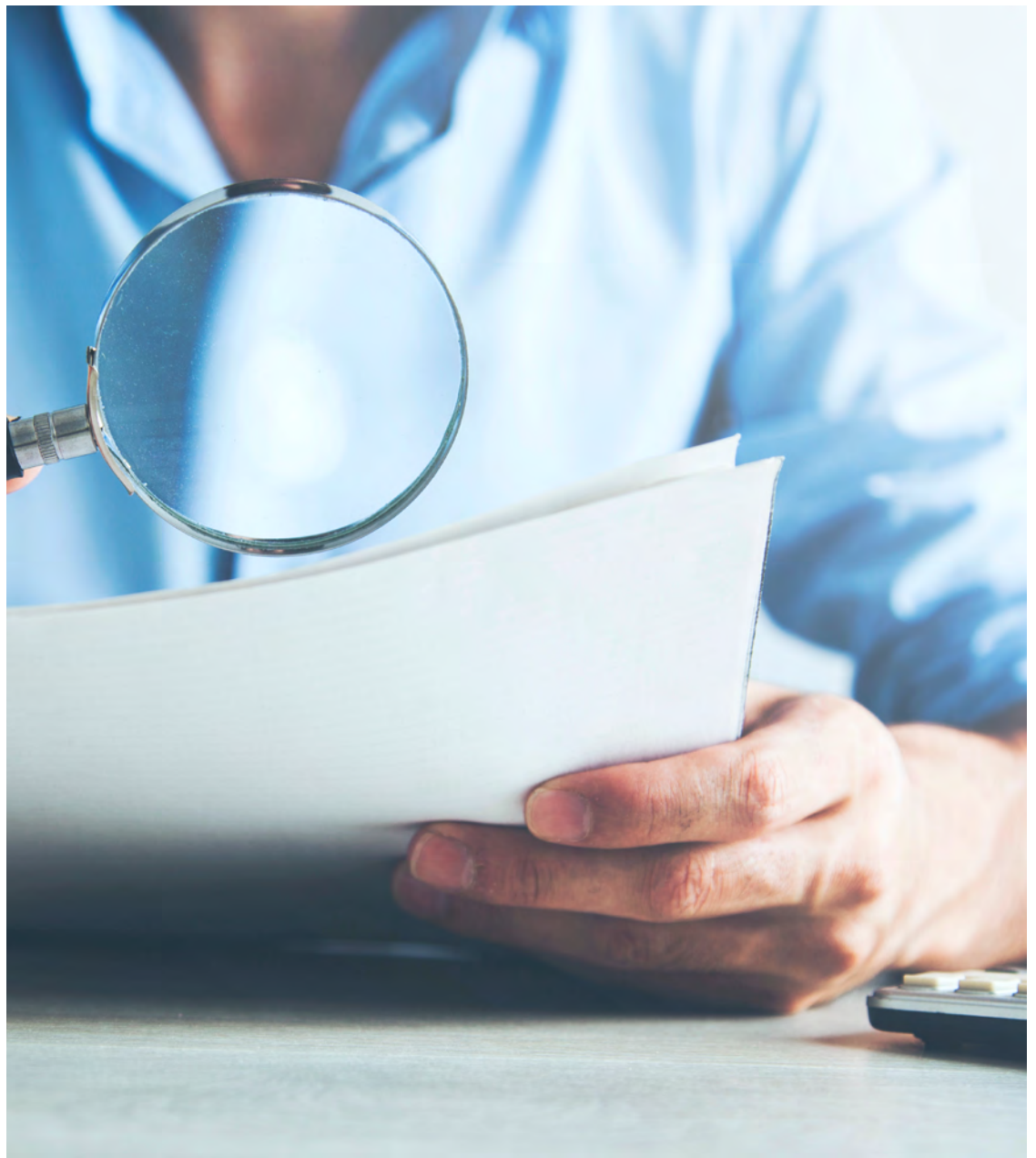
Many journals provide a template or a framework for peer reviewers to record their assessments, and they also offer reviewer guidelines. Adhere to these.

04

Write specific and well-reasoned comments

Just as a good researcher backs up any scientific claims with evidence and thorough logical reasoning, a good reviewer should support any comments on a manuscript with specific reasons.

For example, if you are suggesting a major revision or additional experiments that will involve a lot of effort for the author, explain why you are making this suggestion and, perhaps briefly, recommend how the author could go about it.



05

Do not shy away from pointing out potential ethical problems



If you notice any potential ethical problems—for example, plagiarism—be as clear and specific as you can: point out the exact instances you found problematic and why. You are obliged to do so.

Many journals allow reviewers to share confidential comments meant for just the editor, which are not shared with the author. You can describe any major concerns more freely with the editor through confidential comments. Remember though, that even confidential comments should be written as professionally and objectively as possible.

06

**Remember to
share positive
feedback where
relevant**

Individuals critiquing any type of work sometimes tend to focus a lot more on what is wrong with the work and overlook what is good about it! It's just as important to provide positive feedback where relevant.

This is not to say that you should force yourself to say nice things even if there is nothing much to commend the authors on: that would not be appropriate. But to be fair to the author's research, each aspect—whether positive or negative—should be emphasized to the extent to which it deserves attention and no more.

After all, authors would like to know what they did right too so that they can use that feedback in their future work.



07

**Use a professional,
courteous tone**



Peer review is an effort-intensive, quality-focused task, and sometimes reviewers may lose sight of the human element of this responsibility. A scientific evaluation should be as honest and objective as possible, with only facts as the basis. However, you are also obliged to be empathetic. The person reading your inputs is a human and will feel emotions on reading what you say.

This does not mean that you should sugarcoat negative feedback or compromise scientific integrity in the interest of sparing an author's feelings. But what you should be is thoroughly professional and as helpful as you can be. Here are a few tips on how to do this:

- Avoid writing comments that appear to personally criticize the author or sound accusatory ("the author should have" or "the author should not have"), which can come across as rude. Instead, the criticism should be directed at the text and the ideas.
- Use neutral and not harsh words to offer criticism (for example, never use expressions like "makes no sense," "worthless," or "unpublishable." Exclamation marks

accompanying negative comments indicate strong emotion and should be avoided in professional feedback.

- Not providing explanations adds to the terseness of tone. So, back negative comments with reasons.
- You are likely to be working under several constraints, especially time constraints. So manuscripts of poor quality can take more time and effort than you had anticipated and cause frustration and annoyance. In such cases, never send your comments as soon as you have written them. Take a break and review them once before you submit them to the journal.

Also remember that after the journal editor reviews your comments, he or she might share feedback on how you have worded your criticism and request you to revise it. This will mean more time spent by you. Alternatively, the editor might just decide to neutralize the tone himself/herself before sending the comments to the author. If this happens, it is a disservice to the editor because they expect peer reviewers to be professional and should ideally not have to edit the evaluation.

The best way to get better at peer reviewing manuscripts is to keep doing it and learn from your experiences continuously. Apart from this, you can learn from the reviews you receive for your own manuscripts, go through sample peer review reports available online, and seek peer-reviewer training opportunities.

“How to Become a Peer Reviewer? Basic and Advanced Training” is a structured program available through [Researcher.Life](#), which provides you with a hands-on peer reviewer experience and is a great way to polish your skills.

Happy reviewing!



As peer reviewers, how can you write reviews that are helpful to authors and editors alike?

Make sure your comments are grammatically clear, precise, well-structured, and professional in tone. Editage, with its team of senior language and subject matter experts, offers researchers editing and translation support to help them communicate their thoughts effectively.

Accelerate your publication journey as authors with Editage

- Expert guidance at every step of publication
- Submission-readiness support for improved chances of manuscript acceptance
- Assistance to get published in journals most suited for your manuscript

Editage helps you achieve your publication goals as a researcher by offering support for all the different publication needs you have. Map your way to success with Editage! Work with experts to polish your manuscripts, with guaranteed quality, on-time delivery, and complete data security. **Choose from Editage's publication-focused services today!**





A division of Cactus Communications, Editage was established in April 2002 with an aim to bridge the gap between authors and peer-reviewed journals and accelerate global scientific research communication. Editage is trusted and endorsed by top publishers, journals, and societies across the world, including Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer, Taylor & Francis, PLOS, Hindawi, COPE, BMJ, and OSA.

