

MEDICAL EDUCATION

Reviewing for Journals: The Next Step in Your Academic Career

Shobha Stack, MD, PhD, and Somnath Mookherjee, MD

Dr. Stack is associate director of Medical Student Programs at the University of Washington School of Medicine and an attending on the hospital medicine service of the University of Washington Medical Center. Dr. Mookherjee is assistant professor in the Division of General Internal Medicine at the University of Washington.

Reviewing for journals confers a multitude of benefits. Reviewers can quickly boost their knowledge in a content area by critically reading a manuscript and systematically critiquing it in writing. Exposure to various writing styles also allows reviewers to fine-tune their own diction. More tangible benefits include potential continuing medical education (CME) credit for well-written peer reviews, such as for the *Annals of Internal Medicine* and the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. Other journals, such as *Academic Medicine* and the *Journal of Hospital Medicine*, offer awards recognizing top reviewers who consistently turn in high-quality reviews. Becoming an accomplished reviewer bolsters your *curriculum vitae* by demonstrating a commitment to academic medicine. Interacting with fellow editors provides an opportunity to collaborate with like-minded colleagues at other institutions.

Despite these benefits, junior faculty assume that they are not qualified for the task. A common barrier to engaging in peer review is lack of confidence in one's ability to credibly and effectively review a paper. Yet the editors of the *British Medical Journal* found that the best reviews tend to come from early career physicians.¹ A practicing internist is already an expert in internal medicine and skilled in the competencies required to critically appraise most articles. A junior faculty member can further develop expertise on more specialized topics simply by purposefully reading and evaluating that area of the medical literature.

There are three main avenues to becoming a peer reviewer. The first is as simple as sending an e-mail. Contact a more senior faculty member and convey an interest in peer reviewing a journal submission. Ask whether he/she would be willing to serve as a reviewing mentor the next time he/she is offered a paper to review. If the senior faculty member does not have a review opportunity in hand, he/she may be able to connect you with journal editors as an aspiring reviewer. If there is a manuscript available for review, propose drafting the initial review, and request that the senior faculty member provide feedback. For many senior faculty this will be welcome assistance as well as an excellent opportunity to provide mentorship to a junior faculty member. The second avenue to becoming a reviewer is to send a brief introductory e-mail with areas of interest and your *curriculum vitae* to a member of the editorial board for a journal of interest. While this may seem a presumptuous step, the reality is that the offer will almost certainly be welcome as editors require a wide range of reviewers to call upon for the numerous manuscripts submitted every month. If you do receive a manuscript through this route, request a senior faculty member to critique your draft review. A final avenue is to visit the website for the journal of interest. Many journals, such as the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, have an online system allowing faculty to register as potential reviewers. However, unless a member of the editorial board is contacted as well, it may be a lengthy wait before a manuscript is offered for review.

Table 1 describes the basic structure of a peer review. Based on the available literature and our own experience in reviewing articles, we provide six recommendations for being an excellent reviewer.

Tip #1: Check your bandwidth.

The first step in writing a good review is to make sure that you actually have the time to do it. Many journals value swift responses to authors of submitted manuscripts, and editorial boards have a timeline for responding to authors with decisions regarding publications. As such, peer reviews are typically expected to be returned within two to three weeks. The average review takes approximately two to five hours, with a diminishing return on quality after three hours.¹ However, for the first review, it can often take up to eight hours as you start to master the process. Once you have established whether you have the time to complete the review, quickly respond to the request to review. If the answer is no, it is helpful for the editor to learn this as soon as possible so another reviewer can be invited without undue delay.

Tip #2: Calibrate to the journal.

Each journal has its own unique attributes. Before you start, examine a few issues to develop a sense of what kind of articles are typically accepted. What is the style of writing? Has anything similar to the manuscript in hand been published before? Review the journal's instructions for reviewers as well. Are the editors also looking for reviews of grammar and syntax or is it just the science?

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Component	Description
Recommendation form	This survey form is specific to the journal and allows you to rank areas such as interest to the readership, originality, methods, clarity, and your overall recommendation.
Confidential comments to the Editor	This brief paragraph summarizes your understanding of the article and allows you to list criticisms and questions. Indicate your recommendation for publication and any associated contingencies. If necessary, request additional review if the manuscript contains areas that are outside of your expertise.
Comments to the Author	
1. Overview	This is similar to the comments to the editor; however, do not indicate your recommendation regarding publication.
2. Major comments	Identify two to four points on the overarching themes of your review (e.g. overall clarity, contribution to the literature, accuracy of the science, conclusions, and other major concerns or questions).
3. Minor comments	These are specific points labelled according to their location in the paper detailing suggestions, corrections, and stylistic issues.

Tip #3: Slow down.

The best reviews are not done in one sitting, but rather they follow the mantra of “read—pause—critique—pause—recommend.” On the first pass, simply read through the manuscript. Assess the overall tone and purpose. Do you understand it? Do you believe it? Do you care? Put the manuscript down and come back to it later. On the second pass, read it again, writing down your notes and comments as you go. Take a break. On the third pass, review your comments, and make your final recommendation to the editor. At this point you have done your due diligence, having read the paper with an appreciation of the overarching theme and examined it down to the details of the prose and style.

Tip #4: Give precise and actionable feedback.

Consider the last time you received feedback on some aspect of your work. What made it helpful or unhelpful? In general, broad statements such as “great job” do not improve performance as much as specific feedback on what to do differently next time. This concept holds true with peer reviewing. Your comments must describe exactly where in the paper your comment refers, be clearly stated, and provide a corrective action to remedy the identified issue. Also, as you critique the paper, be sure to clearly distinguish between your preferences (i.e. “As a style preference...”) vs. factual errors (i.e. incorrect science). Make the level of importance of your com-

ments clear both to the authors and the editors: Explicitly label “strong recommendations,” and explain why. Making these distinctions requires some reflection—purposefully slowing yourself down and considering each comment.

Tip #5: Be thorough.

A great review is consistent and comprehensive from beginning to end. One way to do this when reviewing your first few manuscripts is to consider using a checklist as a guide to ensure that you thoroughly evaluate the key aspects of the paper. For example, to evaluate a systematic review, refer to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist.² For a randomized controlled trial, use the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) checklist.³ For other manuscripts, the more generalized, albeit lengthy, Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Checklist of Review Criteria is an excellent resource.⁴

Finally, don’t forget to read the tables and figures and scan the references. Do the data in the table match the results section? Is there protected health information in the figures? Are there glaring errors in the format of references (especially web references), or are there key articles in the field that are missing? A review is not complete without checking these items.

Tip #6: Be kind.

Scholarship can be a strenuous process, and criticism is not easy to take. Remember that your review is continued on page 3



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Table 2. Writing a Collegial Critique	
Sub-optimal reviewing prose	Optimal reviewing prose
This does not make sense.	Please clarify what is meant by...
Delete paragraph 3.	Consider rephrasing paragraph 3 as...
This is wrong.	Perhaps the authors meant to state that...

meant to help the editor make a decision on publication, as well as to help the authors strengthen their manuscript. Point out weaknesses, but do not forget to highlight strengths. This makes revisions easier to digest and shows the author that you are thoughtfully reading the paper—not just hunting for mistakes. As you write your comments, do so in a collaborative spirit and tone (Table 2). Never submit your review without rereading it for blunt or harsh comments—revise

your feedback, always erring on the side of kindness.

Conclusion

Reviewing for journals is beneficial for lifelong learning and your academic career. Getting started requires a little activation energy on your part but can be as easy as asking a senior faculty member if he/she would mentor you in reviewing a manuscript. Once you have a manuscript in hand, follow the six tips above to launch a successful venture into reviewing.

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