

Editorial

How to Peer Review

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Good peer review is a challenge. A study suggests that it is common for reviewers to overlook major errors in the papers they review.¹ Some colleagues might suggest that the system is broken, whereas others, like we, assume that it is not perfect, never has been and probably never will be. While we strive to make the most of it and improve it, we also view it as a component in a larger filtering and feedback system in the publication process. It is complemented by feedback from research funders, internal review boards, co-authors, editors, publishers and readers, as well as future discoveries that adjust, support or overturn ideas and findings.

Finding the time needed to actually do the peer review is also a challenge, and increasingly so in this day and age. A study suggests that approximately 3 h could be an optimal amount of time to spend on the review of an average manuscript in *BMJ*.² We know, however, that some manuscripts and reviewers require more time to review, which is why it mostly takes weeks and not days or hours to hear back from reviewers. Factors such as availability, experience, manuscript length, complexity and language impact the time needed. There are many things to be aware of, but peer review demands more attention than what we can fit into our series of short how-to editorials, and it is a skill that can take years to fine-tune. It might compare with teaching, where some are better at it than others, but it does not mean that only star performers should do it. Accepting to review is not only a privilege and a helping hand to your community; it is also a good opportunity to learn from others in your own areas of interest. Here we capture a list of things to consider when you are asked to review.

1. Can you review the study?
 - Do you have a conflict of interest?
 - Do you have expertise in the subject?
 - Can you dedicate time to do this in the next 2–4 weeks?
2. Is the study original? Does it add new findings to the existing literature?
3. Is the study valuable to other practitioners or researchers?

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4. Does the study ask and answer a clear question or objective?
5. Do the title and abstract accurately describe the study?
6. Is the overall design of the study an appropriate response to the question or objective?
7. Are the conditions and selection/exclusion criteria of participants adequate?
8. Are the methods used for the study adequate, and do they warrant the conclusions?
9. Are the tables and figures appropriate?
10. Does the study meet ethical requirements or special requirements, such as CONSORT for RCTs?
11. Are the results trustworthy?
12. Is the discussion justified by the results of the manuscript, and does it include relevant findings from the existing literature?
13. Are the references relevant – should some be taken out or added?
14. Does the language of the study need significant improvement?

Write your assessment in a constructive and fair tone of voice, and do not discuss the study with anyone other than the Editors of the journal. The study has been sent to you in confidence. Make an overall assessment and recommendation to reject or accept with or without major or minor revisions. You can also use the space available to make confidential comments to the Editor about the significant things that resulted in your recommendation, but keep it constructive and try to only point out things that are also mentioned in your comments to the author. There are several longer and more personal how-to guides available, of which we list some below for your convenience and further reading.^{3,4,5}

References

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