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What Makes a Good Peer Review? An Author's Perspective

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Introduction

When an author submits a manuscript for publication in a journal, it is usually the end result of significant commitment to the research process. While there are a number of motivations for publishing, the strongest is often the desire to contribute to a body of knowledge. Submission of a manuscript to a journal also marks the beginning of the peer review process. Competition for publishing space is increasing, however, with the numbers of papers submitted to high impact journals growing at a rate of approximately 15% each year (McCook, 2006). Inevitably, more submissions mean more rejections, appeals and complaints about the peer review process (McCrook, 2006), but the publishing industry needs to continue to meet authors' needs in order to maintain a competitive environment.

The review process should benefit the author, editor and reviewers. The author has the opportunity to expose their work for constructive critique, the reviewer has the opportunity to be kept informed of what is being published in their field, and the editor receives expert opinion so that quality papers are published. Most nurse academics and advanced practice nurses will be asked to review manuscripts submitted for publication in journals at some time during their careers. Reviews are important for maintaining the integrity of a journal and can be a process for exposing the author to new ideas and perspectives (Meier 1992). Most nurses, however, are not formally taught how to review a manuscript, and consequently a review may contribute little in the way of constructive guidance for the author. So what makes a good peer review from an author's perspective?

Understanding the review process

Skolnick (1991) reported an interesting incident where a major medical journal was 'hoodwinked' and deceived by the authors of an article who stood to profit from the publication. He wrote, 'From time to time, even the most prestigious science journals publish erroneous or fraudulent data, unjustified conclusions, and sometimes balderdash'. The intention of peer review of journal manuscripts is to maintain the integrity of a discipline such as nursing, and over time advance scholarly standards and practice. Readers of published articles are usually expert in limited areas and so they rely on the peer-review process to ensure that credible research is published. When that credibility is threatened, as in the case reported by Skolnick (1991), there is usually outcry from readers.

Reviewers are usually selected from experts in the topic discussed in the manuscript, and therefore the process of peer review is critical to establishing a reliable body of research and knowledge. It is anticipated that during the review process flaws will be identified by reviewers and, with advice and encouragement; authors may undertake revisions which should result in further development of the manuscript prior to publication.

Reviewers return an evaluation of the manuscript to the journal editor, including suggested areas where the article could be improved. During this process, the role of the reviewer is that of advisor,

and the journal editor is not obliged to accept reviewers' opinions. Reviewer evaluations usually include a recommendation to accept the manuscript, to return it to the authors for revision with specific recommendations, or to reject it. Reviewers may have widely discrepant opinions about a study; hence an editor receives two reviews at opposing ends of the spectrum and will either make a final decision or solicit an additional review. The editor's final decision may be influenced by many factors, such as whether the paper meets the aims and scope of the journal and offers new knowledge.

The author's perspective

The main complaints authors have about the review process is that they feel their paper has been misunderstood by reviewers and editors, not read thoroughly, or that reviewers have made an error in judgment (Molassiotis & Richardson 2004). There are many potential faults within a study and the reporting of the research process. My question from an author's perspective is, 'Where is the rejection point for a manuscript?' The review process is almost entirely subjective, and so how do reviewers define the differential importance of the faults within the manuscript? The review process is filled with inconsistency, even though most journals have guidelines for reviewers to follow. Inconsistency between reviewers is compounded when inadequate explanation is given to the author. Another common complaint from authors is that the peer review process is slow. It typically takes several months, or even several years in some disciplines, for a submitted paper to be published. When agreeing to act as a reviewer, there is a responsibility to do a thorough job. For these reasons, reviewers must be responsible for alerting the editor if they are not competent to review the paper or do not have the time to commit to a comprehensive review and should not to hold up the progress of the paper. Interestingly, extensive time commitment for a good review may not be pertinent because research has revealed that spending longer than three hours on a review does not appear to increase its quality as rated by editors and authors (Black et al 1998).

Authors perceive that some reviewers can be critical of conclusions that contradict their own views, and lenient towards those that accord with them (McCrook 2006). Also, critics of the peer review system suggest that some reviewers are unqualified and others, because of personal or professional rivalry, are biased (Kassirer & Campion 1994).

The author is responsible for selecting the right journal to submit the manuscript to, eliminating any clumsy mistakes, and for developing the full potential of the chosen topic. High impact journals have rejection rates from 70 to 94%, with half the submitted papers not reaching the peer review stage (McCook 2006). Competition is therefore fierce and it is in an author's best interest not to waste the editor's or reviewers' time with an ill-prepared paper. It is unfair to rely on the review process to assist in the development of a paper and then to respond angrily when it is rejected.

What makes a good review?

The review should be a constructive document demonstrating that the reviewer has comprehended the topic of the paper. At the same time, authors will appreciate the identification of any flaws in content or recommendations to strengthen the paper. It is important that authors receive detailed feedback from reviewers about their paper in a non-hostile tone, regardless of the recommendation to revise, accept or reject it. Peer review is a far from perfect process, but it can provide useful guidance for authors when reviewers have commitment to working in the author's interest. The following can guide reviewers wanting to provide a good review for authors, and can also serve as a checklist for authors before submitting papers:

- Title of paper
Does the title reflect the contents of the paper? Will the keywords enable the paper to be located?
- Summary of paper
This needs to be only a few sentences but it demonstrates to the author that the reviewer understood the paper enough to summarize it.
- Good things about the paper
Identify the merit in the paper. This is particularly recommended if the review is critical. Such introductions are collegial and enable the author to focus on further developing the areas of merit.
- Major suggestions
It is important to break the review into major and minor comments. Major comments reflect areas that the author should revise, and affect the capacity of the paper to convey the intended meaning. Molassiotis and Richardson (2004) suggest that the reviewer should ask themselves three pertinent questions and documenting the responses to the questions would assist the author to revise the paper.

 Do I understand it?
 Do I believe it?
 Do I care? (the 'so what' factor).

Reviewers can also help the author by supplying additional citations and references rather than alluding to the presence of other published work.

It can be useful to ask the author questions that, when answered, will fill the gaps. Authors find it most useful when reviewers are constructive and succinctly suggest improvements.

- Minor suggestions
Comments on style, figures, grammar, etc are considered minor. If these aspects of the paper are particularly poor and affect the paper's readability and presentation, then they might escalate to the 'major comments' section. It is often useful to list these comments by page number.
- Recommendations
Interestingly, reviewers tend most often to agree on what should not be published, and there is less agreement on what is suitable for publication (Howard and Wilkinson 1998). Editors usually keep lists of reviewers and often this will include information about the quality of the review. Journals also have appeal processes in place if authors receive a review that they consider hostile or not constructive.

Conclusion

A good review can provide authors with positive feedback and constructive criticism that will assist in developing the paper under consideration, but also have a wider impact on the quality of research reported in nursing journals. While the peer review system is not without faults, it can serve the purposes of both editor and author. When it works well, it can improve the quality and validity of publications while contributing to the development of the nursing knowledge base and of authors' writing skills.

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