

# Good practice in academic peer review

## *A short guide for reviewers and authors*

Peter Lugosi, Oxford Brookes University

[plugosi@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:plugosi@brookes.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Peer review is an essential part of academia, in principle helping to ensure the quality and rigour of published work. Constructive and informed peer reviews can undoubtedly help improve manuscripts, although the process is often lengthy and reviewer requirements can be frustrating. Peer-reviewing is also a time-consuming addition to our workloads and it can sometimes feel like thankless, unpaid labour. Debates about the merits of peer review and potential alternatives continue, but it is likely to remain a core function of academic practice. This short document seeks to encourage colleagues to engage in peer review and aims to help improve its culture and practice. The document is split into three parts: the first makes the case for doing peer-reviews; the second focuses on good practice in peer reviewing; the third is aimed at authors revising manuscripts and responding to editors and reviewers. I hope you find it useful and welcome your feedback.

## Why review for academic journals?

- Reviewing for journals is helpful for learning about editorial processes:
  - You get to see the reviewer instructions and evaluation criteria that peer reviewers use to evaluate submissions
  - Depending on the journal and their manuscript handling systems, you can see how other colleagues evaluate papers and write (constructive and negative) reviews
  - You may also get insights into how different reviews are interpreted by editors and how they translate into editorial decisions
- Reviewing builds goodwill between you and editors, which is very helpful in your future careers, especially if you intend to submit to those journals
- You learn about new concepts and methods; it is also a fantastic way to see how colleagues in different fields create knowledge, construct arguments and present their findings
- You also get to see examples of stronger and weaker practice in how colleagues

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respond to reviews and how manuscripts change through the review process

- It is part of good academic citizenship:
  - Reviewers shape knowledge and contribute to the development and credibility of the field
  - Each manuscript we submit to a journal is usually reviewed by two, three or more reviewers, and we should therefore review an equivalent number for each of those journals to keep the system functioning

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### Do

- Respond quickly to review invitations – even if you decline, it helps editors
- Return reviews promptly and certainly within the timelines set by journals (although a number of journals ask for reviews to be returned in 1 or 2 weeks, which may be unfeasible)
- Contact the editor if you cannot return the review in good time to let them know
- Be honest about the limits of your knowledge when accepting review invitations (I always make clear to editors that I am not an expert in some methods so they can ensure the other reviewers have the necessary expertise)
- Appreciate that this is someone else's work and evaluate it fairly: there is a delicate balance between helping authors improve their manuscripts and projecting your own values on to their papers (especially if they are working in an alternative paradigmatic or disciplinary tradition)
- Only recommend that authors cite your work if it genuinely complements and improves their work rather than just to satisfy your ego
- Aim to review as many papers for a journal as the number of reviewers they normally use for your submissions (if a paper you have submitted to the journal had 3 reviews, you should review 3 manuscripts for the journal)
- Provide clear instructions, in a format that you would find helpful as an author (ideally create a list that authors can systematically address, which will help them to make changes and respond to the reviews)
- Maintain a professional tone and provide constructive criticism that authors can use to improve their work, even if recommending rejection for their manuscript

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### Avoid

- Agreeing to review and then failing to deliver – this is annoying for editors and authors
- Automatically assuming that colleagues' papers should correspond to your papers in style or structure
- Giving authors unnecessary work
- Giving unreasonable, confusing advice or raising obscure points that may undermine their ability to revise the manuscript
- Introducing new objections to the content of revised manuscripts unless they emerged from the revisions (this may be unavoidable at times but incredibly frustrating if those issues should have been identified by you in the original submission)

### Never

- Plagiarise other people's work: there are always opportunities to learn from reviewing colleagues' papers, but you have a responsibility to respect their intellectual property

## Managing revisions, responding to reviewers and editors

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### Do

- Provide sufficient detail in your responses to editors and reviewers to help them navigate your revisions easily:
  - Consider presenting the summary of revisions as a table showing the reviewer/editor comments in one column and your responses in another
  - Be as specific as possible, identifying page numbers and/or sections to help the reviewer(s) find the revised parts
  - Explain what you revised and provide justification for why you made specific revisions or decided not to in cases where you disagreed with the reviewer
- Try to refer to credible precedents in the field and/or the journal in response to reviewers' objections regarding concepts, methods or even stylistic points about the manuscript (for example presenting the findings and discussion in one section)
- Maintain a respectful and professional tone, even if responding to criticisms that you disagree with

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### Avoid

- Ignoring a reviewer's points even if you disagree with them
- Always following all the reviewer's advice: if you disagree with something, use the author responses to make a thoughtful and credible case justifying your decisions
- Just providing blunt or vague responses such as "Done"
- Automatically copying and pasting revised sections from the manuscript, especially if they are lengthy (this can sometimes be appropriate, but it may be better to provide a shorter explanation of the changes in the author responses and to refer reviewers to the longer revised section in the manuscript)
- Assuming that you have to respond to each of the reviewers and each of their comments in a linear sequence (you may consider presenting your responses by thematic area (e.g. research design or conceptualisation) or section (e.g. literature, methodology etc.) where you show how your changes in that section address suggestions made by multiple reviewers)
- Antagonising reviewers with poorly presented or proofread responses, which show a lack of care or respect
- Forgetting to show appropriate gratitude to the editors and reviewers for taking the time to evaluate your work and provide feedback