

Reviewer's Etiquette

Carole Bland, Addeane Caellegh, and Ann Steinecke

ABSTRACT

The authors offer criteria for a reviewer's conduct that are unrelated to the substantive review of the manuscript but essential to aid in the smooth-flowing and ethical operation of a journal's peer review system. The issues dis-

cussed are confidentiality, timeliness and expertise, collegiality, plagiarism and intellectual property, reporting conflict of interest, and bias.
Acad. Med. 2001;76:954-955.

REVIEWER'S CRITERIA

- The reviewer maintains confidentiality about the existence of and substance of the manuscript.
- The reviewer reviews manuscripts in his or her area of expertise only and only those that can be completed on time.
- The reviewer presents review in a collegial, constructive manner.
- The reviewer does not participate in plagiarism.
- The reviewer discloses, avoids, or appropriately manages conflicts of interests.
- The reviewer avoids biases that influence a scientific basis for review.

ISSUES AND EXAMPLES RELATED TO CRITERIA

It is a great treat and privilege to read cutting-edge work reported in manuscripts sent to journals. By serving as a reviewer for a scholarly journal, the reviewer performs a service to the academic community. And, by agreeing to review, the reviewers are also accepting certain responsibilities for their own conduct with regard to the journal's review procedures and the treatment of each article being reviewed. Moreover, they are accepting a collegial relationship with the articles' authors.

Confidentiality

It is important for reviewers to remember that they have been given a confidential document. A reviewer should not contact an author(s). Also, it is not appropriate to share the manuscript with or discuss it in detail with others, or even reveal the "existence" of a submission, before publication.

There are some exceptions, if they are first approved by the editor. One is that a reviewer may want a junior colleague to have the experience of reviewing and therefore ask him or her to collaborate on a review. The colleague does the first review, followed by the designated reviewer's finalizing and sign-off. Or a reviewer may not have time to conduct the review or may know of a colleague who is a better match for the review. If the editor approves, it would be appropriate to forward the manuscript to such a colleague.

Journals typically have policies about whether the reviewer is to destroy a manuscript after review or return it to the editor. It is not appropriate to make a copy of the manuscript, or to use it in a journal club or as a teaching tool.

Accepting an Article for Review

Critically reviewing an article takes time. So, the first concern when receiving a manuscript for review is whether the reviewer has time to give it careful attention. Journals op-

erate differently with regard to their allotted times for review (see Chapter 1 on the review process). But if a reviewer agrees to review manuscripts for a journal, then the reviewer should meet the deadline for completing the review and returning it to the journal. Sometimes the deadline can be changed or, as mentioned above, a reviewer can handle the manuscript with a junior colleague. The reviewer should inform the editor if he or she cannot perform the review or if the review will be delayed. Of course, approval must be sought from the editor before involving others in the review. Reviewers must never delay the review of a manuscript to the advantage of other submissions they know of. This reflects a conflict of interest that should have caused the reviewer to decline the manuscript.

It is assumed that reviewers have basic methodologic expertise or access to a consultant, have the capacity to exercise independent judgment about the features and the quality of a research report, and can acknowledge their limits when judging educational science. In some cases, a reviewer may have been chosen to review a specific part of the paper—the methods or statistics, for example—in his or her areas of expertise only. In short, reviewers should not review papers in areas in which they are not experts. It is always appropriate to consult with others on a general question, for example, when there is a question about the methods or statistics used.¹⁻³ In this case, the colleague who is consulted must agree to keep the contents of the paper confidential and make no use of them.

Collegial Approach

The reviewer's approach overall, in language and purpose, should be collegial. When writing a review, the reviewer might imagine, for example, the author(s) sitting across the table as the review is delivered. And reviewers should remember that they may well be receiving reviews from these authors in the future. Criticisms must be based in fact and, of course, facts must never be misrepresented. Many times reviewers have to say unfavorable things about elements of studies. The reviewer should not shy away from identifying weaknesses in the paper, but the criticism should be constructive and given with the intent of improving the manuscript or providing ideas for improving a future study. The reviewer's role is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a paper, and this requires specific comments. Rarely will one or two general sentences be sufficient for such a complex task.

Plagiarism and Intellectual Property

It is a grave offense to appropriate work from a paper by directly lifting words, rephrasing text (plagiarism), or taking

another person's new ideas (theft of intellectual property). Similarly, reviewers should never quote from a paper before it is published or in any way use the information learned in advance of publication to advance their own or others' work. As mentioned above, a manuscript should never be circulated.

Conflict of Interest

Conflicts of interest result from financial relationships (with industry, for example, through employment, consultancies, stock ownership, honoraria, or expert testimony) either directly or through immediate family, and from personal and professional relationships, academic competition, and intellectual passion. Reviewers must disclose to editors any conflicts of interest, disqualifying themselves from review when appropriate.

It is inappropriate for a reviewer to use the review as a soapbox for his or her own concerns. Similarly, a reviewer should decline to review a manuscript on a subject regarding which he or she is involved in a contentious dispute.

Bias

Reviewers need to be alert to possible biases. Although scientific merit should be the basis for review, there may be a bias favoring authors of the same nationality as the reviewer.⁴ A bias may also exist in favor of studies with positive (rather than negative) results.⁵ Also, many authors and others have expressed concern that reviewers not be positively or negatively influenced by the reputation of the author or the author's institution. (It is this concern that has led some journals to use only "masked" manuscripts in review.)

REFERENCES

1. Iverson C, Flanagan A, Fontanarosa PB, et al (eds). *American Medical Association Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors*. 9th ed. Baltimore, MD: American Medical Association, 1998.
2. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996.
3. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. *JAMA*. 1997; 277:927-34.
4. Link AM. U.S. and Non-U.S. submissions: An analysis of reviewer bias. *JAMA*. 1998;280:246-9.
5. Callahan ML, Wears RL, Weber EJ, Barton C, Young G. Positive-outcome bias and other limitations in the outcomes of research abstracts submitted to a scientific meeting. *JAMA*. 1998;280:254-7.