

The Care and Feeding of Reviewers

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A peer-reviewed journal is only as good as its reviewers. There are a number of other important players in the editing-publishing game, but the reviewers' role is critical. Therefore, editors of peer-reviewed journals should pay careful attention to their reviewers if journal quality is to be maintained or, better yet, improved. This article considers 3 important points about reviewers: finding them, instructing and educating them, and recognizing and rewarding them.

How to Identify Reviewers

Occasionally, on first seeing a submitted manuscript, an editor will know exactly the person with the appropriate expertise to review it. But that is not very common; other sources are usually needed. One readily available source is the bibliography of the paper under consideration. A reasonably complete bibliography will list researchers in the same or a related field. Another source is the group of authors turned up by a keyword search of the journal's computerized files or of a standard bibliographic database. Other editors or members of an editorial board can often suggest researchers in their own fields.

Some journals request that the author suggest names of reviewers; even if the journal does not request them, some authors provide them. Such suggestions should be considered carefully; they can be helpful, but the editor must be the final authority in selecting reviewers. An author's request that a particular person not be used as a reviewer should be considered carefully. If the reason given—and a reason should always be given—seems reasonable, the request probably should be honored.

Editors sometimes want to augment their reviewer rosters, and probably all should consider periodic recruitment of new talent. One obvious recruitment technique is to invite the authors of papers recently accept-

ed by the journal to become reviewers. After all, if someone writes something that the journal wants to publish, he or she is probably qualified to judge the worth of other papers. For several years, we have routinely included with our acceptance letter an invitation to serve as a reviewer. We enclose a form on which the respondent indicates the subjects that he or she would like to review and provides a mailing address, telephone and fax numbers, and an e-mail address. We have gained a number of excellent reviewers by this means. Another recruitment method is to write to leaders in a field, such as department chairs and division chiefs, asking them to identify colleagues who would be good reviewers. This technique is especially effective in identifying younger persons who might otherwise not come to an editor's attention.

How to Instruct and Educate Reviewers

Every request for a review should state the criteria to apply in the review. A list of characteristics to be separately rated is helpful in orienting the reviewer, although it is inevitable that many reviewers will produce an overall or global rating and then go back and fill in the individual components.

Sending the reviewer a copy of the disposition letter, including the reviews of the other reviewers, is of great educational value. The reviewer will inevitably study his or her own review to see how it compares with the others and with the disposition. If anyone doubts this, just recall that—at least in the case of medical journals—most of the reviewers were once competitive premedical students!

More-formal efforts at educating reviewers might include workshops at regional or national meetings where reviewers will be in attendance. For several years, we have conducted a journal-reviewer workshop at the annual national meeting of our specialty (see page 193). It is usually attended by 50 or so people, and we have identified a number of excellent reviewers through it. Although there is no direct proof, I also think that the reviewers whom we find that way are better than they would have been without such instruction.

How to Recognize and Reward Reviewers

Doing a good job as a reviewer generally must be its own reward because reviewers toil in anonymity—except, of course, that the editor knows who performs and who doesn't. Some journals publish an annual list of their reviewers of the preceding year. That seems to be a minimal level of recognition.

Sending a copy of the disposition letter to a reviewer, in addition to its educational value, also conveys a message: "We wanted you to see the outcome of all the work you did for the journal and to let you know how much we appreciate it." Occasionally, a circumstance merits special attention, such as when a reviewer recommends rejection but the paper ends up being accepted—virtually always after extensive revision. The reviewer can be miffed on seeing the paper in print and feel that his or her review was ignored. That can be avoided if a letter is sent to the reviewer at the time of acceptance, explaining the situation and pointing out that it was the reviewer's perceptive and critical analysis that guided the author in improving the work sufficiently to make it acceptable.

The personal touch should not be forgotten. A pat on the back can be the most effective form of recognition. When I was just beginning my career and was asked to review a couple of papers for a national journal, the editor of the journal—whom I regarded as one of the giants in my field—mentioned to me casually, "Roy, we really appreciate your help with the journal." That was enough to stimulate me to try to do even better on my next hundred reviews!

Conclusions

The reviewer occupies the key position in the peer-review system as it has developed over the last 3 centuries, and every effort that an editor expends on reviewers will pay enormous dividends. Improved methods of identifying them, including active recruiting, will bring out those with the required interest and the required talent. Education and instruction will make their reviews better. And recognition will keep them interested in continuing their good work. 