

AERA DIVISION J MANUAL FOR PROPOSAL REVIEWERS¹

The process of properly reviewing a manuscript is not intuitive but instead requires training and experience, which are not easily acquired. Journal editors depend on high-quality reviews and are often faced with reviews that do not quite achieve that desired level. A question the authors of this article asked is, “How is this experience gained?” The answer seemed to be, “By trial and error,” which is not the easiest or most systematic method (Provenzale & Stanley, 2006, p. 92).

A thoughtful review of a manuscript is a gift. It is a gift of expertise, of time, and of careful consideration. It is a gift for authors, editors, and the field. Performing a thoughtful peer evaluation of a manuscript is an acquired skill, however, and one that may not be formally taught in many academic departments or postgraduate training programs (Roberts, Coverdale, Edenharder, & Louie, 2004, p. 81).

How do people learn to review? I suspect most newly minted PhDs learn to review papers in the same way that the children in Albert Bandura’s famous 1960s studies learned aggressive responses, which is to say, by imitation (Roediger III, April 2007, p. 1).

Few students coming out of graduate school have much experience reviewing papers, and yet, at least for those students continuing on in research, reviewing is a skill that will be increasingly critical as their careers develop. In fact, being a good reviewer can greatly help a career (Roediger III, April 2007, p. 1).

Participation in the peer review process is a fundamental responsibility for those participating in any scholarly community. But, as the preceding quotes imply, the training and development of peer reviewers is often less than systematic. Those who are asked to review conference proposals (and other manuscripts) may have little experience or formal training in how to perform this critical task. Yet, the ability to conduct constructive, timely, and helpful reviews of peers’ work is:

- Paramount to the conduct of good research,
- Essential for the dissemination of information that is relevant and timely, and
- Integral to the professional and career development of scholars.

¹ At its May 2010 meeting, the Division J Council discussed the preparation of graduate students and junior scholars for reviewing conference proposals. In an effort to address this professional development concern, Division J Vice President Laura Perna established a task force comprised of Jacob Gross, Jillian Kinzie, and Bryan Gopaul. Jacob Gross took the lead on developing this document. Others (e.g., Angie Bell) also provided helpful feedback.

This document provides a systematic overview of how to conduct peer reviews. The guidelines are oriented toward conference proposal reviews but are also relevant to other types of reviews. While the document was drafted to inform graduate students and junior scholars, more seasoned researchers may also benefit from a refresher. This guide discusses: the goals of the reviewer, reasons not to conduct a review, the reviewer mindset, the importance of confidentiality, questions to consider in a review, and what not to do in a review. Although extensive, this guide is not intended to be exclusive or to serve as a simple checklist. There are aspects of reviewing that should be part of every reviewer's practice, but good peer review is as much a craft as it is a science. This guide is intended to serve as a general map to guide this critical process.

Goals of the Reviewer

A conference proposal reviewer has two primary goals:

1. Judging whether a proposal merits inclusion in the conference, and
2. Providing constructive feedback to the authors.

These two goals are not mutually exclusive. The reviewer should strive to provide an informative and constructive review for the authors regardless of whether ultimately recommending acceptance or rejection. A good review should help the program committee decide whether to include the proposal in the conference and help authors improve their work.

Reasons to Not Conduct a Review

Reviewers also have a responsibility to ensure that they are well-suited to conduct the review. Any decision to decline a review should be made as quickly as possible so as not to slow down the overall review process. Before agreeing to complete a review, the reviewer should first ensure that s/he:

- Has the time required to meet the deadline for completing the review; Meeting deadlines is obviously critical to the process of preparing a conference program;
- Understands the methods used (in order to provide thoughtful and accurate feedback); and
- Has no conflict of interest or biases.

Reviewer Mindset

Reviewers should adopt a civil and perhaps even humble mindset. Mazlish (2001) reminds us:

The reviewer must be conscious at all times of his or her own limitations. A certain humility is called for, when one realizes that one is being judged as much as judging. (Indeed, in an ideal reviewing world, every review would be accompanied by a review of the review; one would be enough, for there is no need for an infinite regress—though, in some sense, that is what scholarship is about.) A really original contribution, almost by definition, promises to go beyond the reviewer's initial competence and constitutes a learning experience for him or her.

Some experienced editors (e.g., Provenzale & Stanley, 2006; Roberts, et al., 2004; Seals & Tanaka, 2000) recommend that reviewers write their review as if they had to sign their names. Adopting the “reviewer mindset” helps ensure that:

- Feedback is directed toward the proposal (rather than being personalized or directed toward the authors);
- Authors are treated the same way reviewers like to be treated (i.e., the “golden rule”); and
- Comments are not insulting or demeaning in any way.

Importance of Confidentiality

The sixth edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association addresses peer review in sections 1.14 and 8.01-8.02.² The first section pertains to the ethical obligations of a reviewer, principally the confidential nature of the review process. Per APA ethics codes, reviewers may not cite, share, or quote from a proposal without the express permission of the author. Moreover, reviewers are directed to seek permission from the program committee before consulting a colleague on any aspect of a proposal. Masked reviews—in which the identity of authors and reviewers may be unknown to one or both parties—contribute to the confidentiality of the process. The American Psychological Association deems confidentiality an important component of protecting the intellectual property of authors. Confidentiality also contributes to an

² Certainly APA is not the only style guide used in the field. Nonetheless, many journals and associations within postsecondary education studies have adopted its guidelines and publication styles.

atmosphere of trust essential for sharing research as well as providing and receiving constructive feedback.

Questions to Consider in the Review

Numerous aspects of a proposal should be considered when recommending whether to include the proposal in the conference. Foremost, the reviewer should begin by assessing whether the topic of the proposal is appropriate for the conference. Though section chairs typically screen submissions for fit prior to sending them for review, the reviewer should keep in mind how the proposal fits into the conference as well as broader debates in the field. Key criteria to consider are the relevance of the issues raised in the article as well as the contribution the article makes to the field. Contributions might include shedding light on persistent questions, raising new questions and debates, and replicating prior studies to substantiate or refute previous findings.

Once a reviewer determines that the topic is appropriate and that the proposal addresses issues of substance, it is time to delve into the body of the work. Drawing on Provenzale and Stanley (2006) and others (Seals & Tanaka, 2000), we outline questions to ask about a proposal. This is a comprehensive list of questions is designed to guide a review of a proposal describing a research study; a subset of these questions would be appropriate for other types of proposals (e.g., symposium, scholarly papers).

1. Abstract & Title

- a. Does the abstract adequately describe and represent the content of the proposal?
- b. Is the objective of the proposal clearly and specifically stated in the abstract?
- c. Does the title fairly represent the topic and purpose?

2. Introduction & Literature Review

- a. Is the case made for the importance of the topic?
- b. Is recent and pertinent prior work cited?
- c. Are the research or scholarly questions clearly stated?

3. Methods

- a. Are appropriate theoretical and/or conceptual models used?

- b. Are theoretical and/or conceptual models well grounded and adequately explained?
 - c. Do the chosen methods match the research questions?
 - d. Is the rationale for choosing specific methods clear and convincing?
 - e. Are the sample and data source adequately described?
 - f. Are the methods for collecting and analyzing the data appropriate and clearly described?
 - g. Are limitations clearly specified?
4. Results
- a. Are the results clearly and systematically communicated?
 - b. If multiple methodological steps were taken, are findings from each conveyed in clear and straightforward ways?
5. Discussion
- a. Are the research questions restated in relationship to the results? Do the authors provide a clear sense of what questions were answered?
 - b. Is prior work in the area engaged vis-à-vis the results?
 - c. Are reasonable conclusions drawn within the scope of the results? Do the authors avoid over-interpreting the results?
 - d. Are counter-intuitive or contrary results discussed?
 - e. Are implications of the study for policy, practice, and/or future research identified and appropriately linked to the results?
6. References
- a. Are the references accurate and correctly provided? (Spot check)
 - b. Are the secondary sources fairly and appropriately interpreted?
7. Overall presentation³
- a. Is clear language used throughout?
 - b. Are terms that may be unfamiliar to readers clearly defined?
 - c. Are the arguments persuasive and relevant?

³ Empirical evidence bears out the importance of considering this final set of questions. In a study of why manuscripts were accepted or rejected for inclusion in the program for a national conference on medical education Provenzale and Stanley (2006) found that the top three reasons for accepting an article were it being considered (a) timely and relevant; (b) well-written and logically organized, and (c) well-designed with appropriate methodologies.

What Not to Do in a Review

Just as there are a number of considerations and components to include in a good review of a proposal there are also important things that should be avoided.

1. *Avoid commenting on the study the author 'should' have done.* It may be tempting to recommend that the author consider a different way of conducting the study (e.g., employing a different methodological approach). While such recommendations may be helpful for authors in conducting future work, they are of little value for a study that has been completed. Reviewers should frame comments within the confines of the study that was done and make suggestions for changes only when possible or as suggestions for future work. If the study has been conducted in such a way that its conclusions are highly suspect, then the reviewer should recommend rejection and provide constructive suggestions for the author.
2. *Put aside your ego.* It may be all too easy to fall victim to a degree of egocentrism in reading a proposal. Presumably, reviewers are asked to read a proposal because it is in an area of their expertise. Undoubtedly, there are differences of opinion or perspective on key issues and topics. Reviewers should avoid telling authors how they might have conducted a study given their perspectives on the phenomena of interest. It is important to evaluate the study from within the framework and arguments set forth by the author. Macklish (2001) notes, "How frequently does a reviewer ignore the author's intentions and tell readers how he or she would have written the book!"
3. *Do not lose the forest for the trees.* As Waser and Price (1992) note, a reviewer must read a proposal for the forest and the trees. That is to say, that the global issues of relevance, clarity, and contribution are foremost in the reviewing process as are more detailed issues of methodology and appropriate interpretation and inclusion of other sources. Reviewers should focus on grammar, spelling, style or particular citations only insofar as they distract from the clarity of the proposal.

4. *Avoid beginning the review the night before it is due or after the deadline.*
Timeliness is a vital aspect of the conference review process, as timely reviews are essential to assembling the conference program. We recommend that upon receipt of the proposals, the reviewer immediately scan them to determine whether s/he can conduct the reviews. This ensures enough time for the program committee to assign the review to someone else if necessary.
5. *Avoid focusing only on the negative aspects.* Pointing out what the authors do well is as important as highlighting weaknesses and areas of revision. This approach helps maintain a civil and collaborative approach in the review process for all involved and delineates areas that the authors may want to avoid revising.
6. *Don't be afraid to communicate other relevant information to the program committee.* Reviewers should contact the program chair if important questions arise during the review process. One particularly important issue for a program committee is whether a proposal may have been previously submitted or presented in another venue.

Organizing the Written Review

Although there is no single right way to write a review, we offer a few suggestions.

1. *Begin with a summative paragraph that restates succinctly the topic and goal of the proposal.* This approach ensures that you have understood the proposal and signals key information to a program committee that is going through a number of reviews at one time. The summative paragraph should also provide some indication of the overall contribution and significance of the proposal as well as a summative statement of the review.
2. *Identify three or four major recommendations for improving the proposal,* with the understanding that on occasion there may be no revisions needed. As Waser

and Price (1992) point out, the reviewer should not automatically adopt the perspective of a detective whose job it is to sleuth out a crime.

3. *Be concise, clear and succinct.* Although detail and depth is important in providing constructive feedback, being concise, clear and succinct will facilitate the job of the program committee and also improve the chances that the author will understand and take seriously feedback.

Conclusion

Reviewing conference proposals (as well as other manuscripts) is a fundamental responsibility for members of a scholarly committee. Reviewers should strive to provide feedback that helps the program committee decide whether to include the proposal in the conference and that helps the author improve the proposed work. We hope that this guide provides useful suggestions for how to approach and complete effective reviews.

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