Writing Quality Peer Reviews of Research Manuscripts

Phillip Ward
The Ohio State University

Kim C. Graber
University of Illinois

Hans van der Mars
Arizona State-Polytechnic Campus

Peer review is an important mechanism for advancing knowledge in a manner deemed as acceptable by the research community. It can also serve the function of providing guidance to an author(s) to improve the likelihood that manuscripts will be accepted in peer reviewed journals. There is, however, little assistance for new or existing reviewers of journals beyond the guidelines for reviewers that some journals provide. Moreover, reviewers seldom, if ever, receive feedback on their reviews that might help them to provide higher quality reviews in the future. In this paper, we provide specific recommendations for drafting quality and constructive peer reviews of manuscripts. While we point to the Journal of Teaching in Physical Education as an example, our focus is on encouraging quality reviews across all journals in our field. We base our recommendations on empirical reports, recommendations of editors that have been published in the research literature, and our own experiences as reviewers. Examples of recommended and not recommended review elements are also provided.

Keywords: manuscript review, reviewing guidelines, reviewing ethics

In recognition of the challenges reviewers face, and in the absence of standardized training for reviewers, this paper was developed at the request of the most recent former Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Teaching in Physical Education (JTPE). In this paper we present guidelines on how to develop and write a high-quality review that may be helpful to both the author(s) and editor(s) so that the final product is the best possible manuscript. Our focus is not about the quality of
the science of an individual manuscript, but rather on how to write a review to best serve the field, the journal, and the author(s). We have drawn on studies that have examined the perspectives of editors and reviewers about the reviewing process. We relied on Internet sites for editors (e.g., Orgtheory.net), professional organizations in the publishing arena (e.g., American Psychological Association, Committee on Publication Ethics, Elsevier) as well as three search engines (ERIC, Psych Info & Medline) to identify resources and articles on this topic. Finally we have drawn on our own experiences as editors and reviewers. Our goal is to support the work of both new and experienced reviewers. We have organized this article beginning with the context of the review process and progressing to a discussion about review procedures. We also address ethical considerations, feedback to the author(s), and the tone of the review. Throughout the article we provide examples of appropriate and inappropriate review elements.

The Context of the Review Process

Peer reviewing is an essential service to a field, its journals, and fellow authors. It is a necessary requirement of the scientific process, representing a shared agreement as to what counts as good scholarship in the various research methodologies, and it is the primary mechanism for judging the quality of scientific research (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Lovejoy, Revebson, & France, 2011; Rojewski & Domenico, 2004). As such, peer review relies on experienced researchers who are willing to submit their manuscripts for review and who share their knowledge by assisting in the process of peer review. This obligation represents a professional service to the field.

Although there are critics of the peer review process (e.g., Koonin, Landweber, & Lipman, 2006; Knudson, Morrow, & Thomas, 2014; Rojewski & Domenico, 2004), peer review remains the essential mechanism for ensuring the quality of published research and advancing knowledge in a particular field. In this context of advancing knowledge, one function of journals is to act as gatekeepers to a field of study (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Fischman, 2014; Ward & Ko 2006). Therefore, peer review serves a critical function in terms of maintaining standards established by an editor or editorial board, and maintaining or improving a journal’s scientific credentials (Benos, Kirk, & Hall, 2003; Lovejoy et al., 2011; Rojewski & Domenico, 2004; Silverman, Kulina, & Phillips, 2014). As such, journal editors rely on quality reviews to assist in their decision-making relative to a manuscript. Good reviews make the task of the editor easier, while poor reviews make the task more challenging.

Most manuscripts that are published in a journal differ from the initial submission as a function of peer review (Spigt & Arts, 2010). Although an author(s) may feel frustration at having to make substantial changes to a manuscript, most recognize that the final product is significantly improved as a result of the review process. The process begins with an initial decision from the editor to move a manuscript forward for review or to reject it outright. If a manuscript moves into the review process, the goal is to provide a critique that results in an improvement of the quality, clarity and preciseness of the manuscript (Benos et al., 2003; Spigt & Arts, 2010). Therefore, scholars who take on the responsibility of serving as a manuscript reviewer must commit time and effort to produce the best possible reviews.
Most journals, including *JTPE*, have an established editorial board comprised of individuals considered to be leading scholars in the field. Review board members typically serve for a fixed period of time (e.g., three years) for one or more terms. Depending on the volume of submitted manuscripts, journal editors also maintain a list of guest reviewers for the purposes of ensuring an adequate pool of expertise and also as a form of providing younger scholars in the field with an opportunity to begin serving in a reviewer capacity. This mechanism enables editors to screen for those with the most potential to eventually become members of the board. Increasingly, journal editors are using reviewers without any affiliation to a formal review board. This is likely a consequence of both the increased volume of submitted research manuscripts and larger number of scholarly outlets. Thus, scholars are increasingly being asked to review for multiple journals, without being affiliated with any of them as a formal review board member.

**Obstacles to Improving Peer Review**

In our examination of the process of peer review we found three noteworthy issues relative to improving how reviewers conduct reviews. They include (a) a frequent lack of formal training in how to review manuscripts, (b) the difficulty of determining the quality of the peer review, and (c) the absence of feedback provided to the reviewer(s) about the quality of the review.

**Lack of Training in Reviewing Research Manuscripts**

With the exception of those who received practice and feedback in the review process from mentors during their graduate education, few reviewers are trained for such an important process (Dodds, 2005; Ward, Parker, Sutherland, & Sinclair, 2011). The most education that many new reviewers receive are the instructions for reviewers that may or may not be published on a journal’s website (e.g., http://journals.humankinetics.com/jtpe). Unfortunately, these instructions typically do not distinguish between a helpful and a poor review (Spigt & Arts, 2010; Lovejoy et al., 2011). As such, they provide little guidance in terms of establishing standards for reviews.

**The Difficulty of Determining the Quality of the Peer Review**

If peer review is designed, in part, to assess the quality, validity or trustworthiness of research procedures, how is the quality and validity of the peer review procedure judged, and by whom? Blind peer review allows a reviewer’s critique of a manuscript to typically hide behind the veil of anonymity. This has the potential for bias in terms of nationality, language, philosophy, methodology, and/or gender (Sense About Science, 2004). In a recent paper, Knudson et al. (2014) discuss issues of bias and note that the level of between-reviewer reliability is not terribly strong. Commenting on the absence of research on this topic, Sonnert (1995) observed, “peer reviewing has largely retained the character of a black box. It does produce quality judgments, but one does not quite know how they come about” (p. 37–38). Moreover, there are cases when a review conducted by one reviewer may not reflect the opinions of other reviewers or the editor of a journal. Thus, it is important to
have multiple reviewers provide feedback about a manuscript. By having at least two reviewers and an editor comment on the quality of a manuscript, the chance of providing the author(s) with valid, trustworthy and high quality feedback is increased.

Absence of Feedback to Reviewers

At best, reviewers can compare their own review to those of their peers if the editorial practice is to share reviews among other reviewers of the same manuscript. Without any form of formal feedback about the quality of the review from the editor, it is difficult for reviewers to know if their reviews were considered helpful and appropriate to the editor. For example, if an editor does not like the quality or tone of a review, a reviewer might not be invited to conduct future reviews (Spigt & Arts, 2010). Fortunately, these cases are the exception. Without feedback, however, from the editor, to a reviewer who was deemed to be particularly harsh, the reviewer may be unaware that the review was considered inappropriate and will likely continue providing similar reviews in the future. Thus, editors play a central role in ensuring the quality of reviews when they provide specific feedback to reviewers about the strengths and weaknesses of the review. It may be useful for this to become more of a common practice.

Review Procedures

After a manuscript is submitted to a journal for review, the editor’s role is to make initial decisions about appropriateness of the content and whether the manuscript meets the standards of the journal. This includes judgments about the quality of the writing, quality of the content (e.g., integrity of the research), as well as formatting and style requirements. Once the editor deems a manuscript acceptable for review, the next decision relates to selecting the most qualified reviewers. As part of ensuring a fair and informed review, editors will attempt to secure reviewers who have expertise in both the specific subject matter and the methodologies used by the manuscript’s author(s). This usually involves locating two to three reviewers. The process of selecting reviewers varies somewhat across research journals. In the case of JTPE, the process begins with an editorial assistant who determines compliance with the manuscript criteria (e.g., abstract, page length, line numbers). The manuscript is subsequently forwarded to an associate editor and coeditor. The associate editors screen for appropriateness and recommend potential reviewers. Based on feedback from an associate editor, the coeditor will reject the manuscript outright or initiate the formal review process.

Once a reviewer accepts the invitation to review, the review process begins. Depending on the journal, reviewers typically have anywhere from four to six weeks to submit their review. When all reviews have been completed and returned, the editor will conduct an evaluation by reading the manuscript and each of the reviews before making an editorial decision to reject or move forward in some capacity. For example, a paper may be deemed unacceptable in present form, but the author may be encouraged to resubmit it after making revisions. Although this decision may sound ominous, a manuscript can still have potential for future publication if revisions can satisfactorily be addressed.
Accepting a Manuscript for Review

Reviewers should not accept an invitation to review a manuscript that they cannot review in the given timeline. Once the invitation is accepted the reviewer is professionally obligated to meet the deadline. Further, reviewers should respond promptly after receiving an invitation to review a manuscript. There is nothing more frustrating to editors than having to wait for a response for a review request because it delays the entire review process and the selection of other reviewers. It may also be helpful to remember that there are one or more authors waiting at the other end of the review process who are concerned about career advancement and disseminating important knowledge as expeditiously as possible.

Know the Expectations of the Journal

Although it may seem obvious, it is important for both the author(s) and reviewers to be familiar with the requirements for a particular journal. Thus, they should read and understand the journal’s guidelines. Some journals, like JTPE, contain separate guidelines for both authors and reviewers on a website (see http://journals.humankinetics.com/jtpe). It also is critical that author and reviewers become familiar with the formatting style requirements of the journal. Many education journals in North America (e.g., JTPE) require authors to follow the style requirements outlined in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012) whereas journals published elsewhere may have different requirements. Finally, it is critical that authors and reviewers become familiar with how references are to be cited and formatted.

Length and Focus of the Review

Some journals will specify the length of a review, but most do not. Based on our analysis of the recommendations that do exist, editors in a variety of fields suggest a range from 1.5 to 4 pages (e.g., Academy of Management, 2014; Drotar, 2009, Orgtheory, 2013). Most suggested 1.5–2 pages, particularly for the initial review. The typical JTPE review is approximately 1–2 pages in length (P. Hodges Kulinna personal communication, December 23, 2014). The length of the review, however, is determined by multiple factors, not the least of which is the quality of the manuscript. Thus, in the absence of specific requirements for review length, reviewers should not be constrained by the above recommendations. For those reviewers who have published in the journal for which they are completing a review, they will have some sense of review length based on their own experiences as authors.

International Submissions

The submission guidelines for some journals may include a directive that nonnative speakers of English should have their manuscript edited before submission. Regardless, the critical task for reviewers is to distinguish between the quality of the writing and the quality of the research. It is perfectly appropriate to suggest to the editor that the grammar used in the paper needs substantial improvement. This is usually done in a section of the review where reviewers can make confidential recommendations to the editor. The above comments notwithstanding, reviewers
should not assume that because the grammar and structure of a manuscript are poor that the author’s first language is not English. Thus, it is inappropriate to state in a review, “English may not be your first language,” but it is appropriate to state, “There were a substantial number of grammatical errors that need to be corrected prior to resubmission.”

Duration of the Review Process

There is little guidance that can be provided in relation to the amount of time that it will take to complete a review. The quality of the manuscript in terms of clarity and conceptualization will likely be the determining factors. A well-designed research study that is clearly and thoughtfully written will require less time than one that has methodological problems, is poorly written, and/or is not well conceptualized. Reviewers may also vary in their review routine. Some may complete multiple reads of a manuscript before making substantive comments, while others may complete one read while simultaneously making specific comments. As reviewers gain experience, the time needed to complete and submit the review will likely decrease.

Based on our experience, journal editors are increasingly shortening the time given to complete a review. A four-week time span is now commonplace. There are several explanations for shortened review periods. First, virtually all journals now use an electronic submission process for the review that makes the management of the review process easier and quicker. Second, journal editors are sensitive to the need to disseminate important research into the field quickly. Third, authors often prefer to publish in journals that move promptly from review and acceptance to publication. Finally, in an effort to expedite the review process, particularly for junior scholars, many journals like JTPE have elected to publish manuscripts online before the manuscript appear in print. Collectively, these contingencies, place additional pressure on reviewers to complete a review in a timely manner.

Communicating With the Editor

In each review there is space for communicating solely with the editor. The guidelines published by Elsevier provide the best summary we were able to locate. Elsevier suggests that reviewers should:

**Highlight Key Elements.** In this section of the review, the reviewer summarizes key elements of the overall review. Commentary should be courteous, constructive, and not include any personal remarks or personal details, including the reviewer’s name.

**Explain Judgments.** Providing insight into any deficiencies in the manuscript is important. Reviewers should explain and support their judgment so that the editors are able to fully understand the reasoning behind the comments. Reviewers should indicate whether the comments are the reviewer’s own opinion or are reflected by the data or other evidence.

**Classify Recommendations.** When reviewers make a recommendation regarding a manuscript, they need to be aware of the categories the journal uses for classifying the results of the review (e.g., accept, accept with major or minor revisions,
unacceptable in present form, reject). A reviewer’s recommendation should only be directed to the editor and should not be visible to the author(s).

**Identify the Required Revision.** Reviewers should clearly and specifically explain recommended revisions and indicate to the editor whether they would be willing to review a revised version of the manuscript.

In addition to the above recommendations, we would add a few suggestions for communicating with the editor. First, avoid raising substantive concerns that have not already been made in the section of the review that will be shared with the author(s). If the concern is a critical reason for a rejection then the author(s) will wonder why this was not mentioned in the review. Second, avoid being misleading or deceptive. For example, do not provide heavy praise in the review to the author(s) and then heavy criticism in the comments to the editor. Although it is always important to provide constructive criticism in a positive manner, it is equally important to communicate similar sentiments to both the author(s) and editors about the quality of the manuscript.

**Ethical Considerations of Peer Reviewing (and Good Manners)**

There are a number of obvious and less obvious ethical issues related to peer reviewing that deserve attention. In this section we discuss the types of ethical issues that can arise when reviewing and provide guidelines and resources for reviewers who are confronted with these issues. It is important to recognize that the ethical standards and rules that govern them are continually evolving and changing (Rockwell, 2005).

**Expertise**

Journal editors are always in need of good reviewers. When a request to review is received reviewers must consider the following: (a) whether they are qualified to conduct the review, and (b) if they have the time to conduct a quality review in a timely manner. In judging whether one is qualified to conduct a review, reviewers should consider their familiarity with both the subject matter and methodology. It is understood that very few perfect matches exist between a reviewer’s expertise and the content or methodology of a manuscript. In cases where there are serious concerns about one’s qualifications to complete a review, it is appropriate to inform the editor as quickly as possible. A brief message to the editor as follows below provides an example of a response:

Dear Dr. (Name of the Editor): Although I have expertise in the literature and the intervention used in this study, I am not an expert in hierarchical linear modeling. I cannot judge the appropriateness of the statistical analysis used by the author. Would you like for me to continue the review with this understanding or to decline the review?

The editor may recommend that the review be completed because the second reviewer has expertise in hierarchical linear modeling.
Below is an example of another case in which a reviewer may wish to express concern about his or her expertise.

Dear Dr. (Name of the Editor): My expertise lies in ethnographic case studies which the author(s) of manuscript #YFR2014 has used. However, I am not familiar with sociolinguistics. I would be happy to learn more about sociolinguistics and still conduct the review if you wish, or at your recommendation I am willing to decline the review.

In this case, the editor may recommend that the review be completed because the reviewer has expertise in the methodology employed in the study and because there are a limited number of experts in sociolinguistics available. The editor may indicate that an external sociolinguistics specialist has been invited to serve as a third reviewer.

The above discussion notwithstanding, reviewers who move beyond their level of knowledge and expertise do not usually serve the review or the journal well and could potentially damage their credibility (Moher & Jadad, 2003; Rockwell, 2005; Spigt & Arts, 2010). Thus, it is essential for reviewers to be honest with the editor about their scholarly abilities. If a review invitation is declined, for whatever reason (e.g., availability, expertise), a reviewer should consider calling or sending an e-mail to the editor to suggest an alternative reviewer with expertise in the area.

In all cases, reviewers should respond quickly to the invitation.

Although journal editors approach the invitation to review process in different ways, in the case of JTPE, reviewers are forwarded an e-mail invitation to review along with the manuscript abstract. Invited reviewers should immediately skim the submission and make a decision about whether to accept or decline the invitation to review. Not responding promptly reflects a strong lack of professionalism. If an invited reviewer agrees to serve, a follow-up e-mail provides a code and a hyperlink for accessing the online review system on Manuscript Central.

Conflicts of Interest

There are instances when a reviewer will feel obligated to decline an invitation to review because of a conflict of interest. Such decisions are judgment calls. A reviewer can assess conflict of interest by determining if completing the review:

(a) would or could compromise his/her objectivity and judgment, (b) would or could appear to compromise his/her objectivity and judgment, and therefore compromise the value of the review, or (c) would or could appear to compromise his/her objectivity and might place his/her reputation at risk if this conflict were discovered and questioned after the review. (Rockwell, 2005, p. 6).

Despite the blind review process, there are occasions when a conflict of interest arises because a reviewer may believe he/she knows the author(s) of a manuscript. Conflicts of interest arise if a reviewer:

• is a coauthor on the manuscript (sometimes coauthors are selected accidently by editors),
• has advised in some capacity on the manuscript,
• is in the same department as the author(s) of the paper,
• has an existing close collaborative relationship with the author(s), such as recently coauthoring a paper on the same topic, coauthoring a book, or previously serving in the role of mentor to the author (ongoing collaborations among reviewers and authors raise real and perceived conflicts of interest [Rockwell, 2005]),
• may benefit or has benefited financially from the work (e.g., as a consultant or as a coauthor of a book, curriculum, or technology),
• holds a strong belief that would compromise the objectivity of a review, or
• has a personal or professional conflict with the author(s) of a manuscript.

The above examples are generally accepted ethical conditions under which a reviewer should decline an invitation to review a manuscript.

There may be circumstances in which a reviewer will contact an editor to seek permission to exceed the normal bounds of the review process. For example, a reviewer may ask for permission to seek the advice of an expert to assist in the interpretation of a manuscript (e.g., statistical or design advice). A reviewer may also request permission to share the manuscript with doctoral candidates for the purposes of training them about the review process. In these cases, permission would be sought to maintain the integrity of review process and avoid any perception of ethical violations related to sharing the manuscript with others.

In addition to maintaining confidentiality, reviewers cannot use the contents of a manuscript under review to advance their own research agenda or financial interests. Manuscripts are the property of the author(s) until a copyright agreement between the author(s) and the publisher has been signed. If the journal requires anonymity of reviewers this should be respected and maintained (i.e., do not sign the review with your name). There are a number of varied opinions on this principle and the default guideline is the journal policy. Finally, reviewers should always contact the editor if they suspect plagiarism or fabricated data in published or unpublished manuscripts. The Committee on Publication Ethics has created flow charts for describing the procedures for such events (http://publicationethics.org).

Additional resources for ethical conduct can be found in the bibliographic list at the end of this article. We end this ethics section with the following advice: Know the journal guidelines, and, if in doubt regarding an ethical situation, ask the editor.

Feedback to Authors

Feedback is the core of the review process, and in this section we provide recommendations designed to strengthen a manuscript under review. The task of the reviewer is to provide an honest, critical assessment of the manuscript. Good reviews will aid the editor in making a decision on the manuscript and help the author(s) improve the submission. Poor reviews, particularly those that are unduly harsh or incomplete, will increase the work of the editor and are unlikely to be helpful to the author(s). Moreover, reviews conveying a negative tone may not only offend the author(s), they may damage the credibility of the journal.
Begin With a Summary Paragraph

Reviewers should bear in mind that the audience for the review includes both the author(s) and the editor. Beginning a review with a summary of the reviewer’s interpretation of the manuscript is a good way to: (a) provide the editor with an overview of the paper, and (b) provide the author(s) with a sense of the perspective relative to the manuscript. A good opening paragraph can include a contextual statement that situates the study within the literature and highlights for the editor and the author(s) the reviewers’ perspective on the quality of the manuscript. Consider these two versions of an opening paragraph:

**Version 1**

The authors conducted a study in three sites, each with two teachers and four classes for a total $n$ of 430 students. They used direct observation to record the level of moderate to vigorous physical activity both during physical education and in after school care settings. They randomized classes, and employed a nested design using student, class, and sites as a unit of analysis. The intervention was comprised of daily self-reports on iPods and occurred for 20 days at each site. In all, this was a well-written study with few grammatical errors. It met APA style requirements. One additional suggestion is to revise the title because it contains a confusing reference to play.

**Version 2**

I think this is a socially important topic. There is equivocal research on the effects of out-of-school physical activity being influenced by physical education. This study contributes to our understanding of the role that a physical education teacher may have in fostering out-of-school physical activity. There are several features of this study that are its strengths, including the use of direct observation measures of physical activity in the physical education and after school setting; the randomization of classes; and the use of a nested design using student, class, and sites as a unit of analysis. I particularly liked the connection made between self-report and direct observation – something that is all too infrequent. There are also a number of issues that could strengthen this paper for readers including a more precise discussion in the introduction of the ecological model in the context of this study, clarification of the sampling procedures, and more elaboration in the discussion regarding the issues with procedural fidelity. I’d like you to consider some additional limitations of this study in addition to the two you have listed.

The first version is not particularly useful for the following reasons. First, it is a summary of the abstract and neither the editor nor the author(s) need this information—both will already be familiar with the manuscript. Second, it is descriptive rather than representing an analytical critique. There is little from the text content that would indicate judgments relative to quality of the manuscript. The second version helps the editor and author(s) immediately obtain a sense of how the reviewer interpreted the quality of the manuscript in terms of both social significance and design. It also highlights that the main issues in the manuscript are fixable rather than unchangeable (e.g., design flaws).
Prioritize and Focus on the Main Issues

If the reviewer recommendation is to reject a manuscript, then the focus of the feedback should be specifically on the larger issues associated with the decision, and less attention should be paid to minor issues like formatting errors (Orgtheory.net, 2013, Spigt & Arts, 2010). It is important to prioritize feedback by distinguishing between the major and minor issues. There are two common ways to do this. One is to follow the opening paragraph(s) with detailed points; the other is to address both major and minor issues in the context of the organization of the paper (introduction, review of literature, methodology, and so forth). In either case, what is important is that the review informs both the editor and author(s) about any existing concerns. In deciding what to address, focus on the major issues, particularly in first round reviews. More minor points can be addressed during subsequent reviews.

Be Specific

In the initial and more general synopsis of the review, refer to the sections of the manuscript (e.g., introduction, methodology, data analysis) when making comments. In the part of the review where specific comments are provided, always indicate the page and line numbers being referenced. In most journals, these will already be included by the author(s) of the manuscript based on formatting requirements. This pinpointing helps the editor and author(s) to know precisely where a concern exists in the manuscript. Follow this with a precise statement of the concern. For example,

- Page 12, Lines 245–247: Provide a reference for this statement.
- Page 17, Line 378: Please clarify the point you are attempting to make.
- In the sentence beginning on line 127 could you . . .
- In the second paragraph on page 7, I think you are describing face validity, not content validity.
- In the introduction you briefly discuss. . . . Could you elaborate more on this by specifically talking about . . .

Provide “Action-able” Recommendations

Statements such as “No information is provided on recruitment”, “I don’t like your definitions in the introduction of your key concepts”, or “Your use of MANOVAs was inappropriate” are not particularly useful because they are not always action-able or helpful. In contrast, the following examples require specific responses:

- Page 7, Line 145: Please describe how your participants were recruited.
- Page 10, Line 220: Please include the effect size.
- Page 24, Line 543: Provide a definition of what you mean by “interpretative variance.”
- Page 24, Line 555: How were the data triangulated?
- Page 25, Line 252: Given the number of participants and the many variables included, the use of MANOVAs is problematic. A more appropriate analytic approach may be to use mixed-model or multilevel regression modeling.
Why Should This Paper Be Published?

Avoid only identifying the weaknesses of a manuscript. It is equally important to recognize those elements that are strong. Too often reviews aggressively critique a manuscript without regard to its strengths or the feelings of the author(s) who will be receiving the review. Many reviews contain few positive statements beyond those that are addressed in the opening paragraph. The review should highlight for the editor and the author(s) why a manuscript should or should not be published. In doing so consider the most important criteria are (a) how the manuscript contributes to the literature and extends knowledge/understanding, particularly in relation to its potential impact on future research and/or professional practice, (b) what is novel or unique in the methods or conceptualization, and (c) what makes the finding(s) publishable. When we examined comments from editors about what makes a good review, we routinely read, “The best reviewers look for what makes the paper valuable or interesting” (Orgtheory.net, 2013).

Although a reviewer may provide some editorial and writing style suggestions for changes, a reviewer’s task is not and should not be to edit the grammar and to correct the writing style of the manuscript. Editors and copy editors are charged with this task. Reviewers should alert the author(s) and editor to the main areas of concern regarding format and writing-related issues (e.g., grammar, flow, and organization).

Tone of the Review

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2014) defines tone as, “a quality, feeling, or attitude expressed by the words that someone uses in speaking or writing.” Tone can convey respect, support, differences of opinion, and firm critique, but it can also convey condescension and be malicious. A negative tone in a manuscript review does not serve the journal, editor, author(s), or the reviewer well in any way. The editor must sort through negative comments, some of which may provide little helpful advice, to make sense of their validity. In addition, the editor must worry about how the review will be interpreted by the author(s). The author(s) may feel disparaged even if the manuscript is accepted for publication. Moreover, it may impact the author(s’) perception of the journal and its editors. A review that is negative in tone also has implications for the reviewer who may not be invited to review again for that journal. If the editor is contacted by editors of other journals for reviewer recommendations, those reviewers who are consistently negative in tone will not receive a positive recommendation.

Be Polite and Respectful

Reviewers should treat their peers as equals. Whether the author is a novice or experienced scholar, no author is helped by comments such as, “This is a very poorly designed study,” “A more experienced researcher would not have…,” “You haven’t read the literature,” “This was not a particularly good effort,” or “This manuscript should never have been submitted.” Such statements are not helpful because they convey disrespect and because the tone may overshadow other valuable comments the reviewer is providing.
Reviews are not the time or place for reviewers to demonstrate their own experience or knowledge of the topic relative to the author(s). The fact that someone is invited to review a particular paper generally implies that the reviewer does, in fact, have the necessary background and expertise to render a fair and honest critique of the work. Thus, there is no need to remind the author(s) about this. Furthermore, some authors are junior scholars who are attempting to publish for the first time. Serving as a reviewer offers an opportunity to educate, not discourage, the next generation of scholars.

Reviewers need to use tactful direct, ways to share concerns and criticisms. Some examples are:

*Not this*: The introduction is nonsensical.

*This*: The introduction requires a rewrite with a more focused development leading to your research questions (provide specific directions). Please consider the following as one option . . . (provide an example).


*This*: I would like to argue that you did not use the correct unit of analysis. Class should be used in these analyses, not students. Your n is really 1 per condition. As such, you should not run statistics on these data because you cannot rule out class effects. For a more complete explanation of this position see: Silverman, S., & Solmon, M. (1998). The unit of analysis in field research: Issues and approaches to design and data analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 17*, 270-284. That said, inferential statistics are not really useful here in any case. You have no statistical power, and, thus, no ability to generalize. However, you do have internal validity—which is really what your research is designed to show and this can be represented by effect size or just the means. And that would be a good contribution to the literature. As such, I would strongly recommend that you remove the statistics and go with some bar charts to present your data as means overall, by gender and by ability.

As we noted earlier, the review process is fundamentally a gatekeeping process. However, it also serves an educative function, and poorly conceived negative reviews that are too general do not help the author(s).

**Avoid Bias**

Bias is inherent to the entire review process, and the goal should be to minimize bias. There are occasions when a reviewer has a personal bias for or against a particular type of methodology, study design, approach to data analysis, or research topic. For example, reviewers who must judge a study’s methodological strength, and whose research roots/expertise are in the quantitative domain may believe that all studies must be generalizable (i.e., findings from a study would apply to a larger population). Consequently, they may have little regard for authors’ work in the qualitative domain in which reference is made to transferability (i.e., the degree to
which the reader, rather than the researcher determines the extent to which findings apply to similar settings). Naturally, such bias is also possible in the other direction. Biases such as these are not unique and are even expected within the research community. In such cases, an editor should, at all cost, avoid forwarding a manuscript to a reviewer with a known bias against a particular type of research to ensure a fair and less-biased review. There will, however, be instances when the editor is not aware of a bias, and it is incumbent on the reviewer to inform the editor that he or she may be unable to conduct a fair review of the manuscript. There also may be instances when an editor needs to forward the manuscript to someone who might have a particular bias because other reviewers are unavailable or because that reviewer has important knowledge about another aspect of the manuscript that is needed. If this is the case, it would be appropriate for the reviewer to address bias in the "comments to the editor" section of the review and to attempt to be as unbiased as possible when conducting the review.

Make the Review Scholarly, but Conversational

A review should be a conversation with the author(s). Therefore, it is appropriate to address the author(s) directly. For example, a review can be personalized by writing in first person text. Instead of stating, “The authors should consider,” you may wish to state, “I think you may wish to consider.” Thus, a review is much like a personal letter to the author(s) of a manuscript.

Respect the Author’s Position

When conducting a review, it is important to remember that your research perspectives may be different than those of the author(s). It is appropriate to acknowledge differences, but only in a respectful and helpful manner. Diane Burton, senior editor of Organization Science succinctly describes this important reviewer perspective:

Good reviews take the manuscript seriously and attempt to meet the author(s) in the place where they are speaking from. Reviews that suggest the author(s) ask a different question, address a different literature, or collect different data are not particularly helpful to anyone. While it is certainly appropriate to suggest literature that may have been omitted, be respectful of the disciplinary orientation that the author(s) starts with. (orgtheory.net, 2013)

Conclusion

Very few reviewers have received formal training in the context of completing a blind peer review for publication. Most reviewers have learned the process through practice and from good coaching of those editors who take the time to provide constructive feedback about the quality of the review (both positive and corrective). Like most everything else in life, reviewing manuscripts for publication encompasses a set of skills that require practice and patience. In our experience, the skills of reviewers improve with practice, and there is supportive evidence in the literature (Benos et al., 2003).
Ultimately, the review process is advisory to the scientific process, and the “audience variable” comes into play. That is, once in print, readers can and will form their own opinions about the quality of a manuscript and will cite or ignore the findings. Therefore, it is the responsibility of editors and reviewers to ensure that published manuscripts are of the highest quality, useful to the readership, and reflect positively on the author(s).

Note

1. Web resources used for this article:
   - Academy of Management: http://aom.org/Publications/AMJ/Reviewer-Resources.aspx
   - Committee on Publication Ethics: http://publicationethics.org/resources.
   - Elsevier reviewer guidelines: http://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/reviewer-guidelines
   - Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Science: http://www.onlineethics.org/cms/research/modindex/publ.aspx

References


