

EDITORIAL

Reviewing Peer Review: The Three Reviewers You Meet at Submission Time

Tongue firmly in cheek, we can talk about three roles that reviewers tend to assume — diviner, goalie, and coach. All reviews are useful to us as editors in some respect, but their contributions are distinct.

The first reviewer category is the diviner. He or she has expertise that the editors usually do not, either in the subject matter or in the methods described in a paper. The diviner arrives at a judgement — “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” (worthy of publication or not) and may be more or less cryptic about the basis for that assessment. The diviner asks three questions: Is this good work? Will it be good for the journal? Will it be good for the discipline? The diviner serves primarily as a counsellor to the editors. At their best, diviners use unique “insider” knowledge of a field. Sometimes this entails making a subjective call about whether a paper’s approach, perspective, or conclusions have merit or are interesting without delving too much into the details of the actual methods or data. (Non-researchers usually contribute to reviews in this way.) Diviners may, with their extensive knowledge of a specialized area of the literature, offer the best hope for journal editors to avoid becoming party to duplicate publication or scientific fraud. However, a careless diviner gives material only the most casual reading before reaching a conclusion and can be dead wrong about the contributions of a paper that takes a fresh look at a phenomenon.

The second role played by many (perhaps most) reviewers is that of goalie, trying to keep poor scholarly work out of the literature and holding high the bar for scientific publication. While diviners tend to get a global “feel” for a paper and make their assessments of suitability from there, goalies tend to be more rule-based in their attempts to keep scholars honest. They scrutinize the text for sound use of research methods, help to ensure that authors follow the conventions of reporting — including the all-important principles of making methods, results, and discussion distinct and providing enough methodological detail to enable readers to determine whether the findings actually speak to the working hypotheses. They’ll also cry foul (and appropriately so) when the discussion does not clearly distinguish conjecture from fact, overstates findings,

or fails to cite relevant work by other scholars. However, critique can be overdone and can even turn nasty.

The third role that reviewers assume is that of coach, helping both the author and the editor to ensure that only the best possible version of a manuscript (including the best science possible) appears in print. The coach offers specific, detailed feedback. Sometimes the coach makes a call that a particular manuscript is playing “out of its league” (the author is either rushing publication or has chosen an unsuitable journal in which to publish his or her work). Short of rewriting the paper, the coach asks pointed questions of the author, which leads to a rephrasing and reframing of the paper’s message. Clearly, coaching demands a great deal of sophistication and skill that may take years to master. One long-time reviewer has described the developmental process of becoming a coach as one of initially writing reviews to impress editors, to relaying the details of papers they would have written had they been in the authors’ shoes, to, ultimately, drafting collegial and focused reviews (Romanelli, 1996). Another scholar has written that reviewers tend to evolve over time, from seeing themselves as gatekeepers, to being participants in a dialogue with authors and editors, to, ultimately, being activists or coaches (Meyer, 1996). Scholars may reserve their critical eye and their time for reviewing the work of students and colleagues they know firsthand (a service to the literature and the profession in and of itself, to be sure). But some scholars take on this role for authors they do not know personally, by serving as blind reviewers.

Making the Most of Peer Review and the Contributions of the Three Extreme Types

A journal’s reputation ultimately hinges on the quality of the work that appears in its pages. Getting a critical mass of “good” submissions to begin with and then having an effective peer-review process that helps sort manuscripts and makes good papers even better are critical to the usefulness of the literature to the discipline and to the profession.

The best reviews succinctly summarize the contribution of a manuscript and immediately help the editor to determine whether it is within one revision/rewrite of being publishable by identifying what exactly needs to be done to make it acceptable. It bears repeating that reviewers are not the final authority on the fate of a paper. For reviewers, this can be either comforting (by easing the pressure) or distressing (by prompting some deeper questions about what the reviewer’s role really is and how much power the reviewer really wields).

A great review makes clear distinctions among issues that are “huge” (intractable and fatal conceptual and methodological flaws that can be

resolved only by redoing the study), “major” (requiring serious revisions, perhaps also involving data re-analysis), “medium-sized” (requiring a rewriting of sections), and “small” (requiring editing, minor additions or deletions). Of some use to editors, nonetheless, are reviews that are brief and short on detail but essentially correct in their judgement.

Along with all of the detailed comments one can make about the components of a research report, an evaluation with supporting data is critical. There are a couple of personal evaluative questions that reviewers should ask themselves: Is this an article I would cite in my own work? Is this an article I would recommend to my colleagues or students, because of either the importance of its findings or the quality of its reporting? A good reviewer will include justifications for his or her answers to such questions. Copious suggestions for line editing are rarely helpful and, if they replace deeper analysis, can be most frustrating for editors and authors alike. In the end, if we are not prepared to be coaches, or have little time to write coaching reviews, some blend of the diviner and goalie roles usually produces reviews that are the most useful for editors.

Evidence-Based Peer Review?

Classic and current research in both the social and the biomedical sciences (Fiske & Fogg, 1990; Godlee & Jefferson, 2003) shows that different reviews of the same paper tend to vary a great deal in terms of their substance and conclusions. An obvious implication is that editors need to synthesize reviewers’ observations and comments along with their own in order to reach decisions about the disposition of papers. Here at *CJNR*, we read reviews very carefully. Certainly we are swayed by uniformly negative or positive reviews from all the reviewers of a specific paper. However, our editorial decisions are based at least partially on our own reading of a manuscript. Sometimes we find ourselves reaching conclusions that differ from those of one or more of the reviewers in terms of a manuscript’s contribution to our editorial mission or the extent to which it can or cannot be salvaged.

Again, detail — as opposed to length — helps both the editors and prospective authors immensely. For authors, broad comments about “unscholarly” or “poorly informed” work are not useful, but comments that, for instance, point to a disconnect between the conceptual frame of a study and the variables actually measured can lead to meaningful revision. Very harsh reviews that mention no positive aspects of a piece of work or that attack the author’s competence or integrity are emotionally hard on authors — and usually require revising at our offices before being sent out. Reviewers and authors alike should be aware that not every comment or suggestion made by a reviewer must be acted upon

but that all feedback provided must be responded to. We are not suggesting aggressive “pushback” on reviewer critiques, but authors should know that if a reasonable argument can be advanced for leaving a particular aspect of a paper alone they are free to say so. As editors, we seek “good faith” efforts to appropriately revise manuscripts in line with reviewer and editor feedback. Collegial suggestions by reviewers increase the odds of collegial responses from authors — and the odds of better papers appearing in print.

Who writes good reviews? In selecting reviewers, the best choices are, at least in theory, authors of published work in the same field or of research that has used similar methodology. The next choices (and we must often turn to them) are well-informed individuals with less personal experience and/or publishing track records (such as graduate trainees, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty). Despite the huge stock we place in peer review, we actually know very little, empirically speaking, about the peer-review process, including reviewer selection (Godlee & Jefferson, 2003). Reviewer experience, methodological training, and past performance are all remarkably weak predictors of the quality of any particular review.

Although we do not know whether formal training and orientation to the reviewer role actually improve review quality, it seems unethical not to at least offer information and tools to orient and focus reviewers. For their part, new reviewers should carefully read the materials they are given about the role and should seek out opportunities to become as well informed as possible about the peer-review process. Experienced reviewers should not feel constrained by the lists of questions about particular formats that we suggest to new reviewers. They can and should feel free to make precise but short evaluations of the highest-order problems they see in a manuscript. Just as seasoned authors should never assume that their work cannot be improved upon, seasoned peer reviewers should never assume that the quality of their reviews cannot benefit from feedback and reflection on the purpose of the review process.

Some Final Thoughts

We receive submissions from scholars at a wide range of stages in their careers. It is a particular source of pride at *CJNR* that we offer a welcoming but challenging platform for nurse scholars making a first submission to the peer-reviewed scientific literature. We also arrange for experienced authors to get interesting and thought-provoking feedback on their work that strengthens their contribution to the literature.

Journals ask a great deal of reviewers in terms of time and intellectual energy. What we offer in return is a mechanism for reviewers to help

control the quality of the process of sharing knowledge and the shaping of the discourse in the field, because journal reviewers have a subtle but unmistakable impact on the discipline.

We tend to let many aspects of peer review drift into the background, because we see reviewing and receiving reviews as an imperfect but inescapable part of life as a scientist. But all of us involved in the process really need to read about, reflect on, talk about, and write about peer review and its successes and shortcomings. This will not only improve the process at individual journals and in nursing as a whole, but also, in the long run, help to create a system that gives us the kinds of reviews we ourselves would want to receive.

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