

Love Thy Reviewer as Thyself

Authors hope that what they write will be read. Among the vast number of published papers, there is tremendous competition for the reader's time. The better an article is written, the more likely other people are to read it. Editors and reviewers play a vital role in improving the readability of what we write.



To authors, editorial and review suggestions on their manuscripts represent criticism of what they have done. People don't enjoy being criticized, so it is easy for an author to resent review comments. Editorial criticism may be especially surprising for young scientists. Remembering the "A" he got in senior composition, the young scientists may think he is a pretty good writer, and then may be shocked to see his manuscript covered with red marks.

Scientific maturity helps take away any defensive feelings we may have about editorial remarks on preliminary drafts of our manuscripts. In fact, probably one of the most vital attitudes that a successful author develops is a profound appreciation for the efforts of reviewers and editors.

Some reviewers are extremely skillful. Their analysis of a paper is on target; their suggested changes are all good; and they criticize diplomatically. Others miss the point; suggest changes that are worse than the original; and their comments may be harsh and unkind. Most reviewers fall between these extremes. Regardless of the skill, tact, or accuracy of the reviewer, the author should regard every review comment as potential help in improving his manuscript. When suggested changes are inaccurate or more poorly written than the original, they obviously cannot be used. Nevertheless, every review comment, whether good or bad, should be a signal to the writer to analyze that part of the manuscript very carefully because something about it bothered a reader.

One reviewer's suggestion may be exactly what is needed to improve a manuscript. Sometimes elements from two or more reviewers can be combined for the needed improvement. Other times, no suggestion is usable, but the review comments stimulate the author to rewrite, reorganize, or otherwise improve the manuscript. Reviewers' comments, even when not directly usable, are worthwhile because they serve to direct the author's attention to a situation that needs more attention.

Authors of technical papers need to be reviewers as well as writers. Considering the importance of the review process in getting one's own paper published, every author should be willing to reciprocate and help others by reviewing their manuscripts conscientiously. This may happen by accepting a request to serve formally as an appointed reviewer for a journal, which certainly represents a commendable acceptance of professional responsibility. But a paper should have had a lot of reviewing and editing before it is ever submitted for formal review. This is where every author can serve as a reviewer for his peers.

An especially effective arrangement is a group of three to six mutually-respecting scientists who review for each other. The attitude of such a group must not be "You treat my manuscript gently and I'll do the same for you," but rather, "You be honest and objectively harsh with my manuscript, and I'll extend the same favor to you." Such groups are even more effective if they include mutual review of research plans. Then problems of scientific soundness are corrected before the review process for the manuscript begins. Such critical review of research plans can detect and help correct technical errors or omissions in the proposed research, so that such problems do not plague the author when his manuscript is being written and reviewed.

Remember:

Red marks on your manuscript,
You may not like to see;
But each one as potential help,
Recognized should be.

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