

Greg's suggestions for how to review a journal article

Greg Siegle, 7/12/11

Big picture:

The review is a communication to the editor and to the author. The editor will use it to decide whether to publish the work. And the author will make revisions based on it. Your goals are to help the author to improve their work and to help the field to best represent itself.

For the editor: Keep a clear message

- Keep your review consistent with your recommendation.
 - If you are recommending acceptance, the suggested revisions should be minimal.
 - If you are recommending revise and resubmit, there should be reasonable accomplishable revisions, i.e., not requesting that more data be collected.
 - If you are recommending rejection, it should be clear from your review why no amount of revision could help.

For the author: Be generative, even if you don't like the article

- I strive to keep the tone generative – something you would be ok reading if you received the review. This can be done gracefully.
 - It's never nice to get a yelling/pejorative review. You could un-inspire someone about research which would be terrible.
- Remember that authors will feel compelled to respond to every point you make. And you will likely see the article again to approve or disapprove the revisions. So keep your suggestions and recommendations unambiguous. The clearer you are in what you are hoping will happen, the more easily the author can respond.
- That said try to keep from rewriting the article for the author. Just because you're inspired this month about a slightly different analytic technique than they used, do they really need to use it? Again, the goal is to help the author be the best they can be.
- Realize that some strong recommendations may cause the author to not resubmit, e.g., "please collect more data", "please include a meta-analysis in your literature review", or "please refrain from discussing the thing you think is most central to your article". As for such only if you really think they're necessary and are willing to live with being the cause of a non-resubmit.

Structure

I've found the following structure helpful.

- 1 short par summarizing the main point/findings
- 1 par on the article's strengths
- 1 sentence hinting at your orientation, i.e., "terrific", "needs more work" (i.e., "enthusiasm slightly diminished, but could be addressed with a revision"), or "never ever even with revision" (i.e., "enthusiasm considerably dampened to the extent that I would not expect a revision to be able to address the manuscript's weaknesses")...
- 1-2 paragraphs on big picture issues
- Bulleted points for minor details.
- Bulleted points for syntactic details.
- 1 par re-hinting at your orientation if you feel it may have gotten lost.

Format

- For most articles 1-2 pages is a reasonable length.
- Having 1 suggestion per paragraph or bullet, and numbering them is nice so the author can 1) cut and paste your suggestions into their response and 2) respond to your points by number.