

A Question of Protocol

The authors of a book manuscript tell you that they would like to ask several people to read the manuscript and render a critical appraisal before the manuscript is sent to a publisher. They ask you the usual protocol for soliciting such advice. What do you reply?

Solutions

It is a wise author who seeks critical review from others before submitting a manuscript to a publisher, and this is often done, as Ken Rothman suggests, by sending a manuscript for review to an ever-widening circle of readers.

A natural place to begin would be with review by coauthors, if it is a multiauthor work. Then, after revision, the manuscript can

be sent for review to colleagues not directly involved in the work but expert in the field. When the manuscript has been through several more drafts, it can be sent farther afield for review—perhaps to persons in peripheral fields. Rothman also advises, in this more nearly final stage of critique, including “one or two who are sure to bristle with disdain . . . those sure to disagree.” Better to get these very critical reviews before publication so that issues they raise can be addressed. And it is often helpful to obtain at least one review from a “common reader”, an intelligent reader who is not in the field that the manuscript deals with but can detect problems in readability, logic, and consistency.

For a book manuscript, especially one that

covers multiple topics, it might be helpful to send a table of contents with the chapter topics and subsections delineated to potential reviewers and ask them whether they are interested in reviewing some or all of the book and, if so, which chapters they would be willing to review. In preparing the final draft of the ninth edition of the American Medical Association Manual of Style, we sent such a letter to over 50 inhouse and outside people. We tried to include representatives of all the principal groups in the audience we hoped to address—authors, manuscript editors, managing editors, and journal editors—and additional experts in fields we covered: lawyers, linguists, and librarians. It is helpful, in this initial request, to provide a date by which the

review is needed and to stress the confidentiality of the work under review, as in any peer review. Later, if you wish to acknowledge the help of any of these critical readers, you will need to obtain their permission to be so named and ascertain how they would like their names and degrees to appear. To avoid placing too great a burden on your critical reviewers, be sure to revise the manuscript after each “round” of reviews is completed, so that as you send the manuscript farther and farther afield, it is closer and closer to being ready to send off to the publisher.

In sum, obtaining critical review before sending a manuscript to a publisher for consideration is certain to improve the quality of the manuscript. It can even expedite processing of the manuscript by obviating extensive revision after the publisher’s peer review.

Cheryl Iverson
JAMA and the Archives Journals
American Medical Association

Chicago, Illinois

Rothman KJ. Writing for Epidemiology. *Epidemiology* 1998;9:333-7.

At the American Psychological Association we prefer to review an author’s prospectus (including a table of contents and purpose and scope of each chapter), curriculum vitae, and one or two sample chapters, rather than the entire book manuscript. Likewise, most colleagues are more likely to agree to review such selected materials than a whole book. It is courteous to offer to reciprocate in kind.

In selecting colleagues to approach, it is best to seek people who will give objective, nonbiased feedback and who are willing to spend the time needed to provide detailed, concrete suggestions. Giving them a deadline is essential. A variety of points of view (for example, from people with different theoretical orientations) can be helpful in predicting how the book will be received by a wide array of readers.

Questions that colleagues might be asked to address include the following:

- Is the primary audience for the volume clearly defined?
- Is the volume’s purpose for this audience made clear?
- Given this audience, does the plan for

the proposed volume appear sound, balanced, and logically developed?

- Is the projected content comprehensive? Appropriate? Timely?
- Are the suggested chapters appropriately focused? Should any be added or deleted?
- Do the chapters promise to provide strong theoretical and empirical support in a balanced way?
- Does this work provide any new and valuable insights into the subject?
- What are the best and worst features of the work? Are there ways to improve the manuscript as proposed?
- Do you believe that there is a need (and a market) for a volume like that being proposed, and do you believe that this volume will meet the need that you see?
- How is this work related to literature already published?
- Do you know of any competition for the proposed book?

Our advice would be the same whether we were considering a book proposed by a member or by a nonmember. Other publishers might have different or less stringent criteria for evaluating manuscripts, depending on their publishing goals.

Judy Nemes
Peggy Schlegel
APA Books
American Psychological Association
Washington, DC

Should authors of a manuscript seek critical appraisals before submitting the manuscript to a publisher? Of course! According to the old saw, 2 (or more) heads are better than one (unless they are on the same person). Smart authors always solicit comments from colleagues, friends, and even relatives. I know of no publisher who would frown on this practice.

What is the usual protocol for seeking such advice? First, draw up 2 lists of possible consultants: one of people you want to inveigle into reading the entire manuscript, and another of people you want to read a specific chapter or section. The first group should include one or more readers who can help with the spelling, grammar, style, and all that good stuff. And, of course, include

anyone you know who might be reasonably expert in all the subjects covered in your manuscript. The second group, which could easily number up to a dozen colleagues, would consist of people who have special expertise in particular aspects of the subject.

How do you ask for such help? By telephone, not by letter and certainly not by e-mail. If you have chosen well, you will almost certainly obtain comments that you can use to improve the quality of any manuscript.

Robert A Day
Professor of English
University of Delaware
Newark, Delaware

New Question: A Practical Question

The manuscript of an article that you, as principal investigator, submitted to a scientific journal for publication is returned to you with a statement that the editorial board has considered the manuscript and has recommended its return for revision. The instructions are clear but terse: “Enclosed are specific criticisms. Please make the indicated changes or give your reasons for not doing so.” The attached reviewer comments seem contradictory: one reviewer requests more details of methodology, and another requests that the manuscript be shortened by one-third. In addition, one of the reviewers recommends publication but on the condition that his own, opposing treatment approach be discussed and references to his work be included. There is no summary comment from the journal’s chief editor. Do you feel that a request for further advice is warranted before you proceed with your revision? If so, should you call or write, and should you try to reach the chief editor directly?

The situations described as New Questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, Department of Medical Editing, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94612-3429; telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail della.mundy@nca.kaiper.org.