

How to write a peer review to improve scholarship: Do unto others as you would wish them do unto you.

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In academia, peer review functions as a quality-assurance mechanism which also aims to improve the scientific process as a whole. But few reviewers are provided with any training or mentoring on how to undertake a review. [Hugh McLaughlin](#) offers clarification on the process and the objective of peer review feedback and stresses the need for specific critical analysis for authors, which should be done in a supportive manner.



"I am afraid this manuscript may contribute not so much towards the field's advancement as much as toward its eventual demise."

"I am generally very happy to provide extensive suggestions and comments on manuscripts, but this submission was an absolute waste of my time."

"It is early in the year, but difficult to imagine any paper overtaking this one for lack of imagination, logic, or data it is beyond redemption."

The three quotes above were published in BuzzFeed ("[25 Brutally Honest Peer Review Comments From Scientists](#)") and were ostensibly culled from actual peer reviews. The [article](#) this blog was based on arose following a discussion between the editors-in-chief of international journals here and in the US following a joint presentation at the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) conference in Tampa last year. The comments above are comical; you may also have suffered similar responses in the past. I know I have had a few I would rather forget! They are at best mean-spirited and offer little help to either authors or editors.

The blinded peer review process is the bedrock of journal publishing ensuring holding the line about what is acceptable for publishing and what is not. There is an increasing demand for academics to publish quality papers and for editors to select only high quality manuscripts. Authors generally accept that a good peer review process will help improve their paper. Reviewers generally enjoy reading other academics work but also the opportunity to help someone else, knowing that they may receive help with their papers in the future. However, few reviewers are

provided with any training or mentoring on how to undertake a review. Most reviewers learn how to review by assessing articles.

Most journals will ask two or three reviewers, one of whom who is likely to be a board member, to assess a manuscript. If asked to review please consider the following: do you have the time and the subject knowledge? If the answer to either of these questions is no, then please decline the offer. Nothing creates greater dissatisfaction for editors than someone accepting to review and then submitting their review or a very poor review because the reviewer did not understand the epistemology, methodology or theoretical underpinnings of the article. Most journals now send out a copy of the abstract to help inform your decision to accept or not. Many journals also rate reviews in terms of their timeliness and their content.

Once the reviews have been received the editor considers these. If the two reviews are in agreement this usually makes the editors job easier. However, it is not uncommon to receive one reviewer assessing the article in need of 'minor revisions' and another as a 'reject'. In these cases, either the editor or a third experienced reviewer will be asked to assess the article. One of the biggest difficulties for authors is when they are given a minor revision on one submission that then is assessed as a major revision on re-submission. This can be hard to stomach, but it is possible to make a paper worse. It is also possible that the reviewers had become more critical and maybe should be challenged – in a constructive way! Not all recommendations need to be accepted by the author; however, a clear explanation for rejecting the feedback should accompany any revision that is resubmitted for examination.

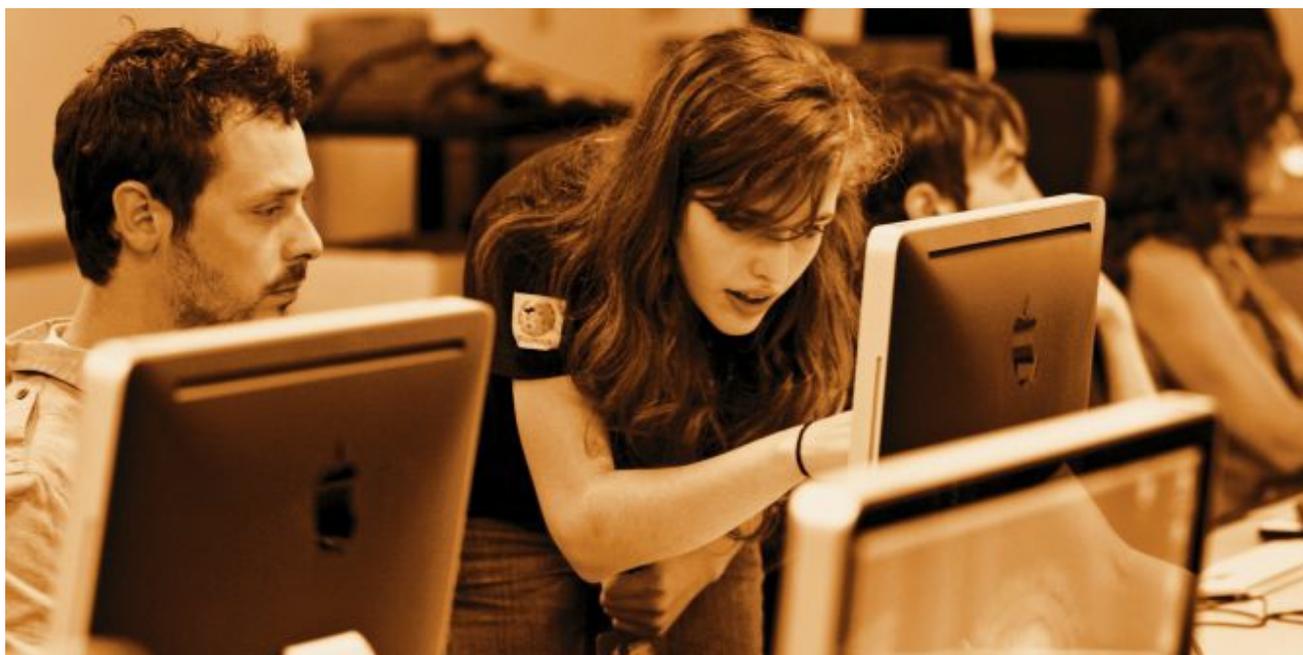


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Most journals include key question areas for the reviewers to comment upon in areas like methodology, structure and content. This should then be complemented with written comments about the strengths of the manuscript and then a specific critical analysis directing the author to areas where the paper should be improved and how this could be done, including suggesting specific bodies of knowledge or references that would help. Lastly, it helps editors if reviewers also identify any spelling or grammatical errors. Journals today also share with reviewers the comments that are returned to authors so that they can see whether the other reviewer(s) has identified the same issues or not.

Journals generally provide an option for the reviewer to provide confidential comments to the editor. This section can be useful when the article has areas outside the reviewer's expertise e.g. advanced statistical methods. However, I

have seen reviews where the confidential editors comments are longer than the review or that both are the same. The confidential comments should be used sparingly and only to highlight confidential issues to the editors.

Reviewers are, or want to be, authors; thus it important to ensure that we 'do unto others that you would wish them do unto us'. If this happens, reviews will be both critical and supportive, and both editors and authors will be happy!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

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