

Editors' Dealings with Reviewers: One Reviewer's Personal Perspective

In 1997 I wrote an article titled "The care and feeding of reviewers".¹ Later, a workshop with the same title was presented at the annual meeting of CBE.² The primary purpose of both the article and the workshop was to identify things that editors should pay attention to in their contacts with peer reviewers to maintain good relations with reviewers and help them improve their reviewing.

A considerable amount has been written, virtually all by editors, about how reviewers should do their jobs. In contrast, little seems to have been heard from reviewers themselves. This report describes my personal experience as a reviewer over the last 4 years, with particular reference to how I was instructed.

I searched my files for data on manuscripts sent to me to review during the period 1 October 1995 through 30 September 1999. I included only journals from which I received three or more review requests, feeling that one or two requests would be too small a sample on which to base evaluation of a journal. The study population consisted of 47 reviews completed over 48 months. The 47 manuscripts came from five journals: 27 from the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, eight from the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology (Am J Obstet Gynecol)*, five from the *New England Journal of Medicine (N Engl J Med)*, four from the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition (Am J Clin Nutr)*, and three from *Lancet*.

The files typically contained the initial letter from the editor requesting the review, any additional statement of review criteria, copies of my review (invariably with separate forms for editor and author), and a copy of the editor's disposition letter. In most instances I had been instructed to return or destroy the manuscript; in the few cases where no such instruction was given, a copy of the paper was in the file.

I reviewed each file, recording an answer

Table
Information with Review Requests

	<u>JAMA</u>	<u>AJOG</u>	<u>NEJM</u>	<u>AJCN</u>	<u>Lancet</u>
Type of paper identified	4/27	1/8	0/5	0/4	0/3
Review criteria stated	25/27	8/8	5/5	4/4	0/3
Time to complete given	27/27	8/8	5/5	4/4	2/3
Confidentiality warning	27/27	5/8	5/5	4/4	0/3
Conflict-of-interest warning	27/27	0/8	5/5	0/4	0/3
Manuscript-disposition direction	26/27	0/8	5/5	4/4	2/3
Informed of editorial decision	24/27	4/8	5/5	2/4	2/3

to each of the following questions, which came from the earlier publication and the CBE workshop:

- Was the type of manuscript identified?
- Were review criteria stated?
- Was the time to complete the review specified?
- Was I cautioned about confidentiality?
- Was I cautioned about conflict of interest?
- Was the disposition of the manuscript directed?
- Was I informed of the outcome?

The results are summarized in the table. The direction given most often—stated in all but one case—was a specific date by which to return the review. Review criteria were provided in almost all cases (although these were typically rather generic and seemed to apply mainly to research reports), and a warning about the confidentiality of a manuscript under review was also nearly universal. Slightly less frequently but still present more than 75% of the time were direction as to the disposition of the manuscript (*Am J Obstet*

Gynecol did not provide this) and notification of the editorial decision about the paper. I was cautioned about conflict of interest in about two-thirds of cases.

The only criterion that was addressed infrequently was identification of the type of paper I was asked to evaluate. I found this in only five of the 47 files (11%).

Comment

This survey of one reviewer's experience over 4 years indicates a considerable degree of uniformity in the five journals for which I provided at least three reviews. Virtually always I was given a specific date for completing the review, and only slightly less frequently was I given criteria to apply in the review and cautioned about confidentiality. Warnings about conflict of interest and instructions for disposition of the manuscript varied from journal to journal. Information about the editorial decision was usually given.

The one information item rarely provided was how the journal classified the manuscript. The standards to use in judg-

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ing differ among different types of articles; the criteria for an original research report differ from those for a review, and those for an opinion piece differ again. It certainly could be argued that the type of article is obvious and therefore need not be stated. Perhaps that is why journals so seldom provide this information. However, among the 47 reviews analyzed here, I found notes in four files indicating that I had enough uncertainty about the type of article to lead me to telephone the editorial office for clarification.

Although much has been written about manuscript reviewing, almost all of it comes from the perspective of editors, usually found in instructions for authors, instructions for reviewers, and editorials. A search of the MEDLINE database (using the terms *reviewer*, *peer reviewer*, and *referee* for 1966 through 1999) identified

only one reference that seemed to reflect the reviewer's perspective. An article in an Australian nursing publication³ described a questionnaire survey of 15 people who had served as reviewers for various journals. Four of the 15 stated that editors' expectations of them were not always clear; this might be consistent with my finding that only rarely was the type of article identified. Another report,⁴ although written by an editor, was also applicable: Frank surveyed reviewer forms, cover letters, and instructions for reviewers used by 73 highly rated US medical journals and concluded that "if editors' expectations were more explicit, reviewers' comments could better serve editorial needs."

The survey reported here represents the experience of a single reviewer and involves only five journals. A further limitation is that the survey was heav-

ily weighted toward one journal, *JAMA*. However, I present it because of the paucity of information on the subject that comes from reviewers, hoping it might stimulate broader and more comprehensive research. 

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3. Emden C, Schubert S. Manuscript reviewing: what reviewers have to say. *Contemp Nurse* 1998;7:117-24.
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