The art of scholarly reviewing: Principles and practices

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Editorial

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A B S T R A C T

The quality and reputation of an academic journal can depend on several factors, but high-quality peer reviews are always a core requirement. Unfortunately, reviews are not always up to the standard that they should be. Poor reviews can result in a number of problems including sub-standard articles being accepted and good manuscripts being rejected. Good reviews are comparable to good papers; they require attention and dedication to write well. Although journals differ, it is important that reviewers approach their task with goodwill, i.e. that they approach a manuscript with an open mind, read it with care and attention and make comments that are constructive and show self-reflection. Reviewers need to know the evaluation standards and the limits of their own expertise and, if in doubt, not to be afraid to say so.

1. Introduction

High quality peer review is the bedrock of any field of scholarship. For a research community, it is one of the most critical of academic activities. Nobody wants to see poor papers being published. A deeply flawed article undermines confidence both in the field and in the journal or conference that publishes it. As a research community, we all benefit when standards are high.

Today, in an era of open-access, pay-to-publish journals where quality control is sometimes non-existent (Bohannon 2013), the reliable, peer-reviewed journal or conference is, if anything, of growing importance for scholars. Open access is valuable and many reputable journals now offer the option for authors to fund the cost of open access post acceptance.[1] There are many reputable open access journals and the number seems to be growing. Unfortunately, there has also been a rise in the number of pay-to-publish journals that are more interested in the author's money than in what he or she has to say (Bohannon 2013). Scholars need to know which journals in their field are not driven by such purely commercial motives. Over the years we have both received invitations to pay to have our research published in a “reviewed” journal where the “review” is a formality. For a reputable journal, quality control is paramount.

Unfortunately, from the point of view of the often already overworked academic, reviewing can sometimes seem to be one of the least valued of tasks. Reviews are not published. They will never be cited. Usually, they will neither earn you promotion nor any recognition beyond that of a small circle of grateful editors and associate editors (AEs) and, occasionally, your co-reviewers. Even the authors you help will never know who you are. With rare exceptions, good reviews are time consuming to do well and only add to the pile of work to be done. The reviewing time needed is often dependent on the article type. A straightforward review will take several hours; a complicated review can take a couple of days to complete.

There are rewards in reviewing. Where a submission is good these include being among the first to see new research and the opportunity to add to one's own knowledge. Doing a review often helps the reviewer to crystalize his or her own ideas and can sometimes help reviewers improve their own research and writing skills, although it is unethical for a reviewer to use the content of an unpublished manuscript in his or her own work. Some journals and institutions have introduced mechanisms to give more recognition to the work of reviewers. For example, a number of good journals, like Government Information Quarterly (GIQ), now have a distinguished reviewer award. GIQ has also adopted a policy whereby reviewers who conduct consistently good reviews are invited to join the editorial board. A reviewer who writes consistently high quality reviews over a number of years may also be invited to become an AE. New platforms, like *publons.com*, that show review performance, have been launched. Reviews conducted can be uploaded and ones' profile as reviewer can be created. Some universities, like those of the authors', require academic staff to include any reviews they have undertaken as an input into their annual appraisal and in some institutions, these are taken into account in decisions on tenure or promotion.

Unfortunately, these are still exceptions. The importance of reviewing is much higher than is typically reflected in its extrinsic rewards and, as elsewhere in life, intrinsic rewards are more ephemeral. When, for example, a submission is poor, the only reward may be the personal satisfaction of having helped another member of the community to improve their work or maybe of saving your fellow scholars from wasting their valuable time reading a poor piece of research or writing. For many busy scholars, this raises the question why should I put a lot of effort into writing a detailed and carefully thought out

[1] While, with a reputable journal, this practice may not raise questions about quality or ethics, it does raise questions about equity. More affluent (and senior) authors may be better able to afford to pay for open access, whereas other scholars do not have the resources to do this. Furthermore, this can wider the divide between developing and developed countries and result in a domination of research from developed countries and a scarcity of research originating from developing countries. However, that is a separate debate.

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review when the authors seem not to have been bothered, or to be able, to write a decent paper? We try to answer this question below.

2. The review process

In discussing what makes a good review, it is important to consider the review process from the perspective of both the author and the editor. Naturally, authors first and foremost want to have their paper accepted, preferably without any, or minimal, revisions. If the paper is rejected, it is reasonable that they be told why it is being rejected in terms that are clear, objective and well-grounded. If they are being asked to revise, the required changes should be clearly stated. Both these aspects are worth some reflection.

Publishing is a core activity for most researchers. There are reasons why scholars want their work to be published other than fear of perishing if it is not. They may need publications to obtain tenure or promotion or it may be a requirement of their funding. Serious researchers will want to have their paper recognised as a high quality contribution to their field, one that has a scientific and societal impact and is acknowledged by their peers. Reviewers should try to help authors to achieve this. A good reviewer will identify the weaknesses in a submission, suggest how these can or might be addressed and indicate other ways to further strengthen a paper. This kind of information also helps the handling editor to determine the feasibility of eventually arriving at a high quality paper. Experienced authors always appreciate high-quality reviews, even if they result in rejection, because it enhances their own insights, helps them improve their research and can point them towards new and possibly more fruitful paths that they can explore.

Editors have a different perspective. Editors like reviews that are in agreement, are clear, are well-written and that can be forwarded directly to authors without any further work. Unfortunately, reviewers do not always agree. Sometimes an editor may wonder if both reviewers were sent the same paper! In general, a review that is helpful to the author is helpful to the editor, but like many journals, GIQ does allow confidential comments to the editor. This can be useful when, say, a reviewer feels it necessary to send something diplomatic to the author, but to send a blunter assessment to the editor. Reviewers should never hesitate to use this option if it is appropriate and it is essential if, say, a reviewer suspects that there may be plagiarism or some other form of academic fraud afoot. Comments to the authors and comments to the editor should, however, be consistent; it is not appropriate to say one thing to the author and the opposite to the handling editor.

An important responsibility of any editor is, where possible, to avoid sending a poor-quality manuscript to a reviewer. Most top journals have high rejection rates (in GIQ it is more than 80%). All papers are first read by the handling editor and will only be sent out for review if they reach a minimum standard of quality, in both content and writing, and the content fits within the journal's aims and scope. In GIQ, a considerable amount of work occurs before any paper goes out for review. GIQ receives, on average, more than one submission a day. Of these, over half will receive a desk reject and slightly less than half will be sent out to (three) reviewers. Each paper will be handled by a handling editor who assigns the reviewers, at least one of whom will be, where possible, drawn from the journal's Editorial Board. Other reviewers can be people who have already published in the journal, people who have submitted to the journal or other distinguished scholars who have expertise in the research domain of the paper. Authors can suggest reviewers, but these recommendations need always be verified against independence and matching criteria and editors will generally treat reviewer recommendations made by authors with caution. Reviewers are expected to be experts in at least some aspects of the paper and to be in a position to provide an informed assessment. With most journals, as a submitting author, you can expect to be invited to review other people's work and as a published author it becomes a certainty. The latter is essential for a research community dependent on peer reviewing.

3. Good reviewing: some principles

In the long term, any journal is only as good as its reviewers and the submissions it receives, but few, if indeed any, reviewers ever receive any formal training in what constitutes a well-constructed review (and we include ourselves in this list). Reviewing is an art that is mastered over time and the skills involved usually need time to develop. Most of us learn from reading the reviews of our own work, from other reviews of the same papers (if they are shared with all the reviewers) and occasionally from feedback by more experienced editors, colleagues or co-reviewers. This hit and miss approach results, in our experience, in an uneven standard of reviewing with some reviewers conscientiously submitting pages of detailed analysis and critique and others sending in just a few perfunctory sentences. Some reviewers mention only the weaknesses of a paper (and only incidentally, if at all, mention the strengths); others seem extremely reluctant to criticize anything. The ideal review avoids both of these extremes and tries to provide a balanced picture.

When two reviewers disagree radically or approach reviewing quite differently, this can result in a problem for the handling editor. For this reason, GIQ has recently instituted a standard of three reviewers per paper. In GIQ, a handling editor is at liberty to invite an additional reviewer or reviewers to deal with an impasse should one occur. Ultimately the decision whether or not to accept or reject a paper or to ask for revisions is for the handling editor to make. In really difficult decisions the handling editor may discuss a paper with the Editor-in-Chief (EiC) and make a joint decision.

What makes for a high-quality review? We propose five principles and a number of good practices.

For the first principle, and a good point from which to start, is an observation by the economist John Maynard Keynes. Commenting on Frederick Hayek's savaging of one of his books, Keynes said that:

> *"Hayek has not read my book with that measure of 'good will' which an author is entitled to expect of a reader. Until he can do so, he will not see what I mean or know whether I am right".*

(cited in Tieben, 1997, p118). Keynes states an important principle. *It is important to approach any review with good will*, i.e. an open mind and a willingness to change your own mind or position if the paper is convincing. All reviewers bring their personal prejudices or, to use a more polite expression, points of view, to a review; let's not pretend otherwise. The trick is to leave such prejudices outside the door so to speak. One of the problems we all face when reviewing is confirmation bias; we like to see our own opinions confirmed and tend to be more enthusiastic about looking for weaknesses in arguments for points of view with which we disagree than we are about seeking out gaps in arguments that support our worldview.

The second principle is to *read the manuscript with care and attention*. Most academics are fast readers. It is difficult to keep up with the sheer volume of published research without being able to read quickly and this often involves a speed reading technique called skimming, i.e. looking for keywords and phrases. Skimming, except for the purpose of a preliminary overview of a paper, is never a good practice when reviewing, but unfortunately it is encountered all too often. This can result into unfounded or poorly founded acceptance or rejection decisions. Most academics, including the authors, have had experience of reviews where the reviewer has clearly not read the text carefully (or in some cases seems not to have read it at all). More experienced authors,

when they encounter this problem, will draw this matter to the editor's attention and any handling editor who is doing his or her job properly will address it. Unfortunately, younger and less experienced authors are often intimidated by a rejection and even if they feel that the rejection is not well-founded, they will accept it. This not only damages the author's confidence, it may also deprive the journal of a good paper.

The third principle is *to be constructive, but firm*. Reviews should add value. A sloppy paper can expect a brief review and a reject. A premature paper, i.e. a paper that has potential, but where it is clear that more work or research is needed before it is ready for review, may also receive a brief review and an invitation to re-submit when the paper is ready. Experienced reviewers sometimes return a paper to an editor with a statement to the effect that they will review this paper when it is tidied up or written in proper English. Where a paper is strong and needs little or minor revision, constructive reviewing is easy. It is more challenging when major revisions are being requested and toughest of all when recommending rejection of a paper into which an author has obviously put a lot of time and effort, but which just doesn't quite make the grade. Almost all of us have been on the receiving end of rejection letters and those who have been know that there is the world of difference between a constructive and encouraging rejection from which one can learn, and a curt dismissal. It is part of the handling editor's job to read the reviews carefully and make sure the latter does not happen, but where a review is severely critical and unconstructive, it can be hard for a handling editor to sugar the pill and turn such a review into a constructive rejection.

One of the most satisfying forms of review is when a reviewer succeeds in turning around a deeply problematic paper and makes it publishable. In the end, nobody but the author(s), handling editor and yourself may appreciate the value you have added, but looking back on our own careers, we have found that these are occasions of which we feel great sense of a job well done. One area that often benefits from this type of help is in theoretical or methodological support. In GIQ some papers have high relevance, but the theoretical underpinnings are poor. A good reviewer may be able to help an author to remedy this.

The fourth principle is to *know your own limits*. Sometimes a reviewer will accept a paper based on the abstract only to discover when the full paper arrives that the subject matter is not within the reviewer's area of expertise. Obviously, if a paper is outside of a reviewer's area of expertise she should return it to the handling editor explaining that she is not qualified to review it properly or she may choose to indicate that she is not able to comment adequately on certain sections of the paper. Reviewers should never be afraid to do this and to be transparent. Experienced reviewers will always return a paper if they are not comfortable reviewing it. Less experienced reviewers sometime feel that, having signed up for the gig, they should see it through. This is always a serious mistake. Reviewers who do this are not being fair either to themselves or to the authors of the paper. Acknowledging gaps in your own expertise helps the handling editor assign other reviewers who can comment adequately on the parts not covered by a reviewer. It can sometimes happen that a reviewer feels that a submission is outside the scope of the journal. In such case he or she should say this to the editor.

The fifth principle is *if in doubt, check it out*. A problem, even for experienced and knowledgeable reviewers is deciding what to take on trust. For example, if a paper has 50 or more references/citations it is probable that a reviewer will not be familiar with many of them. If, say, an author cites Doe (2008), which I have not read, as saying X, do I assume that the author is both honest and meticulous and that Doe does indeed say X or should I look up Doe's paper and check? In practice, it is not possible to check all references/citations and it is certainly not the role of the reviewer to redo the authors' work, though sometimes, a reviewer's instinct can be a guide. For example, a reviewer who knows Doe or is familiar with his oeuvre, but is not familiar with this particular paper, may be happy that this is the kind of thing that Doe would say. Should a citation sound odd, the reviewer will need to check the source and if Doe's paper is not readily accessible this may be a problem. Checking of this type can be tedious and time consuming, but there are times when it is essential. It is important always to remember that the readers will be depending on you to certify that what they are reading is valid.

A more specific problem is when a paper uses an analysis technique which is beyond the competence of a reviewer. This is a common problem with statistical tools. Most reviewers will know their basic statistics, but when more advanced tools such as logistic regression or structural equation modelling or highly specialized measures are used, many reviewers may feel out of their depth – even if they have a broad conceptual grasp of the technique, they may not know enough to judge whether the analysis has been executed properly or the results and interpretation are correct. There are two strategies open to the reviewer in such circumstances. One strategy is to note to the handling editor that you are unable to review that part of the paper; the other strategy is to suggest a colleague who can do this (and is willing to do it) to the handling editor, who in turn can assign that person for reviewing the specialized part.

4. Some good practices

The above principles are fundamental to good reviewing. There are, in addition, several good practices that experienced reviewers will do automatically, but less experienced reviewers may not. These practices are summarised below primarily for the benefit of scholars who are new to reviewing.

1. Avoid the temptation to show off. Sometimes reviewers regard a review as an opportunity to show how clever they are and indulge in academic pyrotechnics. If this serves to help the author, fine, but if not relevant or helpful it should be avoided.
2. Set the right tone. A review should be professional and measured. It should never be sneering or abusive or patronising or even witty (though wit can occasionally be useful to make or soften a point). Most experienced authors have received a review which is hurtful or unkind. It is important to be firm, but a little diplomacy rarely goes amiss.
3. Allow yourself a ‘cooling off’ period - especially when you have written a highly critical review. Where a paper really is poor and the review reflects this, a 24-h wait before submission is a good idea. It is easy, especially if a paper is annoyingly bad, to write something dyspeptic that, however justified, is only going to upset the author to no useful purpose.
4. *Re*-read your review through the authors' eyes. Before you submit the review, it is a good idea to try reading it as if you were the author(s). This is a surprisingly useful exercise. How would I feel if I received this in the e-mail on a Monday morning? Is the review easy to read and follow, are the problems in the paper clearly identified and explained, are the suggestions helpful and the recommendations clear?
5. Check references and provide additional references where you can. Some reviewers like to include references to a few of their own papers in the review in the hope that they will be cited in the published article. Doing this is ethically questionable, however pointing the author at useful sources, whether they are yours or not, is a good practice. It is important also to check that the references in a paper are correctly cited. Sometimes there are mistakes in citations or references are mixed up.
6. Include both strengths and weaknesses. As noted above, some reviewers only like to criticize and neglect the strengths of a paper.

Occasionally the converse happens. A good review should acknowledge the strong points and encourage the authors to continue their work (unless the work is so bad that this is not possible).

7. Say 'no' if you cannot do it. If you don't have time to do a review, it is best to tell the editor immediately rather than waiting three or four weeks to decide that you don't have the time to do the job. Where possible, please try to help stressed out handling editors by providing suggestions for other possible reviewers. However, saying no every time is not an option. If you expect your own work to be reviewed and published and you want to become a respected scholar, then you have an obligation to do your share of reviewing. Those who are happy to have others review their work, but refuse to reciprocate are behaving like parasites on the rest of the community.
8. Send in your review on time. Having promised to do it, it is important to get it in by the deadline. It is perfectly OK to ask for a longer time or an extension, but writing as editors, it is frustrating when you see the third overdue reminder going out without any response. Try to respond and give realistic estimate of when the review can be finished.
9. Account for different type of submissions. Not all papers are research papers; GIQ can also publish viewpoints or discussion-type papers. GIQ features papers that have high level of rigor and that have a high level of relevance (see Janowski & Janssen, 2015). Ideally papers should have both high rigor and high relevance, however, such manuscripts are rare. Some scholars find manuscripts with high relevance, but low rigor hard to review, whereas others have difficulty with reviewing a manuscript with low relevance. The approach used in an evaluation often needs to be tailored to the type of paper being reviewed.
10. Check if all of the components that should be present in a paper are there. There are various aspects that should considered when reviewing a research paper including, research questions, the research approach, the literature review, the flow of argumentation and last, but not least, the contribution to knowledge.

5. Concluding thoughts

Reviewing is key to the quality and reputation of an academic journal. In the title of this editorial, we use the word 'art' to describe the skills involved in reviewing. We could also have used the word 'craft'. This is because reviewing is not a mechanical process; it is a skill that requires commitment and practice; the more reviews one does, the better the reviews one should be able to produce. Reviewers are not infallible or all-knowing (even if some of them think they are). Any reviewer has his or her own knowledge base and can only judge the paper using that knowledge. This requires both an interpretation of the manuscript as well as self-awareness and good judgement about how much you know. Some people overestimate the depth of their own knowledge; others underestimate it. A review should be approached like the writing of a publishable paper. Reviewers should always do their best to ensure the highest quality in their own work, regardless of the quality of the manuscript being reviewed.

Finally, all editors, associate editors and guest editors regard reviewers as a precious resource, one not to be wasted and one to be valued and nurtured. As GIQ's reviewers are the guarantors of the journal's continuing success, suggestions for improving the reviewing process are always welcome. To all our reviewers we say a big thank you for your contributions in the past and for your contributions yet to come.

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Appendix A. Further information/ideas

As one might expect, there are many sources on the web which can provide help with reviewing. Below are some of the site that might help becoming a better reviewer:

https://www.elsevier.com/connect/reviewers-update/ten-tips-for-a-truly-terrible-peer-review

https://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/how-to-conduct-a-review

https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/187762

https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/380984

http://portside.org/2013-10-06/whos-afraid-peer-review

https://publons.com/blog/6-tips-to-writing-a-great-manuscript-review/?utm_source=PublonsUsers&utm_campaign=df953a67a2-Mixed_reviews_24.01.2018&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d203ec3f11-df953a67a2-137050593

http://www.redalyc.org/html/337/33712016009/

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