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"They've got it all wrong!" How to give constructive feedback in peer review

July 17, 2018

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Exploring how to frame your advice to authors

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The email may stare at you for a few days from your inbox, but you know you will have to open it sooner or later: an invitation to review a paper. Of course there is always the option to politely decline the request for whatever reason, but if you do decide to accept, you may just as well make the best out of it. Your review report can actually help a young researcher finalize his/her PhD, get a grant application accepted, or smooth someone's tenure track. So although a two-sentence report underlining how bad the paper is, or – the opposite, just containing the comment "accept as is" may look like an easy-way-out option, this isn't really going to help the author report better science, which is what this process *should* be all about.

The importance of peer review

Before we look at constructive criticism, let's first take a step back and consider the peer review process. The importance of peer review can hardly be overestimated. Peer review remains the backbone of the publishing process, and places the reviewer, along with the author, at the heart of academic publishing. Without peer review, a vital quality control mechanism in scientific communication would be missing. A well-executed peer review improves the scientific quality and presentation of a paper, makes sure that the research is embedded in the existing literature (and that previous work is acknowledged), verifies the originality, significance and relevance of the work, and ensures the reference list is complete and extensive enough.

Okay, but what is in it for the reviewer? Well, despite it sometimes being a time-consuming activity, there are in fact many benefits associated with peer reviewing (as well as it being a perfect way of returning the favour that you will have had from others reviewing *your* work, of course!). As a reviewer you are the first to see new research in your area. You can mentor young researchers and help them reach their goal(s). Spot new talent. Get inspiration for your own research. Network with the editors of your favorite journal. Or use your reviewing activities for your own career development, for example by downloading your stats from the [Elsevier Reviewer Recognition](#)

[platform](#) or [showcasing your reviewing activities on Mendeley](#) (and make sure your supervisor sees these!).

So here are a few tips to improve your review and thereby make it a more rewarding experience for you *and* your author(s). Before you kick things off, though, have a look at your journal's homepage to see if it has any specific guidelines on review which might be tailor-made to your specific subject community. These can help guide you in the right direction, particularly if you're new to reviewing, or new to this area.

Don't be a bully

Try to frame your feedback and criticism positively. What you want is to empower and enthuse the authors to develop their ideas, and not intimidate them by beating them over the head with their mistakes. "Don't tell the authors what paper they should have written; tell them how to improve the paper they have written", says an editor of *Astronomy and Computing*.

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Be specific

When you criticize certain statements made in the paper, try to be as specific as possible. "I don't think you explained your method very well" is much less useful than "Section 4.2 would benefit from a couple of sentences explaining in more detail how X follows from Y and how you have extended the work of Z". Also try to suggest practical, alternative approaches to address the problems that you have flagged. If there is as yet no technology or method available for addressing these, try to evaluate how well the authors have done without this in their paper.

Stay cool

Do not make your review personal and try not to write things in a way that you would not say to someone in person. Try to avoid being overly and unnecessary critical, or making statements that you can't substantiate.

Separate main from side issues

Keep your review focused on the research, and try not to get distracted by grammatical mistakes or sloppiness in the reference list. If the paper is full of such errors, tell the editor and ask whether professional copy editing is possible – or whether it is worthwhile to pursue the review at all if the standard of language is really that poor.

Quid pro quo

Generally, you would do well to imagine yourself in the shoes of the author of the paper that you are reviewing, and remember that someone else will, and has done the same for you. Think about the type of review that *you* would like to receive – and act accordingly!

Think twice

After writing your report, put it away for a day and then read it again. Ask yourself whether you really made a fair assessment, did not get too personal, and whether you addressed the main issues rather than getting bogged down in the fine details.

In conclusion

Lastly, some concluding advice from an editor: "Don't dig your heels in (unnecessarily). Some authors will not take your good advice. If the paper is over the quality threshold required for publication you have to let it go, even if you can see further improvements they could make."

In summary, preparing a positively framed, constructive and objective report can really make a difference for the author, and will ultimately also make your effort more rewarding. So the next time you see an email from an editor winking at you in your inbox, smile and open it!

Elsevier offers all kinds of resources for authors, such as the Elsevier [Webshop](#) which provides language and illustrations services, and the [Researcher Academy](#) which is full of information on how to write a good paper (and how to reply to a reviewer!) – you can always refer authors to these. You will also find plenty of practical information for reviewers on the [reviewers' hub](#). *Additional editing by Alice Smith***Sources**

<https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/sep/27/peer-review-10-tips-research-paper>

<https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1890/0012-9623-92.4.376>

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