

## **GUIDELINES ON GOOD REFEREEING PRACTICE**

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A journal's refereeing system is constructed to be a help to the editor. In broad-spectrum journals, in particular, the editor and the editorial board often do not have the expertise to cover all the subjects the journal publishes. The referees therefore help the editor to judge the scientific soundness, originality and so on of a submitted manuscript. The editor, however, has the final decision on acceptance, revision or rejection of manuscripts. In many cases this is a policy decision; the editor may feel that although the submitted manuscript is qualitatively good, the topic of the study reported in the manuscript falls outside the main profile of the journal. If the editor in such cases decides to decline the manuscript it should be recognized that this decision is aimed at the good of both the author and the journal; the author will have a better impact on a perhaps more specialized readership elsewhere, and the journal will keep to its established scientific profile.

The first step in the refereeing process of a manuscript is, of course, the standard logging-in procedure, giving the manuscript a reference number and acknowledging receipt to the author. Keeping track of the progress of the manuscript throughout the refereeing and revision process is of course essential.

The second step should be an editorial reading of the manuscript. At this stage it may already be evident to the editor or members of the editorial board that the topic is not suitable or the quality of the study is not acceptable. A civil rejection, preferably with a suggestion of which other journals might be approached by the author (e.g. for a narrow study a specialized journal; for a regional study in, say, biology or geography, a regional journal), will save time and work for author, editors and referees.

Journals may choose between having submitted manuscripts judged by either an (extended) editorial board or by external referees. This is a matter of judgement and also of the coverage of the journal. Specialized journals with a narrow coverage may be content with the judgement of an editorial board; the danger in such a case, of course, may lie in inbreeding. It is to be recommended that broad-spectrum journals rely on an extended list of external referees.

For such a list a detailed database of referees and their specialities will be helpful. It is, however, also important for the editor to know how much he or she has recently burdened the referees with manuscripts. The database should therefore include the special competence of the referee, how many times and how recently he/she has been sent a manuscript for refereeing, special remarks on sabbaticals or other commitments that prevent referees from helping out, editorial work in other journals, and so on. Sometimes referees will also want to be asked beforehand if they will be able to read a manuscript.

Referees should be sent a standard referee form and checklist for each manuscript; these should contain pointers to help the editor in his/her judgement of the study/manuscript. If journal policy allows, comments should be invited that go beyond the standard form.

An important point is whether editors/editorial boards should ask their referees to be anonymous or not. This is a matter of policy; it can be said, however, that an increasing number of journals encourage referees to sign their reports; in particular, it is more honest to sign the criticisms if the reports are negative. If the question of concealing (blinding) either the author's or the referee's name comes up, the editor / editorial board must be very careful. Blinding may be very difficult and cases of conflicts of interest, for example, may not always be known.

Should the journal send referees of the same manuscript each other's reports? This is sometimes a question of journal policy, but most often of available editorial time.

The editor / editorial board should take a decision on whether or not to accept appeals. This decision should preferably be published in the journal. Generally it could be said that openness is imperative to scientific progress. No journal should, however, refuse to print corrections or retractions.

The points listed below show the advice an editor may give to a referee when asked how to perform the task of a referee. The editor/editorial board may change this advice; there may be other ideas but the main points remain.

#### Advice for reviewers

1. You (the potential referee) are being asked by a colleague (a peer, the editor), to comment on a study and its presentation, carried out and written by another colleague (another peer, the author). What you are doing is peer review (one colleague to another). You are not a judge; you and the editor are the guardians of publication and ethical standards - but you yourself are not a policeman.
2. Are there reasons why you should not carry out the review? Are you prejudiced or compromised in any way and thus not completely objective? Have you already reviewed the manuscript for another journal and perhaps recommended against its publication? In that case the manuscript should be reviewed by someone else to ensure objectivity. Do you have time to review the manuscript? If not, return it immediately and suggest another reviewer; alternatively ask the editor if you can hand the manuscript over to one of your colleagues.
3. The review is in principle confidential- a correspondence between you and the editor. If the policy of the journal allows, you may waive anonymity. This is recommended by many journals and - especially if your review is negative - it is more honest to give your name. The progress of science does not lie in anonymity: dialogue is a better way. If you start a discussion with the author the editor should know about it.
4. The principle of confidence also implies that you should not in any way use or exploit the material for your own purposes.
5. Decide which parts of the study / manuscript you are competent to comment on and keep to those. Explain the reasons to the editor. Do not say anything about those aspects you cannot evaluate.
6. Regard the manuscript as being written as a first effort by your favourite pupil, or by your co-worker; then it is easy not to be antagonistic, sarcastic, ironic or acidic - be friendly instead. Editors do not like nastiness. Suggest alternatives instead of sneering.

Try always to be fair and constructive - avoid being negative and destructive. Be open-minded to authors working with other methods or following other paradigms than you yourself would have chosen. You have been asked to take the place of a possibly non-existent supervisor - help the author, try to sharpen argument, analysis, interpretation and synthesis. If the study IS problematic, what are the possible positive values? Point out the good ideas and try to help the author to elaborate on them for further work. Remember that if you are only negative the review may be poorly received and the results of the study may be buried forever in the bottom drawer of a desk. Then your review has failed. One or two erroneous sentences might discredit the whole review in the eyes of the (editor and the) author.

7. Try not to let the author's possibly halting command of the English language influence your impression of the quality of the study itself. This is an important point - language may influence your judgement of the manuscript much more than you think. A large part of the world's scientists have English as a second (or third) language. Their message may therefore be difficult to understand. What is more, their response to your critique may be even more difficult to understand, since they might have had linguistic help with the manuscript but possibly not with their letter of response. If you are not sensitive to this point you could add to the chasm already existing in scientific communication. Moreover, the philosophy of scientific presentation might be different from your own. Remember that EU authors (English as a second language) are trained to argue their scientific case, but are not trained, and sometimes lack the vocabulary, to defend their cases in court. Remember also that language and way of presentation can be improved later in the editorial process.

8. Be aware that peer review is seldom a fair process. One of your goals should be to try making it fairer. You should neither overrate manuscripts from your own area of expertise nor belittle manuscripts from other areas. Never tell an author that he/she should have done the study the way you would have chosen to do it. But sometimes, if the situation is retrievable, it may be helpful to tell authors how to do it.

9. Effective reviews might actually help you in your own work, by getting you to look with the same critical eye at your own writing.

10. Do not assume that authors are hiding skeletons in their cupboards, or go out of your way to find suspected major errors behind a smoke-screen of words or statistics. Special attention should be paid to negative results - are they worth publishing in their own right, or are they caused by faulty methods or theory?

11. Remember that the author often knows the subject (at least slightly) better than you do. Be respectful, or even humble, in your review. Allow for simple mistakes (all studies can be criticized for that). How is it that you, who can so easily find faults in other peoples' studies, do not see the errors in your own? Say "I am not all that familiar with the topic" instead of saying "It is highly improbable that the system can work in the way suggested" just to hide your unfamiliarity with the subject. No studies are ideal. There are often possible constraints to the study - do not suggest "The author should repeat the measurements for at least one more year at Point Barrow, Alaska" (or Central Africa, as the case may be). However, the author and yourself are probably experts in the field, while the editor most often is not - help the editor in making the necessary decision.

12. If you suggest that the editor should decline the manuscript try to suggest another journal where the readership might be more receptive (a more specialized journal, perhaps, or a local one). Alternatively, suggest that the author should put the results in another context that might be better suited to the journal chosen for first submission.

13. Do not check whether every citation (reference) is included in the reference list. Authors' accuracy here is notoriously low, and the job is laborious and probably not very productive (it is, anyway, the work of a technical editor). All reference lists contain mistakes. You could point out that textbooks and references in local languages should not be allowed (if that is the journal's practice). If a key reference is omitted or a citation is badly wrong you should of course point this out.

14. General and sweeping statements should be avoided ("The manuscript should be shortened", "This manuscript should be accepted", "Rejection is recommended"). Be specific and give reasons for your views.

15. Keep your review short. Do not digress. Respond rapidly (what kind of reply do you yourself expect?). Read the review through before returning it to the editor. 16. If necessary you could suggest to the editor how the review process of the journal might be improved. Are the instructions for reviewers sufficient? You could also propose to the editor that details about the journal's reviewing practices should be published from time to time. It is important that editors should be able to convince authors that the review process is as fair as it can be, and that the editors should also acknowledge when wrong decisions have been taken. 17. Remember that editors often choose reviewers from their own experience. The scientific community in your field may be large but the number of people chosen as reviewers is much smaller. This places a heavy responsibility on you as a reviewer. If you are also a frequent author in the journal your reviews may influence the editor greatly.