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On Reviewing Well

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Without peer reviewers, we would have exorbitant fees for publications (because we would have to hire professional reviewers); we would have potentially skewed publications (because we would have the editor's view of a manuscript); or we would have poor quality (because minimal feedback was provided). Peer reviewers are the advisors to the editor and, in most cases, the content and process experts.

The profession is fortunate to have many highly skilled reviewers who know both content and process related to reviewing. Yet, every year new nurses join the ranks of reviewers and often have little if any preparation to be reviewers. What they know often derives from what they experienced as authors. Because reviewers are so essential to the creation of a substantive body of knowledge, these new reviewers need to know what to expect from the review process and what constitutes the potential issues related to reviews. Editors often make clear the timelines and the process. Less information exists, however, about what constitutes a good review. As Shirey (2012) pointed out, in order to be effective, reviewers must have an understanding of the role of a reviewer. That role is analogous to the skin of a person. Just like the skin is the first line of defense against infections, so too reviewers are the first line of defense against spurious or inadequate writing.

Many authors thank the editor for the feedback because, they say, the feedback makes them a better writer. I concur. I learn from reviews of my writing, and in my editor role, I learn from reviews of the writings of others. While some authors feel grateful for feedback, others become defensive and challenge the comments the reviewers make. In some cases, this is a wise move. A reviewer and an editor may not have the same expertise as the author. In other cases, the defensiveness could be avoided based on how the reviewer delivers the message. Let me explain.

The Attacking Review

As an editor, I infrequently see content or process issues I challenge. The reviewers are "right on target" with almost all comments they make. I do, however, sometimes challenge the way the message is delivered. From my perspective, the need to shred an author's self confidence has little if any value. If a reviewer says something that suggests this is the worst manuscript he or she has ever read, I will change that message to something about the manuscript lacking rigor or needing professional editorial assistance, depending on what the intended message is. The point here is: if you want to be heard, create your message in the language you would want to hear.

A common example a reviewer might make is the "shorthand" version of the message "more thought needs to be given to how this manuscript fits with this journal." The shorthand message often is stated as "this reads like a graduate school paper." In some cases, it clearly is written in that manner; in others, it simply may reflect the naiveté of the author's writing style.

The Wishy-Washy Review

Sometimes a reviewer simply cannot commit to a manuscript being acceptable or not. I too have experienced such situations where I vacillate about the recommended action. The design might be good, but not as good as it could be, maybe the number of subjects left something to be desired, or the content was really good but the writing obfuscated the content for the average reader. The reviewer may state that he or she could make a case either way: accept or reject. The point here is: a good reviewer has expressed that dilemma so clearly that the editor can understand the struggle. The editor then can decide if other manuscripts have addressed the topic well enough or if the journal should/could invest the effort to move the manuscript to an acceptable state.

The Too Tactful Review

Some reviewers attempt to be polite. In doing so, they may couch critical points in such soft language that the statements sound like "possible considerations" when in fact the reviewer thinks those essential points must be fixed. The point here is: saying clearly and kindly what the issues with a manuscript are is a struggle every reviewer faces. Delivering negative messages in a "tactful" manner may mean that the person won't get the point.

The Exceptional Review

When reviewers are of greatest value is when they can articulate what the issues are in a clear and succinct manner and provide some examples. For instance, if the manuscript's title suggests it is about outcomes, but the actual approach was designed to provide perceptions about outcomes, offering the rewording to insert "perceptions of" before outcomes helps the author understand the needed changes. The exceptional review does not rework the statistics, but may raise questions about the particular analysis. The exceptional review may even provide a listing of points so that the author can check off each item as it is addressed. The goal is to turn the manuscript into its best form as quickly as possible, and reviewers play a major role in helping authors achieve timeliness and clarity.

What this Means for the Reviewer

Being too soft only confuses the author. Being too harsh only upsets the author. Being unclear only misses the point. So what can reviewers do to be exceptional? Here are a couple of suggestions. In my view, I think I spend more time (proportionally) in writing the review than I do in reading a manuscript. My time isn't spent focusing about what content needs to be fixed; I am usually clear on that. I spend my time n figuring out how to express my critique so it will be most valuable to the editor and subsequently the author. Even if I have a brilliant insight, if I cannot say it in a way it will be received positively, it isn't useful. What if I cannot find the right words/tone needed?

Almost every journal review system has a section that means these comments are for the editor only. This is where reviewers can be as blunt as they want because those comments are not directly shared with the authors. This area can provide a context for the editor to understand the points that are made in the review. The editor can decide then what the actual review comments say in the context of the private comments. The editor can serve as the translator for those confidential comments.

Desired Outcomes

Why do we care about the nature of the review provided? We care because the reviews can take a meager manuscript and create something acceptable or take an acceptable manuscript and create an exceptional one. Smith (2008) may have said it best: "the most important question with peer review is not whether to abandon it, but how to improve it" (p 180). That is our task as editors (heed what the reviewers say), as reviewers (be thoughtful and clear), and as authors (take the free advice and benefit from it). Every effort we make toward reviewing well improves the nature of peer review.

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