

# I've Been Sent a Manuscript to Review — Now What?

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You've just received an email invitation to review a manuscript for a journal. What should you do next?

Surprisingly, we rarely seem to consider this question in academic circles; I don't think that I encountered it even once in graduate school. I'm not sure why this is so, although perhaps we assume that the answers are so well-known as to warrant no discussion. My experience as a journal editor, as well as conversations with fellow editors, have led me to question this assumption.

There is a veritable cottage industry of user-friendly guides for how to conduct peer reviews (e.g., Bourne & Korngreen, 2006; Spigt & Arts, 2010), including one published in the *Observer* (Roediger, 2007), and I commend them to the reader. Still, few if any of these tutorials instruct prospective reviewers regarding what to do (a) after they receive a manuscript review invitation and (b) before they submit the review.

Most of the suggestions I offer may appear self-evident. Nevertheless, in my experience, they are commonly ignored or flouted by prospective reviewers, even those who are experienced scholars. My conjecture — and admittedly, it is only a hunch — is that the frustrating delays that authors routinely experience while awaiting feedback on submitted manuscripts stem largely from prospective reviewers' neglect of these pointers.

I apologize if some of my dos and don'ts come across as pedantic etiquette tips. I don't intend this article to be a Dear Abby Advice Column for Potential Journal Reviewers. But let's face it: We academicians are rarely taught or shown good manners (if you doubt that, I'll be happy to share a few a few choice manuscript reviews I've received over the years).

I offer these recommendations as current editor of an APS journal (*Clinical Psychological Science*, or *CPS*), past editor of another journal, current and past Associate Editor of two other journals, and current and past member of over a dozen editorial boards. Although my experiences may be somewhat idiosyncratic to journals in my primary field of study—clinical psychology—I suspect that they will be shared by journal editors in most if not all other psychological fields.

Without further ado, here are my eight tips for prospective journal reviewers.

## **Eight Dos and Don'ts for Reviewing**

### **1. Please consider saying yes, especially if you are an active researcher.**

As I remind my graduate students, article reviews can be a lot of work, but they can also be a wonderful opportunity to learn about research being conducted elsewhere in the field, as well as about how the peer-review system works. Nevertheless, the ubiquitous lament of every journal editor and associate editor I've met is the difficulty of finding fellow scholars who are willing to serve as peer reviewers. Some evidence from biology journals suggests that this task may be becoming increasingly difficult (Albert, Gow, Cobra, & Vines, 2016; Powell, 2016). These declining reviewer agreement rates aren't surprising. The demands on faculty members to publish high-impact papers and obtain grants have steadily increased, often without offsetting decreases in teaching and service expectations. Furthermore, many departments don't reward peer reviewing, so the small number of "free riders" who publish many papers but perform few or no reviews can escape under the radar without consequences.

When editors complain to me about their difficulties in finding peer reviewers, I respond with the words of Bill Clinton: "I feel your pain." For one manuscript I handled at *CPS*, I went through nine prospective reviewers (some even suggested by the authors), all of whom declined or never responded. After keeping the unfortunate authors waiting for a few months, I ultimately made the editorial decision myself without sending the manuscript out for peer review. I recently spoke with a journal editor who blew through 15 potential reviewers for a manuscript before identifying three who were willing to review it. I wish that such stories were atypical, but they are not. Survey data from science journals suggest that a small proportion of reviewers, perhaps 10%–20%, perform about half of all manuscript reviews (Publons, 2017).

I have even heard of researchers who regularly submit manuscripts to journals but openly state that they turn down all manuscript reviews. Fortunately, such individuals appear to be rare, although many highly published professors refuse to do more than a handful of manuscript reviews per year. On the positive side, I never cease to be amazed at the large number of prominent and overcommitted scholars who promptly and cheerfully agree to review manuscripts, and who return them on or well ahead of schedule. Most of our academic colleagues are generous and responsible, and we need to find better ways of recognizing and rewarding them (fortunately, there is provisional but encouraging progress in this regard; see Cantor & Gero, 2015).

The Golden Rule applies here: If you expect others to review your manuscripts, you should review others' manuscripts in return. Needless to say, if you are a member of an editorial board, you should virtually never turn down an invitation to review a manuscript from that journal unless it entails a conflict of interest or you have already fulfilled or exceeded your agreed-upon annual quota of reviews. Similarly, if you regularly submit manuscripts to Journal X, it is bad manners to turn down most or all reviews from Journal X.

Of course, many of us are far too busy. During the academic year, I receive an average of three to four peer-review requests per week from journals on which I'm not an editorial board member, and probably turn down more than half of them. To be clear, I'm not asking any of us to be martyrs. But we should all do our part and give back to the system.

## **2. If you can't do the review or don't want to, please say so promptly.**

As a long-time editor and associate editor, I am always surprised by the substantial proportion of prospective reviewers who never respond to invitations to reviews, even after repeated email requests sent across several weeks. As *CPS* editor, I'd estimate that about 25% of individuals who receive review requests never respond to them despite multiple prompts. The resulting periods of radio silence frequently delay the review process by several weeks while journal editors scramble to identify a sufficient number of reviewers — typically two or three — for a manuscript.

In fairness, some review requests surely end up in spam/junk email folders. Bearing that point in mind, any of us who might be asked to review manuscripts (which probably includes most of us reading this article) should check these folders regularly.

The bottom line: If you can't or don't want to do a review, let the action editor (the person handling the manuscript) know as soon as possible, ideally within 48 hours. That way, he or she will know to move on and not keep authors waiting needlessly.

## **3. If you have questions about whether you should perform the review, contact the action editor.**

Reviewers are sometimes not certain whether they can agree to a review request. They may have a potential conflict of interest (see more below); they may be a graduate student or postdoc and are unsure whether the action editor (a) is aware of that fact and (b) is fine with their performing the review anyway; they may have reviewed a previous version of the manuscript for another journal and are unsure whether they should review the revised version; and so on. In all of these cases, prospective reviewers should first seek a go-ahead from the action editor to conduct the review.

## **4. Suggest alternative reviewers if possible.**

If you decline a review invitation, you should *always* recommend alternative reviewers if you can. Such recommendations can be enormously helpful to action editors, especially for manuscripts in highly specialized research domains, for which identifying reviewers can be challenging. If the manuscript is so far out of your area of expertise that you don't feel knowledgeable enough to recommend alternative reviewers, let the action editor know that, too. (Earlier this year I received a request from an apparent predatory journal to review a manuscript on Laparoscopic Nissen Fundoplication to treat

gastroesophageal reflux disease; I had no idea what Laparoscopic Nissen Fundoplication was, and still don't). Such feedback also provides editors with a better understanding of your domains of reviewing expertise and nonexpertise.

**5. If you want to do the review but can't do it within the specified time interval, let the action editor know.**

When you receive a review request, you'll almost always be asked to complete it within a given period of time, such as 5 weeks. Some journals ask for 2 or 3 weeks, which is rarely realistic for overburdened faculty members. If you'd like to do the review, but need somewhat more time — say, an extra week or two — ask the action editor first. He or she can often extend the deadline a bit without much difficulty.

**6. Notify the action editor of any potential conflicts of interest.**

If you have a potential conflict of interest with respect to a submitted manuscript, let the action editor know before accepting the review request. He or she can then decide whether you should still review the manuscript. Perhaps you developed the Minneapolis Multipurpose Psychobabble Indicator, third edition (MMPI-3) and you receive royalties for it, and you've been asked to review a manuscript critical of the MMPI-3. In that case, you should promptly alert the action editor and ask whether you should still review it.

Other conflicts of interest are nonfinancial (Akl et al., 2014). One of the manuscript coauthors may be a collaborator, current academic reference, or close friend; or the manuscript may challenge a theoretical or empirical position in which you are powerfully invested. Some journals require individuals to report conflicts of interest when submitting manuscript reviews, but many do not.

**7. Try to return the review promptly; if you are delayed, let the action editor know.**

This one should go without saying, but it needs to be said anyway. Each day you delay returning your review past the deadline is another day that an author, sometimes a graduate student, postdoc, or young professor who is eagerly awaiting news on one of their first submitted manuscripts, may lose sleep over a much-awaited editorial decision. So try to prioritize manuscript reviews whenever you can.

Of course, unexpected things often come up, and almost all reviewers, myself included, sometimes run late. In such cases, inform the action editor and propose an alternative and realistic deadline.

**8. Don't go AWOL.**

Some reviewers mysteriously disappear for weeks or even months at a time, neglecting to respond to multiple inquiries from journal editors or editorial managers concerning the status of an overdue review. I have one straightforward recommendation for them: Don't do this. Not only will it make them less likely to be invited to editors' parties at the next APS convention, but it will risk keeping long-suffering authors waiting for additional weeks or months (as astute readers will observe, I'm not beyond using guilt as a persuasion tactic). I can speak from experience as a reviewer who is often a bit late: It's far better to apologize sheepishly for an overdue review and let the action editor know when to expect it than to disappear into the black hole of cyberspace.

## Concluding Thoughts

I harbor no illusions that my advice, even if heeded, will dramatically improve the peer-review process, let alone eliminate the inevitable author frustrations that come with it. Still, I hope that my perhaps quixotic etiquette lesson will raise the consciousness of at least some prospective reviewers and make them more cognizant of what and what not to do when that dreaded email request from a journal arrives in their inboxes.

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