

EDITORIAL

Beyond Objective and Balanced: Writing Constructive Manuscript Reviews^{*,†,‡}

The crafting of manuscript critiques relies on considerable efforts of largely volunteer peer reviewers—scholars and scientists called upon to use a complex set of analytic skills honed, typically, through years of experience in conducting research and providing critical analysis in the interest of improving outcome. It is an art requiring both skill and finesse (Foster, 2002). Although a resource-intensive process, the rewards of peer reviewing, for the discipline, the fields of inquiry, the scientific journals, and the authors make it a worthy investment. Manuscripts having undergone peer review, refined in response, and readied for publication following the scrutiny of editors, demonstrate the value of the process—the product surpasses the quality of the initial submission (Goodman, Berlin, Fletcher, & Fletcher, 1994).

But the process, in the eyes of authors, especially those newer to the publishing experience, can seem picky, peevish, prolonged, and, at times, painful. This is not the intent. Reviewers and editors invest in the critical review process to assure quality of the science—publishing articles deemed by editors to hold readership interest and contribute soundly to the extant body of scientific knowledge. So, where can the process go awry? Rather than being invigorated and informed by the review, authors may feel deflated and discouraged. In these instances, perhaps reviewers have fallen short in writing a *constructive* critique.

In many journals and texts from a variety of disciplines, editorials, chapters, and articles itemize and detail elements of a manuscript review, capturing their requisite and common ingredients (Alexander, 2005; Benos, Kirk, & Hall, 2003; Seals & Tanaka, 2000). The authors customarily

guide reviewers to construct a two-part critique, first presenting the overall strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript, (e.g., originality, relevance and saliency to the field, anticipated readership interest, organization, and style of writing), followed by a meticulous examination of the manuscript, section by section. Most advisory articles describe elements of review for quantitative studies. However, to apply the same advice to qualitative studies, one can easily extrapolate from a growing number of articles that guide researchers in writing qualitative manuscripts or grant proposals. The point is, however, that following the normative steps and responding to an exhaustive list of requisite items for a manuscript review does not necessarily constitute the writing of a *constructive* critique.

When authors read the eagerly awaited reviews of their manuscript, what do we hope the response will be? Based on the critique, we want authors to be able to differentiate between aspects of the manuscript that are strong and should remain, and those elements needing revision and refinement. Moreover, authors should know how to proceed in revising the sections of their manuscript needing improvement. This capacity to differentiate between “what works” and “what needs more work,” and, then, “how to go about working on it” defines *constructive* feedback. It is an essential ingredient for strengthening performance and improving outcome, whether the outcome is scientific writing, grant writing, teaching, or clinical practice. In other words, learners learn more efficiently and achieve desired goals more quickly when constructive feedback is offered and the learner has the opportunity, and the motivation, to respond to the feedback.

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Providing constructive feedback should be the goal of every reviewer. When critiques give feedback that enable authors to revise and resubmit a potentially publishable paper, the peer review process is working as intended. Responding to a survey of editors of nursing journals, 72 of 88 defined an “excellent review” as one containing specific, detailed suggestions on how the deficits in the manuscript might be remedied (Kearney & Freda, 2005). However, when authors respond to reviews by feeling devastated and dejected, baffled and bewildered, perhaps it is because reviewers have failed in giving feedback that points the author(s) to next steps in moving toward a publishable work. Reviewers, in short, have failed to serve as “author advocate.” In other words, the reviewer’s task goes beyond writing an objective and balanced critique that solely differentiates between what is right *versus* what is wrong. Rather, reviewers should write the review that they themselves would want to receive or that they would want a dedicated and talented colleague or doctoral student to receive—one that moves the manuscript closer to acceptance, a galley proof, and, most importantly, making a worthy contribution to the scientific literature in one’s field (Benos et al., 2003). Such a review holds no place for sarcasm, humiliation, or cynicism.

Nothing is more discouraging to a new investigator than a sarcastic, denigrating statement in a review. As a doctoral candidate, I was encouraged to submit a manuscript that my faculty advisor thought was a unique juxtaposition of two dimensions of adolescent development. As I slid the review from the envelope, I read the one on top that offered, literally, a one-word critique: “Superficial.” The other two reviews detailed the flaws of my first-ever manuscript submission but offered no advice for revision. I permanently filed the rejected paper, never to revisit the possibility of revising and resubmitting. Most of us can remember a harsh, critical comment that irritates long after the fact. However, those who are energized by teaching and delight in the nurturance of new scholars never want to be the source of such a long-term irritant. Instead, we want to serve a source of clarity, direction, and encouragement—treating the review process as something we do *with* each other, not *to* each other (Osgood, 2004).

Undoubtedly, a constructive critique requires more finesse and critical thinking, and, perhaps, more time, on the part of the reviewer. Consider the difference between merely assigning grades to students’ papers as compared to providing stu-

dents with feedback that will help them rewrite and submit an improved draft. Clearly, the latter task requires more time and a higher level of detailed feedback. Yet, it is worth it because we want authors to use reviews as a source of support and guidance for improving their presentation and writing skills. Constructive reviews constitute an investment with benefits to authors, journals, and the science.

Increasingly, editors and their boards are adopting strategies for improving and assuring the quality of reviews for their journals. Help ranges from orienting materials for new reviewers (provided by virtually all nursing editors according to a survey by Kearney and Freda (2005)) to score sheets requiring a ranking of all elements determined essential to a thorough review. In Kearney and Freda’s survey of 88 nurse editors, four of five said they provided a checklist to aid reviewers. It is becoming more common, as well, that professional meetings host sessions focused on elements and processes of review. Among the various methods for learning peer-reviewing skills, the self-taught instructional guides appear to hold the most promise (Kearney & Freda, 2005). However, the jury is still out as to the short-term impact of these various efforts. Unfortunately, the long-term impact (i.e., more than 6 months), has been found to be negligible to none (Kearney & Freda, 2005).

Just like writing a manuscript, critiquing is an applied skill that improves, like any other art, through *practice* and *feedback*. And, like any other applied skill, developing expertise requires ‘learning by doing’ or, as commonly termed, ‘experiential learning,’ that is enhanced by guidance from coaches (Davidoff, 2004), or, in the case of peer reviewing, from editors, associate editors, and peer reviewers. Unquestionably, this is why nearly all reviewers express appreciation in being sent, by the editor, post-review copies of the other critiques of the same manuscript that they have recently scrutinized and judged (Snell & Spencer, 2005). Comparing their own critiques with those of the other peer reviewers, provides reviewers with an excellent source of feedback. It also aids in communicating norms for manuscript reviews. With the same intent, many nursing editors include in their new reviewer orientation materials, examples of good reviews (Kearney & Freda, 2005). Acknowledging the value of practice for maintaining the skills of reviewing, it has even been suggested that we adopt a peer review certification process in which on-going certification would require completion of a defined minimum number of reviews annually (Davidoff,

2004). With or without a certification requirement, recognition of scholars' and researchers' involvement and investment in the peer review process, for example, by considering it when reviewing workload and quality in academic assignments and advancement, might further convey its pivotal contribution to the science and scholarship of the discipline (Emden, 1996; Kearney & Freda, 2005).

What more can be done to remind reviewers how it is they can serve as "author advocate," writing a constructive critique that aids scientific writers in moving their scholarly work forward? Are there other means for improving skills and outcome for such a critical task as manuscript reviewing—critical to our journals and the science of our discipline and its fields and methods of inquiry? Perhaps like all other essential aspects of educating new researchers and scholars, skills for manuscript critique should be incorporated into doctoral curricula. Not only might it aid new investigators called upon to review early on in their careers, but we can be assured that having a better understanding of how manuscripts are critiqued will help new investigators submit quality material themselves. For these reasons, course content focused on manuscript reviewing appears more and more in doctoral programs. Perhaps, by teaching the skills of manuscript critique in parallel with all other educational objectives for research preparation, we will see its long-term impact on the quality of reviews.

Critiquing manuscripts for scientific journals is a professional responsibility, and, if done constructively, an opportunity for learning, for reviewers and authors alike. Peer reviewers gain exposure to cutting-edge research and garner practice at critique, thus, furthering their own skills and art in reviewing, and authors receive the quality of feedback that will guide them toward a polished manuscript.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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