

# Care and Feeding of Reviewers: How Do You Recruit, Train, and Maintain?

Panel:

**Craig A Smith**

American Veterinary Medical Association  
Schaumburg, Illinois

**Pamela J Hines**

Science  
American Association for the  
Advancement of Science  
Washington, DC

**Susan Knapp**

American Psychological Association  
Washington, DC

Reporter:

**Deborah Weiner**

Plant Physiology  
Rockville, Maryland

The speakers cleverly mapped out the familiar scenario of “finding, capturing, training, and retaining” reviewers that most offices and staff of peer-reviewed publications experience. In describing the “capturing and recruiting” phase, Craig A Smith reminded the audience that reviewers are necessary components who bring prestige to a journal but receive the least credit and therefore need to be treated respectfully as colleagues and extensions of the staff. He emphasized that communication with reviewers is vital and can be enhanced by defining the reviewers’ task, evaluating their input, providing them with feedback, and publicly acknowledging their contribution.

Places where reviewers can most often be tracked down are universities, government agencies, corporations and industry, private business, and international markets. The search can be refined by using announcements and suggestions from other reviewers, authors, or editors. You will know whether you have captured a good reviewer if he or she exhibits knowledge, ethical awareness, efficiency, good communication, and willingness to review. Reviewers

accept the challenge for a variety of reasons, including the enjoyment of reviewing and a feeling of obligation or honor. Some do it for the learning experience and career advancement; many accept simply because they were asked, but many also understand the importance of good reviews and want to give back to their profession and their

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colleagues.

Pamela J Hines took the lead in discussing the training and evaluation of reviewers from the perspective of her success at Science. To answer the question of how a review will be used, she explains that it will add to the editors’ integration of the question and will ultimately improve the overall quality of the manuscript. To encourage reviewers to say yes, she addresses their motivation and explains her expectations. She applies and reminds them of the “three Rs for reviewers”: respect confidentiality, respond promptly, and refrain from emotional bias.

Hines lays out 3 tasks for reviewers: to assess the importance, to assess the technical validity, and to assess the presentation. The elements of a useful review include a brief synopsis, analysis of quality of experiments, analysis of validity of interpretation, suggestions for further experimentation, discussion of the possible effect of the paper, and a note about similar publications. Superb reviews include evidence of good judgment, thorough explanation of the scientific facts, apparent familiarity and technical expertise with the research subject, high standards, a broad point of view, and a willingness to learn from the author.

Hines correctly identified some common problems that plague the peer-review system, such as conflict of interest, which can take either a positive form (friendship with the author or too close an alignment with the presented theory) or a negative form (affiliation with a competing research group, for example). In most cases, conflict of interest should be brought to the attention of the editor. She also mentioned the need for a timely response as a continuing problem requiring regular vigilance. Sending a variety of notices to delinquent reviewers is the proven way to prod them gently, but she also suggested sending a reminder letter before the due date.

In addressing the critical component of retaining reviewers, session chair Susan Knapp, who oversees 35 journals, stated that she makes sure to meet annually with her editors to discuss what is and is not working with regard to review. She reported that begging, positive reinforcement, and publication of a thank you list are tried and true methods of reviewer retention. Her field editors also remind reviewers that in return for their services they are getting a preview of the science, the opportunity to work with other reviewers in shaping their field, the opportunity to help develop younger scientists and serve as mentors, the chance to develop their own experience in preparing manuscript reviews (possibly leading to editor apprenticeship), and the editor-in-chief’s acknowledgment and appreciation.

Knapp acknowledged that it is important to keep reviewers happy and said that field editors use such methods as letting reviewers know that their reviews were received and read, sending the other reviewers’ comments to them, and not overloading them with requests to review. She strongly recommended that editors not divulge the names of their “good” reviewers to other editors.

