

Responsibilities and Rights of Peer Reviewers

Peer reviewers are the linchpin in the process by which research becomes knowledge. The process is publication—usually in print, but increasingly Internet-based or in some other electronic form.

As described by F Peter Woodford in *Scientific Writing for Graduate Students*, peer reviewers are “responsible scientists anxious only to further science”. Accordingly, they volunteer to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the work of one or a group of researchers for the editors of a publication to which that work has been submitted. The purpose of peer review is to ensure the accuracy and rigor of any work before it is widely disseminated.

Peer review is a gift of uncompensated time by people to whom time is a precious commodity. It is important to define the rights and responsibilities of those people, to whom the scientific community owes so much.

Responsibilities

Responsibility to the Scientific Community

Peer reviewers must simultaneously fulfill their responsibility to the scientific community and to the journal that has requested their assistance. By rigorously assessing a given research manuscript within time limits specified by the journal, they meet their responsibility to the scientific community in full.

Responsibility to Authors

Reviewers who agree to examine the work of a peer and comment on its accuracy, its clarity, its importance, and its usefulness to the scientific world have a weighty responsibility. First, they are obliged to treat the author and the manuscript with respect. When reviewers have a bias against the researchers or the research, they must recuse themselves. When they have a conflict of interest with the research or its sponsors, they must make it known to the editors or recuse themselves. When they are not truly knowledgeable about the subject of the research in the manuscript they have been asked to review, they must decline to review it.

Second, reviewers must provide an honest assessment of the value of the research. An appropriate assessment includes an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the study,

suggestions for avenues to pursue to make it more complete or relevant, and specific questions for the authors to address to make their study acceptable and useful to the intended audience.

Third, reviewers must maintain confidentiality about the manuscripts they review. Using the data from such manuscripts before they are published is inappropriate. Sharing the data with colleagues is equally inappropriate, as is reproducing the manuscript for any purpose.

Fourth, reviewers must not use the peer-review process as a means to further their own research aims, specifically by requiring authors to respond to questions that are interesting to the reviewers but that the study was not designed to answer.

Fifth, reviewers should resist the temptation to use their reviews as an opportunity to suggest that their own published work be referenced.

Responsibility to Journals

Reviewers' responsibilities to journals are in several categories: quality and timing of reviews and avoidance of conflicts of interest.

When reviewers receive invitations to review manuscripts and it is unlikely that they can finish the task within the period specified by the journal, they should decline the opportunity and explain why. That accomplishes two objectives: it keeps the manuscript on an appropriate schedule, and it informs the editorial office that the reviewers should not be sent additional manuscripts in the near future.

Once reviewers agree to review manuscripts, it is incumbent on them to send their reviews to the editorial office within the specified period. If it becomes impossible to complete the review on time, reviewers should so inform the editorial office and ask for guidance about whether to return the manuscripts without review or to take the additional time needed.

When reviewers receive invitations to review manuscripts with which they have a clear conflict of interest, it is their responsibility to turn down the invitations or to divulge the conflict of interest. Conflicts of interest can be of several sorts; the most common is

a relationship between the reviewers and the company that sponsored the research under review or a company that competes with the sponsor of the research. It is fairest for people with such conflicts of interest to decline to be reviewers.

When reviewers receive invitations to review manuscripts that advocate positions against which they have a bias, the situation is more complex and the decision more personal. Should, for example, clinicians who advocate aggressive treatment for patients who have a specific disease review manuscripts that advocate nonaggressive treatment? In general, such reviewers should make that determination personally. The fact that a journal editorial office requested their input into such manuscripts suggests that the editor is looking for balanced reviews and has chosen other reviewers who support the nonaggressive approach to provide perspective. With that in mind, reviewers should respond affirmatively if they believe they can review within the specified period.

Rights

Reviewers have the right to expect to be informed of the outcome of the review of the manuscripts they refereed for journals. Whether that information is communicated while a manuscript remains active—for instance, when it is returned to its authors for revision—or only after a definitive decision is reached is up to the journal. Regardless of the timing of notification, however, reviewers should ultimately be informed. As an educational service and in the hope of helping the reviewers with future reviews, each reviewer should receive the comments of the other reviewers for their edification.

Reviewers should expect to be thanked for the time they take to review manuscripts. A journal's thanks can take several acceptable forms. Some journals give reviewers who are not subscribers a brief subscription to the journal. Many journals publish a list of their reviewers for a given year in an issue early in the next year. Some journals arrange a social or educational event, generally at a large specialty meeting, to which their reviewers are invited. 