

editage

Responsibilities of a peer reviewer toward editors and authors



Table of contents

01 How reviewers
are chosen

02 Qualifications and qualities
of a good reviewer

03 Responsibilities of a
reviewer to the journal

04 Responsibilities of a
reviewer to the author

05 References

Introduction

Editors of scientific journals have for long been considered gatekeepers because they control what is published – and thus enters the body of scientific knowledge – and what is rejected – and thus stays out, awaiting its turn or the chance to become part of the body of knowledge.

However, the real gatekeepers are reviewers, because in most cases editors of journals are guided by the advice and comments of reviewers. If you hope to become a reviewer yourself, this mini handbook offers you some help by discussing your responsibilities as a reviewer—responsibilities not only to journal editors (who invited you to be a reviewer) but also to the authors of the manuscript that you have been invited to review and, in turn, to readers of the journal.



01

How reviewers are chosen

Reviewers are members of that 'invisible college', a network of people working within a defined academic domain or subdiscipline who keep in touch with another either directly or through citing papers published by members of the network.



Some publishers also invite authors to suggest the names of suitable reviewers (and some even allow authors to name those who should not be approached for a review).

Contacts made during conferences are yet another source, because editors of journals are always on the lookout for potential reviewers. And if on reading this mini handbook you think you have what it takes to be a reviewer, by all means write to the editors of appropriate journals expressing your interest (but do not be disappointed if you receive no response).

Membership of professional societies is yet another pool from which reviewers may be chosen, although the best and the most common route to becoming a reviewer is to publish – and to keep publishing – in your field and in a variety of journals and to take every opportunity to present papers at conferences and to participate actively in webinars.

Once you act as a reviewer and carry out your duties promptly, thoroughly, and efficiently, more invitations will come your way. Many journals monitor reviewers' performance, though, which is why you should do your job conscientiously.

02

Qualifications and qualities of a good reviewer

Journal editors are always looking to expand their pool of peer reviewers. Knowledge (evident in the form of published work) of the given domain is an essential qualification, but not the only one.

Reviewers should be objective in evaluating manuscripts even when their contents may contradict established knowledge or assumptions. Reviewers should also have the vision to see the implications of such manuscripts and be willing to set aside their long-held dogmas in face of evidence to the contrary. One account of the difficulties faced by path-breaking, or at least challenging research, in getting published is given in *The Emperor of Scent* (see Part 1, Chapter 4).¹

Good reviewers should also be prompt. Typically, journals allow 2–4 weeks for a review, and reviewers should honor that. In fact, peer review is one stage that most often delays publication.

Most importantly, continue honing your skills as a reviewer. One of the best ways of doing this is learning from experienced peer reviews. **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.



03

Responsibilities of a reviewer to the journal

Peer review increases the credibility and reputation of research as it allows subject field experts to look closely at new research. While playing the role of a peer reviewer, it's important to keep in mind some important responsibilities.

Be prompt

The journal that sends you a manuscript for review will have set out its expectations in the letter of invitation. Many journals also send a checklist. Be prompt in your response, especially if it is negative: if you think that you cannot review the manuscript in time, let the editor know right away and, if possible, suggest another reviewer.

Some journals send review requests with separate links, one for accepting the request and one for declining it, with specific instructions to respond within a specific timeframe. If you accept the invitation, send the review within the allotted time; if you anticipate delays, inform the editor yourself rather than wait for a reminder.

Be thorough

Peer review is not a responsibility to be taken lightly. Remember the biblical phrase “Do unto others as you would like them to do to you”—you are a reviewer one day but you will also be an author another day. Therefore, set aside enough time for review and keep in mind that you will need at least two rounds for a good review: one to understand the paper so that you can mull over it and one to write the review itself.

See how the manuscript fits in with what you know about the subject and whether the topic and the scope of the manuscript are consistent with the journal’s aims and scope. If you detect a serious mismatch, alert the editor right away and ask whether you should yet go ahead with the review, although it is routine for the editorial team to have checked this point before sending out a manuscript for review.

Read the methods section carefully and check whether the results fit in with the methods, that is, whether the methods can validly lead to the reported results. Ascertain whether the methods are adequate and up to date and that the authors have not overlooked standard methods. If applicable, see also the statistical validity of the tests used.

Check the references to see whether they are up to date and relevant. If none of the reference is recent, that can be a cause for concern. Be on the lookout for excessive self-citation, although “self-citation has reduced from over 20% of all references in 1975 to less than 15% by 2017 [and] high-impact journals are more likely to include self-citations to articles from the previous 2 years.”²

Be clear

Convey your recommendations clearly and concisely. Typically, you are expected to say whether the manuscripts should be a) rejected or b) re-submitted for another review after the manuscript has been revised or c) accepted provided the revision has addressed your concerns adequately or d) accepted ‘as is’ and published right away. The last option is recommended only in rare cases but may represent a great opportunity to the journal to be the first to publish a major breakthrough.

04

Responsibilities of a reviewer to the author

The other side of being a peer reviewer is to also remember your responsibilities toward the authors. Whether or not the submission is a good fit for the journal, a reviewer's fresh perspective and constructive feedback can surely help authors improve their work.

Be helpful

Even if you recommend rejection, do suggest another journal if you think the manuscript has some merit. If you are recommending a revision, indicate your concerns clearly and, more important, suggest how the author may address them. For this purpose, indicate how the manuscript should be revised. Do not limit your review to shortcomings or errors: offer praise where it is due.

Be considerate

Moderate your language and be objective. Ensure that the review is limited to the contents of the manuscript and does not extend to personal comments about the author. Although it is your expertise related to the topic of the manuscript that has prompted the invitation from the journal, if you find the presentation poor in terms of language, you could include a general comment to that effect but supplemented with a couple of specific examples.

Be ethical

A manuscript under review is privileged communication, and you are not expected to divulge its content. Respect the confidentiality. Do not discuss the manuscript with your colleagues, students, or anyone else. Even more important, refrain from using that information to further your research until the manuscript is published.

05

References

[1] Burr C. 2004. The Emperor of Scent: a true story of perfume and obsession. New York: Random House. 332 pp.

[2] Gazni A and Didegah F. 2020. Journal self-citations trends in 1975–2017 and the effect on journal impact and article citations. Learned Publishing 34: 233–240



As authors, how can you fulfill your responsibility toward peer reviewers?

Submit a publication-ready manuscript that is technically, grammatically, and structurally sound. Editage, with its team of senior language and subject matter experts, offers authors editing, translation, and publication support to help them achieve their publication goals.

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