
A New “Golden Rule” for Peer Review?

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Peer review is a cornerstone of scientific publishing. It relies on the altruistic efforts of voluntary referees and is thus an inherently cooperative endeavor (McPeck et al. 2009, Mulligan and Raphael 2010). An essential ingredient of any cooperative system is fairness (de Waal 2009, Anon. 2012); this applies to publishing as much as any other endeavor. However, anyone with more than a passing familiarity with the peer review process is likely to have experienced behaviors that are not fair. Some referees abuse their influence and anonymity to make criticisms that are undue or inaccurate (Lawrence 2003, Gray 2004, Hart 2004), and editors sometimes turn a blind eye to such behavior. This undermines the integrity of academic publication, lowers productivity, delays progress, and discourages talented researchers from pursuing academic careers.

A new “golden rule”

In an insightful editorial, McPeck et al. (2009) suggested a “golden rule” of peer review.

Review for others as you would have others review for you.

They emphasized that the peer review system depends on reciprocal altruism, reminded referees that their own behavior directly affects the integrity of the system, and argued that referees should be prompt, thorough, fair, and constructive (McPeck et al. 2009). This essay is mainly concerned with the latter two descriptors, *fair and constructive*. As an author and editor, I have been alarmed by some referees’ reports, which have lacked objectivity, and at times been spiteful or offensive. Offensive behavior is not generally tolerated in the workplace, or by society at large; why is it tolerated from anonymous reviewers?

Unprofessional (rude or aggressive) comments by referees can damage the reputation of journals and their review process, encourage the recipient to engage in similarly inappropriate behavior, or even discourage some from a career in research (Statzner and Resh 2010). Harsh reviews may be especially disheartening for young scientists (Schäfer et al. 2011). Rates of depression are abnormally high among postgraduate students and early-career researchers (Gewin 2012). To the thick-skinned and self-assured, derisive comments from reviewers may be water off a duck’s back. For those suffering depression, such

attacks can be shattering.

I suggest a simple, additional golden rule of peer review:

If you wouldn't say it in person, don't say it in an anonymous review.

I am not suggesting referees should waive their right to anonymity. Even fair and balanced criticism could provoke resentment, so the right to anonymity is important. Nor do I wish to imply that referees should refrain from criticism; it is a referee's role to criticize. However, criticism should be offered constructively, and without pejorative language. In choosing how to word the criticism, you should imagine you are delivering it to the author in person. I recognize that some people do not hesitate to be rude, even face-to-face. My plea will do little to change those people—they are beyond hope. However, in my experience, such individuals are (thankfully) rare. Most of us would be reluctant to say anything offensive to a person's face. Why then do referees do so under the veil of anonymity?

Dos and don'ts for referees

The referee has a responsibility to be objective, fair and to write clear statements that are of value to the writer in helping them to improve their science (Gray 2004).

1. *Refrain from denigrating or insulting language.* I was once shocked to see the following remark in a referee's report (complete with upper-case lettering and two exclamation marks): "THIS STATEMENT IS SIMPLY RUBBISH!!" Whether my statement was correct or not, the referee failed to meet even the most basic standards of professional courtesy.
2. *Be critical, but be constructive.* If you think a manuscript needs improvement, say so. But also indicate *how* it can be improved. Diffuse statements (e.g., "this paper is poorly written/contains errors") are meaningless unless supported by examples. What are the errors? How can the writing be improved? Vague criticisms cannot help to improve a manuscript. All they can do is to offend and discourage.
3. *Don't be too adamant.* What is perceived by a referee to be an error in a manuscript is often simply the result of an ambiguous sentence, an omitted detail, or (perish the thought!) a mistake on the part of the reviewer. I was once rudely rebuked by an anonymous referee for supposedly misrepresenting my own findings. In fact, the reviewer had misunderstood the paper. Perhaps my wording was open to misinterpretation, but the rebuke was unjustified and inappropriate. When making a criticism or evaluation, referees should indicate their level of confidence (Roff 2004).

For example, your comment can be posed as a question (“Doesn’t this contradict the previous statement on line number...?”), or simply be prefaced with a qualifier (“I could be mistaken, but...”).

Even if you feel no ethical obligation to be fair and constructive, self-preservation should be sufficient motive. Referees’ comments often give clues to their identity, and the denigrated author may one day review a paper of your own. I am not suggesting they ought to retaliate with a similarly spiteful review. However, since (supposed) anonymity clearly brings out the worst in some people, I suspect such retaliations are all too common. Even if you are confident the author could never deduce your identity, the practice of writing spiteful reviews is perpetuated by the simple fact that it is so commonplace. We have created a culture in which offensive behavior is so widespread as to be considered almost normal. As authors, none of us benefit from such a culture.

The role of editors

Editors can do much to guide the behavior of referees (Bauer 2004). For example, journals often issue a set of instructions to referees when their services are requested. As a referee for *Pacific Conservation Biology* some years ago, I was impressed to receive instructions from then-Editor H. F. Recher, which encouraged referees to be constructive and stated that “at no time should referees denigrate the work of others.” I applaud this stance, and suggest other journals include a similar statement in their instructions to referees (see also Roff 2004).

If reviewers do make insulting comments, editors should not communicate these to the author. As an editor, I have occasionally removed offensive remarks from referees’ reports before passing them on to authors. In every case the substance of the referees’ criticism was still clear; the pejorative language was unnecessary.

Impolite comments by referees may sometimes be born out of frustration. Correcting scores of errors in a poorly written manuscript does try one’s patience. Journals can help by giving referees the choice to access the manuscript as a Word file so that minor changes can be suggested quickly and easily using the “track changes” tool. This saves the referee time, and minimizes frustration.

Referees, like authors, can also be given feedback on their performance. The practice by some journals of blind carbon-copying referees on the decision letter to authors is helpful in this regard. Referees can see how their assessment compared with those of the other referees and the editor (Browman 2004).

Why does it matter?

Despite the angst caused me by offensive reviewers, I have persevered with my publishing career (albeit with dented enthusiasm). However, I know of talented young researchers who have been discouraged from publishing their work because of cruel remarks by referees. The ethical implications are obvious, but this is also unfortunate because these individuals had much to offer. A great deal of time and resources are invested in young researchers, yet many are driven away from academic careers by the unscrupulous behavior of some referees. Pursuing a research career is difficult enough already; authors should not have to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous reviewers.

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