

How to Review a Journal Article: Suggestions for First-Time Reviewers and Reminders for Seasoned Experts

Guidelines for Reviewing

Here are some things you should consider as you examine a manuscript and write your review:

Look for the “intellectual plot-line” of the article. You can do this from first skimming through the manuscript and then giving it a once-over read. As you do this, ask the major questions that are central to the review process:

1. What is the purpose of this article?
2. Why is it important to investigate or examine the subject of the article?
3. How are the authors carrying out the task? Are their methods and comments appropriate and adequate to the task?
4. What do they claim to have found out? Are the findings clearly stated?
5. How does this advance knowledge in the field?

How well do the authors place their findings or comments within the context of ongoing scholarly inquiry about this topic? Look at the organization of the article. Can you find answers to the above questions quickly and easily? Can you trace the logic consistently from the opening paragraphs to the conclusion?

Then go back to the opening paragraphs of the article. Is the groundwork adequately and clearly laid to guide readers into the topic that is being addressed? Is it clear what the authors are talking about? Do they make the case that this is an important area for inquiry or examination?

An early section of many articles is usually a review of the existing literature on this topic. Do the authors present a convincing line of argument here—or does it appear that they are just name-dropping (citing sources that may be important, without a clear underlying logic for how they may be important)? Do the authors focus on ideas, or merely on discrete facts or findings? Have they given sufficient attention to theory—the cumulative attempts at prior explanations for the questions they are investigating? In short: How well do the authors set the stage for the problem or issue that they are reporting?

In the case of a research article, the section presenting research results is surely the heart of the article—though not its soul (which the reader should find in the opening paragraphs and in the discussion section). Reviewers might consider four questions here:

1. Does the results section tell a story—taking the reader from the research questions posed earlier to their answers in the data? Is the logic clear?
2. Are the tables and figures clear and succinct? Can they be “read” easily for major findings by themselves, or should there be additional information provided? Are the authors’ tables consistent with the format of currently accepted norms regarding data presentation? Are the tables and/or figures necessary?
3. Do the authors present too many tables or figures in the form of undigested findings? Are all of them necessary in order to tell the story of this research

- inquiry; or can some be combined? Remember that tables and figures are very expensive and can take up a lot of space. Also remember that undigested data obscure rather than advance the cumulative development of knowledge in a field.
4. Are the results presented both statistically and substantively meaningful? Have the authors stayed within the bounds of the results their data will support?

The writing style is important. Consider the three guidelines for successful communication—to be clear, concise, and correct—and whether the authors have achieved it:

1. Is the writing clear? Do the authors communicate their ideas using direct, straightforward, and unambiguous words and phrases? Have they avoided jargon (statistical or conceptual) that would interfere with the communication of their procedures or ideas? Have they clearly and satisfactorily explained the key concepts relevant to the article?
2. Is the writing concise? Are too many words or paragraphs or sections used to present what could be communicated more simply?
3. Is the writing correct? Many writers have only a rudimentary grasp of grammar and punctuation, and that results in meandering commas, clauses in complex sentences that are struggling to find their verbs, and adjectives or even nouns that remain quite ambiguous about their antecedents in the sentence. Does the article have a foreign accent, i.e., is it clear that a native speaker of English did not write it? These are not merely technical issues of grammar to be somehow dealt with by a copy-editor down the line. Rather they involve the successful communication of a set of ideas to an audience; and this is the basis of scholarship today.

Your evaluation to the editor: Should this paper be (a) rejected for this journal? or (b) does it show sufficient promise for revision, in ways that you have clearly demonstrated in your review, to encourage the authors to invest significant time and energy in revision for this journal? Your bottom-line advice to the editor is crucial. Make a decision; state it clearly in your remarks to the editor in the space provided. Remember that not all of the articles submitted to a journal will be published.

Some reasons to reject a manuscript:

1. The issues have already been addressed in prior studies;
2. The data have been collected in such a way as to preclude useful investigation;
3. The manuscript is not ready for publication—it is incomplete, in the improper format, or error-ridden.

Most rejected articles do find a home in other journals. Don't tease authors with hopes for publication in the *NECTFL Review* if you feel it is not likely.

Good Reviews and Bad Reviews

A good review is supportive, constructive, thoughtful, and fair. It identifies both strengths and weaknesses, and offers concrete suggestions for improvements. It acknowledges the reviewer's biases where appropriate, and justifies the reviewer's conclusions.

A bad review is superficial, nasty, petty, self-serving, or arrogant. It indulges the reviewer's biases with no justification. It focuses exclusively on weaknesses and offers no specific suggestions for improvement.

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