◆Peer-Review Forms: Getting the Best from Your Reviewers

Speaker:
Ann Steinecke
Academic Medicine
Washington, DC

Reporter:
Joanne Jessen
American Speech-Language-Hearing
Association
Rockville, Maryland

Do peer-review forms improve the review process? The answer depends on what piece of the process needs improving and on which stakeholder answers the question.

Ann Steinecke (*asteinecke@aamc.org*) shared research information on peer-review forms and gave an overview of various formats, which are often used in combination.

- **Global publication recommendation.** The reviewer indicates whether the manuscript should be accepted or rejected. Interestingly, few forms include "revise". This type of form is generally not sent to authors. Editors are looking for reviewer consensus, but the editor makes the final decision.

- **Ratings.** These may be dropdown boxes with a set of possible responses. The reviewer is asked to rate the paper on the importance of the topic, its contribution to the literature, scientific validity, originality, and clarity. Editors occasionally find that reviewers contradict their own ratings in their narratives.

- **Likert-type scales.** These are generally five-point numerical ratings that appear to be declining in popularity. They give a broad picture of the process but are not as useful with individual manuscripts. Again, the ratings may contradict narrative comments.

- **Open-ended questions and directed narratives.** Open-ended narratives are difficult for the reviewer. Often, the questions are difficult to answer, leave important gaps if the reviewer skips one or two, and tend to discourage further narrative comments. This format may be more useful in a second round of reviews. A variation, the directed narrative, asks the reviewer to write a narrative based on specific questions.

- **Checklists and dichotomous scales.** The benefits of such lists are that they provide guidance on what the journal considers important, give a clear picture of significant problems, and constitute an organized framework for feedback. The drawbacks are that they are overwhelming and, if generally negative, might "feel like a sledgehammer" to the author. They lack nuance, giving no inkling of the weight of a flaw.

- **Free response.** An open narrative assumes experience with reviewing and requires time and effort, but it does allow a detailed critique of the manuscript. Again, it may contradict responses to questions on other formats and presents issues of length and organization. Narratives sometimes are written in longhand, so legibility can pose a problem.

Clearly, one size does not fit all. New reviewers may tend to see options as black and white and prefer an extensive checklist that does not take a lot of time. Editors may find that the checklist format doesn't give enough information or that the reviews don't "add up". And authors may feel that reviewers didn't understand the paper or are biased and ask, "Where are my comments?" Longer narrative reviews may be slow in arriving.

Steinecke pointed out that the choice of form may depend on what is expected of reviewers for a particular journal. Reviewers may edit, critique methods, suggest or promote a different study, weigh the importance of the contribution to the literature, identify fatal flaws, or simply give thumbs up or thumbs down. The form should reflect the expectation of the journal's editor.

Other considerations in designing a form might be online or offline workflow, the volume of submissions, the number of reviewers, the decision-maker, the number of other forms, and the level of editing after acceptance. A form used for an online journal may be different from one for a paper journal, and a form for a clinical journal will differ from one for a basic-research journal.

As workflow processes and journal content move increasingly online, an opportunity exists for a journal to rethink its review process. Steinecke suggested some interesting alternatives, including a continuing process with review forms, reader quality ratings, letters to the editor, online discussion among reviewers, and citation counts accompanying the published article.◉