

Some Advice About Journal Reviewing

Perhaps you've received an e-mail from a journal editor asking whether you would consider reviewing a recently submitted article. Congratulations! You've moved on to the next stage in your scholarly career. You are now part of the peer review process.

Consider a journal that publishes (say) 20 articles per year. It is common to commission three reviews for each submitted article. Many journals have rejection rates of 80% or higher, which means that 4 out of 5 submissions are typically rejected. So the 20 articles that appear in print were likely selected from 100 submissions, which means perhaps 300 reviews were written. That's a lot of work, and it is work that goes almost entirely unseen. In scholarly publishing, journal reviewing is the hidden part of the iceberg: it is a fundamental, essential, yet largely invisible part of scholarship.

If you are an active scholar — submitting and publishing journal articles — it follows that you should do your part by contributing to the review process as well. That's what peer review means. In an equitable world, over the course of your career, you should expect to write two or three peer reviews for every article you submit.

THE REVIEW

Each journal has its own editorial policy and different journals may have different procedures for reviewing submissions. In some cases, the journal may send "Instructions for Reviewers." More commonly, the editor will simply provide a sentence or two describing what is expected.

A review is typically divided into four parts: (1) recommendation, (2) summary, (3) major concerns, and (4) detailed comments. Reviews are typically between 2 and 5 pages in length.

RECOMMENDATION

The first part is a one- or two-sentence recommendation. There are four common outcomes: (1) accept outright, (2) accept pending minor revisions, (3) revise and resubmit, and (4) reject.

Here are some examples of recommendations:

"This is an admirable paper and I'm delighted to recommend publication."

"I enjoyed reading this paper, although I have reservations about the presentation of the analysis — especially Figure 2. If the author(s) is/are able to address this concern (see below), I am happy to recommend publication."

"While the subject matter of this paper is interesting, I regret that there are a number of methodological issues that need to be addressed (see below). Accordingly I would recommend

that the author(s) revise and resubmit.”

“I recognize that the author(s) carried out a considerable amount of work in pursuing their study. However, I regret that there are several serious problems that make it impossible for the author(s) to draw the conclusion presented. I recommend that the paper be rejected.”

Be aware that your recommendation is just that — a recommendation. It is the Action Editor (the person in charge of the review process for this particular manuscript), who will normally make the final assessment. Very rarely, the (chief) Editor will intervene and override the activities of the Action Editor, but this is extremely rare.

When the review process is complete, the Action Editor will send you copies of all of the reviewers’ reviews, as well as the action letter, conveying the Action Editor’s recommendation. So you’ll get to see what other reviewers wrote about the same submission.

SUMMARY

After the assessment comes the summary. In about a paragraph, you should describe the paper in your own words. The purpose is to show that you understood the manuscript.

This is not always straightforward. Unlike published articles, submitted manuscripts vary considerably in their quality. Sometimes the manuscript is disorganized and it is hard to decipher what the author(s) is(are) doing. It is possible that the research is actually quite well done, but the writing quality is so bad that it is hard to realize this as a reviewer. (Also, remember that many scholars do not have English as a first language.)

As a reviewer, you might end up criticizing something that’s not germane. For example, the author(s) might have carried out the work in an appropriate way, but they just didn’t describe it adequately. You can waste a lot of time because you misunderstand something.

By summarizing the work, you make it clearer to the author(s) that they have communicated (or failed to communicate) their work. Don’t be afraid to say you had trouble understanding the paper. For example, in your summary, you might want to say something like “If I understand the paper correctly, the author(s) ...”

MAJOR CONCERNS

This is the place to identify any major concerns you have. It is common to number each issue successively.

It is useful to present the concerns in their order of importance. This ordering will help the author(s) understand the relative gravity of each point. The Action Editor will also appreciate your ordering. For example if all three reviewers identify a particular problem near the top of their list, this lends weight to the overall assessment.

In your recommendation, you may already allude to a particularly onerous problem that you expand on in this section.

DETAILED COMMENTS

This is the place to identify simpler issues. Detailed comments might refer to simple problems such as spelling errors, confusing sentence structure, recommendations that the author(s) cite other existing research, etc. Typically, detailed comments begin with the page/line numbers, followed by the comment.

Don't be afraid to make specific recommendations. E.g.

pg.7/lines 10-11 "Our results establish that ..." Please replace by
"Our results are consistent with the view that ..."

GENERAL ADVICE

It is common for new reviewers to feel unqualified. You may feel that you really don't know very much about the specific area of research addressed in the manuscript. Unfortunately, there are simply not enough experts in the world. All scholars must leave their comfort zone, otherwise new topics or fields wouldn't be able to emerge or flourish.

The most common mistake for new reviewers is to be overly critical. Avoid harsh language. People pour their hearts into their research. It is discouraging to receive rejection notices and disappointing to receive perpetual "revise and resubmit" letters. But if the assessments are written using acerbic language, this just deepens the wounds — for no good reason.

Be helpful. Instead of saying "Why did you do this?" — offer specific advice. Tell the author what to say. Don't be afraid to suggest replacement wording. Tell the author what to do to bring the work up to sufficient quality.

Reviews are teachable moments. Your own research aside, the most important thing you will do in your academic career is to identify and develop the talents of others. In the case of your own students, this is obvious. But the same principle applies to all the members of a scholarly community. Personality conflicts notwithstanding, we are all members of a research community whose collective purpose is the advancement of knowledge. Take the opportunity to help your colleagues become better researchers. Explain the problems. Share your knowledge. Describe how they can improve their work.

An author may have *reified* a concept, inadvertently performed *multiple tests*, or lapsed into an *ad hominem* argument. Be prepared that the author may not know that these are problems. If necessary, provide a reference to a book (include page numbers) or website that describes some methodological difficulty. (E.g., "Sixty methodological potholes," <http://csml.som.ohio-state.edu/Music829C/methodological.potholes.html>) Even if you recommend rejection, the entire

exercise can still contribute to the discipline as a whole by helping other researchers to become better at their craft. Especially when I was younger, I learned a lot from the comments reviewers made about my work. Although receiving a letter of rejection is disheartening, much of the sting is removed if you learn something from the process.

Occasionally, you will review work that is precisely in your area of interest and expertise. Avoid the temptation to regard the submitting author as a competitor. Celebrate the insights of others — even as you lament the fact that you should have thought of that yourself. Do not hold the author to a higher standard than you would expect for yourself. The least useful reviews are ones where the reviewer offers sweeping (though vague) criticisms — implying that the author has somehow “sinned,” without providing detailed charges of what’s wrong. These sorts of reviews are written when the reviewer feels threatened, views the author as a competitor, and so does not want to be helpful. Although this attitude may be understandable, it is not professional.

Be circumspect about asking for “addition work.” There is no such thing as a definitive study, so there is no end to the number of follow-up studies or follow-up issues that can be addressed. Especially when contrasted with books, journal articles are meant to be *contributions* — research that adds another piece to the puzzle. An excellent study may very well invite an obvious follow-up study. However, follow-up research may not be practical for innumerable reasons, such as illness, the departure of a collaborator, limited access to resources, etc.

In the end, ask yourself the following question: “Will publishing this article as it is (without any additional work) contribute to our knowledge?” If the answer is yes, don’t hold things up by asking for more work.

Defend good work. If you think the work is good, say so. Many journals have a policy that if any one reviewer recommends rejection, then the Action Editor is expected to reject the submission. If you write enough reviews, you will have the experience where a perfectly good piece of research is rejected because one of the other reviewers was feeling spiteful. An Action Editor will have second thoughts if the other reviewers are enthusiastic about the work.

Do not presume what is or is not appropriate for the journal. Your task is to judge the quality of the work, not its topical content. Leave that to the Editor. In general, most Editors struggle to expand the range of topics addressed in their journal, while Reviewers tend to think narrowly in terms of past practice. By way of example, the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* has long aimed to publish research in *all* areas of music scholarship. Yet despite the best intentions of JAMS Editors to broaden the range of topics, reviewers often recommend rejection because an article seems better suited to *Ethnomusicology*, *Music Theory Spectrum*, or some other journal. JAMS was never intended to deal only in historical topics; that’s just how the journal evolved.

SIGNED REVIEWS

Most journals practice blind peer review in the sense that the reviewers remain anonymous. Most (though not all) journals also remove identifying information about authorship. Even so,

you can sometimes guess the identity of an author by the subject matter and by the cited references. However, as you gain experience, you will learn to mistrust your intuitions here. Try to avoid the mental guessing-game about authorship. Instead, simply attend to the quality of the work.

In some cases, reviewers will identify themselves in their reviews (so-called “signed reviews”). This is usually done when the reviewer thinks it may be beneficial for the author(s) to contact the reviewer for further clarification. For example, a reviewer might be quite enthusiastic about the research but might have specific suggestions that would be better conveyed by conversation. It is rare for “rejections” to be signed.

ANNUAL REPORT

Reviewing is something you can include in your annual report to your department chair. Being invited to review for journals testifies to your status in the scholarly community. When reporting, it’s important to maintain the anonymity of the author(s) — when known. Instead, simply report that you did a review for Journal X.

Once you have reviewed for several journals, this is something you may wish to include on your C.V. under SERVICE or PROFESSIONAL SERVICE. E.g. “Manuscript reviewing done for *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Music Perception*, and *Music Theory Online*.”

REPUTATION

Conscientious reviewers can have a major positive impact on a discipline by educating authors and shaping the quality of scholarly communication. The flip side is that poor reviewers can retard a discipline, creating an acrimonious environment and discouraging research activity by sewing the seeds of bitterness among scholars. While anonymity serves to promote honest appraisals of work, anonymity can also lead to uncivil behavior.

You might think that only well-known scholars are invited to review journal submissions. There are very well-known scholars who are rarely asked to write reviews because editors have discovered that they are excessively critical or easily lapse into harsh language. In my experience, the best reviewing tends to be done by lesser known scholars who are not so preoccupied with their own status.

Since only a handful of people will ever read your reviews, you might think that reviewing will have little impact in developing your reputation as a scholar. However, this impression is not quite right. Editors are always looking for reliable reviewers: scholars who are knowledgeable, conscientious, courteous, and do their work in a timely fashion. Since editors are privy to all of the backroom correspondence, they quickly learn who is trustworthy and who isn’t — who is a positive force in the field, and who is a negative force.

Good reviewing is one of the ways of establishing your scholarly reputation, while making a lasting contribution to the discipline as a whole.

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