

How to choose and become a reviewer for a scientific medical journal

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ABSTRACT

Peer review is the process of subjecting an author's scholarly work, research or ideas to the scrutiny of others who are experts in the same field. The peer review of scientific manuscripts is a cornerstone of modern science and medicine. Some journals have difficulty in finding appropriate reviewers who are able to complete reviews on time avoiding publication delay. We discuss some of the main issues involved during the peer review process. The reviewer has a direct and important impact on the quality of a scientific medical Journal. Editors select reviewers on the basis of their expertise. Reviewers are more likely to accept to review a manuscript when it is relevant to their area of interest. They should respond to ethical principles, excluding any conflict of interest condition. The reviewer has to be professional, constructive, tactful, empathetic and respectful. Structured approaches, quality indicators and step-by-step process check list formats could be useful in obtaining a good review.

*The Reviewer is a consultant:
his goal is to improve the paper at hand, not to make it into a different study*

Introduction

Peer review is the process of subjecting an author's scholarly work, research or ideas to the scrutiny of others who are experts in the same field. The Institute for Scientific Information only considers journals that are peer-reviewed as candidates to receive Impact Factors.¹ In Internal Medicine the job of a reviewer is multifaceted, including several skills, referred not only to the expertise in the specific field required, but also to his competencies in evidence-and value-based medicine, statistics, ethics and clinical judgment in the

complexity of real word.² Reviews have a direct and important impact on the quality of a journal. The emphasis of our reviews should be to help the authors on how to improve their work and therefore to improve the overall quality of the work in our research community. In this technical note we will use interchangeably the terms of a reviewer (as a person who writes critical reviews for a newspaper or other publication) and a referee (as an expert who judges the manuscript of an article or book to decide if it should be published).

Who gets invited to review? Between difficulties and opportunities

Someone believes that there is little evidence that the peer review process actually works effectively.³ For this reason we must be sure to involve talented professionals who can ensure an adequate editorial process to our expectations. In general, editors need to invite 6 to 7 reviewers to get 2 to 3 acceptances to review, but for about one out of eight papers, editors have to invite 10 or more referees to get enough acceptances.⁴ On average, a reviewer will conduct approximately eight reviews per year, according to a study on peer review by the Publishing Research Consortium (PRC).⁵ Time needed to review one paper is around six hours.⁶ Peer reviewer can be anyone who has competence and expertise in the subject areas that

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the journal covers. Reviewers are more likely to accept to review a manuscript when it is relevant to their area of interest. Lack of time is the principal factor in the decision to decline.⁷ Some general criteria may be useful in choosing reviewers: i) recognized experts in the field, including women;⁸ ii) do not *only* recommend the biggest names in the field: the probability that they can comply with your request is minimal; iii) do not look for reviewers among your friends. The main goal of peer review is to assess and improve manuscripts before publication. Choosing some friends that will not challenge your research in any way will deprive the objective possibility to improve your manuscript; iv) junior reviewers (generally the most responsive), under the supervision of a mentor if necessary; v) expert and updated retired professionals, with a lot of free time available; vi) editorial board members (providing about 30% of reviews); vii) potential reviewers recommended by the authors, better if not personally known to them.

We have to assure the anonymity of the reviewing process. Journals will keep a rather large reviewer bank, so that reviewers do not get burnt out, overwhelmed or time constrained from reviewing multiple articles simultaneously. Reviewers are asked to decline if: i) there is a real or perceived conflict of interest (see further); ii) they cannot review in a timely manner (at most 2 weeks); iii) the content is out of their area of expertise.⁹

Ethical responsibilities of a reviewer (but for Editors too)

Adherence to ethics requires a more careful analysis of the paper as well as a more time spending in our review, counterbalanced by the opportunity of getting a better result for both the manuscript and the journal.¹⁰ The idea is that everyone should get a similar and unbiased review. First, the reviewer has to operate according to a specific peer review policy applied by the Journal (*e.g.*, *single- vs double-blind* peer review are the most common methods; for a deep

discussion, see the next paragraph). The reviewer has to provide an honest, critical assessment of the research, accepting manuscripts for review only in his/her areas of expertise.¹¹ She/he has the unpleasant responsibility of reporting suspected duplicate publication, fraud, plagiarism, or other ethical concerns in the research. Plagiarism is a common problem.¹² It occurs whenever you use either without proper attribution: *'if you paraphrase another author's ideas in your own words then you need a citation, but, if you copy verbatim another author's words then you need to put the copied text in quotes and include a citation'*.¹³ Peer reviews are often criticized for being unable to accurately detect plagiarism. Obviously, the responsibility lies with the author and not the reviewers. In this task, Editors, webmasters and copyright holders could help reviewers in detecting plagiarism by implementing electronic tools, such as *Similarity Check*,¹⁴ the *Déjà vu database*,¹⁵ *iThenticate*,¹⁶ *Plagiarism Today*.¹⁷ In turn, the reviewers must not fall into plagiarism by getting out ideas, data and novel concepts from a paper before the manuscript is published. Their task is to protect ideas not to appropriate them. Our *Italian Journal of Medicine* (ITJM) refers to the *Recommendations on Publication Ethics Policies for Medical Journals*, prepared by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) Publication Ethics Committee (Table 1).^{18,19}

Single- or double-blind peer review? A third way of review exists

Even if single-blind peer review is the traditional mode most commonly used in the peer review process, double-blind peer review has been introduced with the aim to reduce/avoid bias. However, many issues still need to be discussed about the pros and cons in using one or the other mode in the review process, and a third one has been recently hypothesized as the possible solution: the *open* peer review.

First of all, single-blind peer review is intended when authors do not know the referees' names, but on

Table 1. The peer review process in the *Italian Journal of Medicine*.

All of our journals follow the WAME Recommendations on Publication Ethics Policies for Medical Journals^{18,19} about peer review. The Editorial Board of each journal will immediately screen all articles submitted for publication in that journal. Those articles, which fail to reach the scientific standards of the journal, may be declined without further review. Those articles, which satisfy the requirements of the Editorial Board, will be sent to a maximum of three referees. These are experts in the field who have agreed to provide a rapid assessment of the article. Every effort will be made to provide an editorial decision as to acceptance for publication within 4-6 weeks from submission. Referees may request a revision of the article to be made. In this case, it is generally understood that only one revised version can be considered for a further appraisal under the peer review system. The Editorial Board of each journal is responsible for the final selection of referees to conduct the peer review process for that journal. The names of referees will not be made available to authors. However, referees will be informed as to the identity of the authors whose articles are subject to review. All members of the Editorial Board and referees are asked to declare any competing interests they may have in reviewing a manuscript. If on receiving the editorial decision concerning their manuscript authors are not satisfied they are invited to appeal to the Editorial Office. In cases in which this is considered appropriate a second opinion on the manuscript will be requested.

the contrary the referees may access to authors' names and affiliations. Double-blind peer review is intended when any information about both authors and referees is hidden and unknown to both parties.

There is a long-standing debate about whether it is more reasonable to anonymize a submission or not: i) supporters of the *single-blind* method advocate that to guarantee a complete anonymity may be difficult, if not impossible (also considering the increasingly common practice of publishing preprints); it causes problems in the detection of any possible conflicts of interest, or in evaluating a work because it is more complex to contextualize the research direction; a biased assumption that authors hiding their identities produce lower-quality work is widespread. Also, a waste of time is frequent because referees try to identify the authors' identities, and this may affect their final judgment in the case they guess correctly or not;^{20,21} ii) on the other hand, supporters of the *double-blind* method endorse the idea that knowledge of the authors introduces undesirable - conscious or unconscious - biases in the reviewing process (such as, prejudice against authors from a certain country, race, or gender; more recognition to papers from already-famous researchers, or the fame or quality of the institution where the study was carried out).²⁰ But the objectivity of the double-blind peer review may provide a *false sense of security* (e.g., well-known authors can be easily identified by the structure of their work, even if their names are blind), affecting the detection of any possible conflict of interest.²²

*Bias in peer review is a real problem*²² and it mainly affects women, ethnic minorities, and researchers from non-prestigious institutions.²²

As the double-blind peer review may not actually eliminate bias, some researchers have advocated for a third modality of reviewing: the *open peer review*, in which both authors' and reviewers' identities are known.^{21,22}

This possible solution, which is becoming the subject of many debates, requires a much greater assumption of responsibility, given that the people involved have to *put their faces and their names to it*.

Conflict of interest

Declarations about conflict of interest (COI) should be explicitly requested for reviewing a manuscript. COI relates to a state, not to our behaviors: it exists whenever there is a divergence between an individual's private interests (*competing interests*) and his or her responsibilities to scientific and publishing activities.²³ COI includes cases when a potential reviewer has published or worked with the author recently or is sponsored by a pharmaceutical company related to the work under review. Financial

ties occur when a participant in the publication process has received or expects to receive money (or other financial benefits such as patents or stocks), gifts, or services that may influence work related to a specific publication. Personal relationships with family, friends, enemies, competitors, or colleagues can pose COI. Political or religious beliefs could be considered in COI. Several other conditions define a state of COI: i) if you acknowledge that you have a friendly relationship with one of the authors; ii) you are a co-author in the reviewing work; iii) you have a prior or current collaboration with the author(s); iv) you may have a known history of antipathy with the author(s); v) you have a strong affiliation with the same institution of authors; vi) you are family related to one of the co-authors. Any conflicts of interest must be avoided while conducting peer review. If referees have a COI with the content or authors of a manuscript, they should be excluded from the review process.

How to be an effective peer reviewer

Reviews will be expected to be professional, honest, courteous, prompt, and constructive. Should the referees be overcommitted and have to decline the request, she/he should be so kind to inform the Editors about their need to be replaced, in timely manner avoiding any delays. In that case, a suggestion for other suitable and reliable reviewers with sufficient experience in the field related to the paper is much appreciated. The manuscript should not be retained or copied; also, reviewers must not share it with any colleagues without the explicit permission of the editor.²⁴

The following tips synthetically report how to be an effective peer reviewer (Table 2).²⁵⁻³⁰

Admission criteria for publication in the *Italian Journal of Medicine*

The ITJM main focus and scope are: i) describing the complex and variable situations confronted by Internists in daily practice; ii) promoting excellence in the practice of internal medicine in hospitals and disseminating the results of clinical research; iii) updating of hospital internists on general topics concerning public health, including ethical, legal, economical and health policy issues.³¹

When reviewing a paper for ITJM, a referee must be aware about the above-mentioned focus and scope admission criteria, in order to help the Editor-in-Chief and the Associate Editors in making a first selection of papers worthy to undergo peer review phase.

Once the article appropriateness for the journal readership is established and the manuscript priority

ranking relative to other manuscripts under consideration is defined (since the number of papers that the journal receives is much greater than it can publish), the peer review phase can start.

Prior to start reading the assigned paper, the selected referee(s) is/are warmly invited to check and revise the Guidelines and Editorial standards available from the journal website³² and keep them in mind during the whole revision process.

In particular, at a first glance evaluation, she/he should detect the following points related to the *ethical standards*: i) the submission has not been previously published (plagiarism); ii) in case of clinical trials, a note about their registration in a public accessible trials registry must be clearly stated; iii) a documented review and approval from the Institutional Review Board or Ethics Committee is

required for all studies (prospective or retrospective) involving people, medical records, and human tissues.

If reviewers suspect any misconduct, they should report it to the Editor in confidence, and should not share their concerns with other parties unless officially notified by the Journal.²⁴

At the same time, she/he should detect also the following points related to the *editorial standards*:³² i) the document file format and the text adhere to the stylistic and formatting requirements outlined in the Author Guidelines; ii) the reviewer should verify the bibliographic references (whether data are accurate, complete, easy to find, *etc.*, or not), and ensure that all citations are relevant and pertinent to the paper topic. If not, she/he should instruct the authors in order to reduce/correct them; in particular, attention should be paid to self-citations only added in order to increase

Table 2. Tips to be an effective peer reviewer.

1	<i>Be timely and respectful of the commitments</i>	It is important to be timely both for respect to the journal and the author, but also not to delay the publishing process. If unexpected reasons for delay arise the reviewer should immediately contact the editor
2	<i>Be professional and make your review as objective and evidence-based as possible</i>	Peer review is a mutual responsibility among fellow scientists. We must share professional values. Search the literature for systematic reviews on the same topic. Using keywords and the title of the article ²⁵ The CONSORT statement is a useful tool for reviewing randomized trials ²⁶ Cohort, case-control, and cross-sectional studies should conform to the format suggested by the STROBE panel ²⁷ Reporting of meta-analyses should conform to the PRISMA Statement criteria ²⁸
3	<i>Be constructive, tactful and pleasant</i>	Review should be written in a collegial, constructive manner. Sarcastic comments are unnecessary. Avoid aggressive and scathing reviews, which can ward off potential authors to submit papers to our journal. Your criticism should be able to sustain a productive discussion with authors. Have an open mind, think about your potential biases and try to eliminate them in the review
4	<i>Be empathetic and respectful</i>	Ensure that the review is scientific, helpful and courteous. Be sensitive and respectful with word choice and tone in a review Be careful not to review the other reviewers' comments. Do not argue with the other reviewers in your comments to the authors
5	<i>Be helpful and open</i>	Suggest how the authors can overcome the shortcomings in their paper. A review should guide the author on what is good and what needs work from the reviewer's perspective. Recognize that both specialists and generalists can provide valuable information during peer review
6	<i>Be scientific and rigorous in finding errors</i>	When performing a peer review, there are some common scientific errors to look out for, such as: - poor legibility and clarity of the text - violations of logic and common sense: contradicting statements, unwarranted conclusions, suggestion of causation when there is only support for correlation, inappropriate extrapolation, circular reasoning, or pursuit of a trivial question - bias (in the planning, selection of cases, data collection, statistical, analysis, and publication phases of research) - failure to define terms or use words with precision, as these practices can mislead readers Identify, according to your <i>experience and gut feeling</i> , any specific problem to each paper
7	<i>Be scientific and systematic</i>	Focus on adding value with scientific knowledge and commenting on the credibility of the research conducted and conclusions drawn Comment according to a pre-ordered check list of actions/criteria required
8	<i>Be organized</i>	A review requires structure and logical flow
9	<i>Be realistic</i>	The peer reviewer must be realistic about the work presented, avoiding asking for paper changes that are too ambitious and not congruent with the initial objectives of the work
10	<i>Stay on the matter</i>	You should never propose to do another study, but try to pursue in your judgment the author's goals Ask the authors to resume the key messages of their study

Sources:^{29,30}

personal impact factor or the visibility of a *friends'* journal; iii) check and evaluate the readability of Figures and Tables, both for scientific content and graphic presentation; iv) if material which has already been published is used, a copy of the *written permission* for the reproduction and adaptation has to be provided before publication, and appropriately cited in each caption. The procedure for requesting the permission is the responsibility of the authors; referees should remind authors about that: alternatively, they should advise to use materials from other (free) sources.

All the above-listed points are admission criteria that have to be considered prior to start the in-deep scientific evaluation and decide whether proceeding with the peer review phase or not; otherwise, submissions not adhering to those criteria must be returned to authors.

Approaching a paper and writing the review

Your review should be written in a direct, constructive and scholarly way. Sentences should be phrased in such a way as not to degrade or belittle the authors. Specific issues concerning interpretation of data or discussion points should include pertinent references when necessary. You are not obliged to re-analyze or re-draw the data but you can make suggestions that the authors do so. Finally, remember that your review needs to be written as well as you would want the manuscript to be written. When a manuscript is revised, the authors should respond to the concerns of each reviewer on a point-to-point basis.

Primary questions to ask

Our initial check should evaluate the overall structure of the manuscript in its components (Title, Introduction, Materials and Methods - including Statistical analysis - Results, Discussion, Conclusions and References). Those parts must be complete and coherent.³³ Regarding the contents, we have firstly to ask some basic questions:⁹ i) Is the research question important and original? This process may be supported by a literature search; ii) Is the scientific approach appropriate for answering this question? iii) Are there obvious omissions? iv) Are conclusions supported by data? v) Is the statistical method appropriate?

Initial evaluation: a tactical approach

As a first approach, carefully read the cover letter, accompanying the Author's submission. You can use the abstract, figures and tables to understand the sense of the overall goals and methodology of the study. Read conclusions at the end of discussion and, if

available, the key messages that the authors want to offer with their paper to the medical literature as novelty and/or added value.

Proceed for a more in-depth evaluation

Read the entire paper, paying attention to the details. Ask yourself if the basic question has been addressed by the protocol and methods used. Similarly, data quality and interpretation can support the conclusion. Exclude the possibility of type II (false negative) errors from underpowered studies.

Abstract evaluation

The abstract alone is often used to assess the value of a manuscript.³⁴

In the review a checklist format can be useful

Some checklist for reviews include issues for comment, such as: i) importance of research question; ii) originality of work; iii) highlighting of strengths and weaknesses of methodology/experimental/statistical approach/interpretation of results; iv) writing style (including redundancies and repetitions) and figure/table presentation; v) ethical concerns. The following checklist may be useful for guiding the reviewer step by step in his referrals (Table 3).³⁵

Proceed according to a structured approach and quality indicators

A useful suggestion can be to follow the indications of the *IMRaD* model (Table 4).^{36,37}

Good and bad reviews depend on some elements shown in Table 5.⁹

Reviewing a revised manuscript

At this point you have to understand if the authors were responsive to your suggestions and if the revision is scientifically acceptable. The authors should explain why your concerns were not acted and carry out additional analyses or experiments if requested as recommended. If they did not, they should justify why this.

Conclusions

Peer review is fundamental in assisting editors in selecting credible, high quality, novel and interesting research papers to publish in scientific journals. Some journals have difficulty in finding appropriate reviewers who are able to complete timely reviews, thus resulting in publication delay. How to implement acknowledgement or incentive to facilitate and speed

Table 3. An example of a step-by-step reviewing process checklist of a paper.³⁵

General criteria					
Issues	1 Minimal	2	3	4	5 Superior
Importance/interest of research question					
Appropriateness for our Journal					
Originality of work/idea					
Study design validity and appropriateness					
Organization of the text and paragraphs					
Writing style and grammar					
Written English language					
Adequacy of figures and tables					
Relevance of the discussion					
Conclusions and interpretation					
References-format citations					
Quality					
Superior	Explain:				
Good					
Fair					
Poor					
Strengths and weaknesses in the paper					
<i>Methodology of the study</i>	Strengths: Weaknesses:				
<i>Statistical methods</i>	Strengths: Weaknesses:				
<i>Approach/interpretation of results</i>	Strengths: Weaknesses:				
Priority in publishing					
High	Explain:				
Routine					
Low					
To your knowledge, has this material previously been published?					
No	Explain:				
Unknown					
Yes					
Ethical remarks					
<i>Are you are affiliated to the same institution as the author?</i>					
Yes					
No					
<i>Do you have any conflict of interest in reviewing this paper?</i>					
No					
Unknown					
Yes					
<i>Are you interested in writing an editorial for this paper?</i>					
No					
Yes					
<i>Would you be willing to review a revision of this manuscript?</i>					
No					
Yes					
Recommendation and comments					
Acceptable with no change	Explain:				
Acceptable with minor changes					
Acceptable with major changes					
Reject					
Revised manuscript needs further review					
Reviewer's suggested references					
Confidential comments to the Editor-in-Chief					Explain:

Note: Explain if deemed necessary but not mandatory.

up the publishing process? Some non-financial incentives could be useful. For instance, by posting annual lists of their reviewers on their journal and/or websites, sending letters of thanks to their most valued and regular reviewers and appointing their best

reviewers to their editorial boards.⁷ Reviewing should be considered in the career development and noted on curriculum vitae. Institutions could consider a researcher's involvement in peer review when assessing their performance for promotions.³⁸

Table 4. The IMRaD approach: the peer reviewer jobs.

Section	Contents	The peer reviewer has to:
Introduction	The research question is presented in the context of what is already known about the topic. It identifies the aim of the research, briefly describing the general methods of investigation, and outlines the hypothesis and predictions	Determine whether the introduction provides sufficient background information on the research topic, ensuring that the research question and hypothesis are clearly identifiable
Methods	Describes the experimental procedures and how the research was conducted, including any tool used in the study and statistics The methods section should be detailed enough to be used in a repeated experiment	Assess the appropriateness of the instruments used to answer the research question, and if they were presented with sufficient detail. If something should be missing, the peer reviewer has to identify details that need to be added
Results	The results have to be expressed as: - Summary of overall results - Detailed result for one of the experiment's samples - Detailed result for the other of the experiment's samples - Further results (comparison between two methods of sintering) - Significance of the results This section can include statistical tests results performed on data, as well as figures and tables in addition to the text	Ensure that the results are described with sufficient detail and credibility Check if excessive numerical data and redundant statistical results are reported Control the congruence between text, tables and figures and their completeness, accuracy, importance, relevance and originality Check if the figures and tables modified by other authors are provided with formal permission, according to the editorial standards
Discussion	The results are interpreted and related to past studies The discussion describes the meaning of the results in terms of the research question and hypothesis, stating whether the hypothesis was supported or rejected. In this section you may provide some possible explanations for unusual results The discussion should end with a conclusions section that summarizes the major findings of the investigation, suggesting the need for future research	Determine whether the discussion is clear and focused, and whether the conclusions are congruent with the results presented Highlight the limitations of the study, any anomalies in the results, the relationship of the research to previous studies, and the theoretical implications and practical applications/limitations of the study

Source:^{36,37}

Table 5. Good and bad reviews.

How to make a good review	How to make a bad review
Control if the title is descriptive enough, clear and concise List the major strengths and weaknesses of the paper Control any grammar, syntax or typographical error of the manuscript and report them to the editor for proofreading Comment on the logical sequence of paragraphs Comment on the statistics. Are they appropriate? Recommend changes to improve the study: - Suggest changes to improve the data presentation - Redundancy or inadequacy? - Tables and figures quality, overlap, duplicating - Propose clearer formats, if necessary - Suggest changes to clarify, expand, or reduce sections: introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusions, figures, tables, references Use references to support suggestions	Extreme brevity of the review Rude, arrogant, with personal judgments and self-referential statements Unclear observations, expressed in an ambiguous manner Scientific errors (or misquoted literature) or outdated references cited by the reviewer Sloppy writing with spelling errors and poor grammar

Source:⁹

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