


CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Demystifying Reviewing: The Whys and Hows

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Peer review is a key component of academic publishing, meant to maintain the integrity of the process. Peer reviewers help editors evaluate research—assessing the quality, validity, and original contribution of manuscripts submitted for publication. At its best, peer review can also help raise the quality of published research by providing authors with constructive expert feedback that helps them further develop and polish their project and its presentation.

In this essay, I share some advice and guidelines for potential reviewers that might also be of use to authors navigating the review process. First, I address reasons to review in general. Why is it important? What considerations should you make in accepting or declining an invitation? Second, I provide suggestions on how to write a review. What should you be looking for? What makes a review helpful to both editors and authors?

Why Review?

While reviewing can be a lot of work, often without financial compensation, it does have some benefits: (1) there is much to learn from being a part of the process, and (2) it is also an important means of developing and shaping the field.

Let's start with what there is to learn by being a reviewer. First, it is a great way to keep up to date on the research that is being done in your specific field, or the discipline more broadly. You might be asked to review an article that is squarely in your area of expertise or one that is tangentially related. Editors often want manuscripts that are of both particular and broader appeal (to maximize readership), and having a range of reviewers is a good way to ensure that the research is both sound and accessible. So, by reviewing often, you will become familiar with trends in your field and get early exposure to innovative efforts.

Second, reviewing is an effective way of learning more about the publishing process, both in general and for a specific publication. Reviewers often have access to the manuscript and subsequent memos and decision letters from editors and other peer reviews. You can learn a lot about norms and expectations by paying attention to how others are engaging in the review process. What might you learn from other reviewers about what they are looking for in manuscripts? Are there things to emulate or avoid? What constitutes an accept, a reject, or an “R&R” (revise and resubmit) at a particular journal? How do authors successfully (or unsuccessfully) navigate feedback? How might a manuscript change from the first draft to the final publication?

While some of you may already be inundated with reviews, others might be trying to figure out how to become a reviewer. While I suspect editors will eventually find you, you can be proactive about getting on a particular journal’s reviewing radar by reaching out to the journal directly. The editor or editorial assistant will be thrilled to add you. If you are interested in reviewing for *Politics & Gender*, you can email the team at pag@apsanet.org.

Finally, reviewing is an important means of developing and shaping the field. You get to play an influential role in the decision-making process. Whether you recommend publication or not (and with what revisions), you can help in the development of the manuscript or even a larger research agenda. You can help an author identify problems or oversights. You can advocate for engagement with work that the author overlooked, recommend improvements to the research design, or suggest better execution of different methodologies.

With great power, however, comes great responsibility. If you are invited to review, it might be because you have a successful record of publication. That means you have relied on the labor of others to get those publications. There is the responsibility of paying that forward both in agreeing to review and doing it constructively. Even if you are not yet publishing a lot, consider exercising the same generosity you hope others will display with you.

When to Decline a Review?

While there are a lot of good reasons to review, that does not mean you should accept every review request you receive. There are a few considerations you might make in the decision to accept or decline a review.

First, can you conduct the review in a timely manner? One of the most common reasons given to editors is a lack of time. Reviewing does take time, and time is a finite resource. If you do not think that you can adequately complete a review in a reasonable amount of time, then the responsible thing to do might be to decline. Accepting too many reviewing invitations might also mean that you are not able to give all the manuscripts in your queue sufficient attention or that you end up delaying the process with tardy reviews. Now, if the reason you are too busy to review is that you are so busy publishing elsewhere (relying on the work of others who are reviewing), you might want to think a bit about that. Editors do occasionally take note of those who have plenty of time to submit without ever accepting a reviewing invitation. Some scholars suggest the “rule of

three.” For every manuscript you submit, you should be willing to conduct three reviews (to account for the number of reviews you received or will receive). If you do accept a review, you might consider putting it on your calendar right away. The amount of time you need to designate might depend on your familiarity with the field, the length and complexity of the paper, and your own working patterns.

Another reason often given is that a person does not feel that they have the appropriate expertise. This also might be a valid reason to decline, particularly when the manuscript is far from your substantive or methodological expertise. At the same time, you might consider not being too rigid in your self-assessment on this front. Sometimes it is difficult to find someone with the exact expertise to evaluate all aspects of a particular manuscript. Editors might account for this through their selection of the other reviewers. They might want your expertise on a particular facet of a paper (the theory, the methods, the cases, etc.). If it is a generalist journal, they might be balancing those with specific and broader expertise. If you get a manuscript for which you think you might have some valuable feedback in one area but are less confident in another (perhaps the exact method being used or a particular case), communicate that to the editor, either by asking them before declining or at the beginning of the review.

Another valid reason to decline a review is that you have (or suspect) a conflict of interest. A conflict of interest arises in a situation when you cannot make a fair decision—perhaps the author of a manuscript is a former or current graduate student, advisor, colleague, or coauthor. While editors try to check for these, occasionally they miss them. In these situations, it is best to decline. Reviewers will also sometimes decline an invitation if they have reviewed a manuscript before, or if they suspect they know who the author might be—an increasingly common situation in today’s social media era. In these situations, you do not necessarily need to decline the invitation, but you should let the editors know before you accept the invitation or submit the review. When in doubt, it is always best to ask.

When you do decide to decline a review, please consider suggesting other reviewers. Editors will be grateful! Recommendations that help expand the reviewer pool (e.g., early career scholars, scholars from smaller institutions, or scholars from other countries) can be an important contribution in and of itself.

How to Write a Review

When you do decide to review, it is important to consider what is most helpful to both editors and authors. While there is a lot of overlap between the two, there may also be some points of departure.

Editors are looking for expert advice on the relevance and quality of the work. They want feedback that is clear, concise, and professional. What is the contribution of the article to the literature and to the journal? What is your evaluation of the argument, methods, evidence, and citations? Is the style and structure appropriate and reader-friendly?

When you are writing a review, make sure to read the journal guidelines. Then read the article, perhaps twice. A first read might be made for an overall impression of the article and its contributions (a good way to start a review). A second closer read might be used to provide a more detailed assessment. This does not mean that you need to (or should) copyedit or list every single change that you would make if you were the author. Focus on the major themes or issues. Also, make sure to include what is good (and why) as well as what may need work (and why). Reviewers are often more likely to spend time on the negatives, which can sway the review and the review process in that direction, disproportionately or unintentionally.

Most journals will also want you to make a recommendation: accept, minor revision, major revision, or reject. “Accept” decisions without revisions are rare, but they do exist. If an article is stellar and ready, do not feel that you must require or suggest revisions. Remember, sometimes an article has gone under review elsewhere and the authors may have already undergone multiple rounds of revision. Just make sure to justify to the editor the reasons why you think it is ready to go. You need to signal to the editor that you read it carefully and thoughtfully and that it really does rise to that level. An accept recommendation without sufficient justification might be weighted less seriously if there is no supporting evidence. Similarly, if it is a reject, also make sure to justify that decision. A clear “reject” might be given if an article is not sound in principle or methodology, does not make a significant contribution, and/or has significant problems or even a fatal flaw.

While recommendations of “reject” are more common than outright accepts, a lot of articles will fall somewhere in between. Reviewers often find that an article has merit but requires revisions. This can be a tricky place, and one where journals have moved toward asking reviewers to distinguish between minor and major revisions. But not everyone will agree on what constitutes either (and authors are usually more optimistic than editors are on this front). Recommendations for minor revisions should include advice that matches small edits to better communicate and frame arguments or findings, small additions or tweaks to data, small increases in citations or address of topics, small changes to the interpretation of results and/or evidence. Recommendations for major revisions might be given if there are more significant structural issues or the need for more data or the reworking/reframing of the theory or analysis. If there is a need to do all the above, a “reject” might be the better recommendation.

One of the most important things to remember while writing a review is to be professional and courteous. Reviews (and memos; see Sundström 2023) should never include derogatory language or personal attacks. Even if you think a manuscript falls below the bar, try to be constructive.

Conclusions

While there are many debates about whether the peer-review process is the right one, it is the system we have now. That does not mean that we cannot all work to make it a more humane process. *Politics & Gender* is a journal that was created by

and for an incredible research community. Therefore, our participation in the review process can be an important means of building and supporting that community, as are efforts such as these to uncover the “hidden curriculum” and help others navigate the process.

Reference

Sundström, Aksel. 2023. “Responding to Reviewers: Guidelines and Advice.” *Politics & Gender*. DOI: [10.1017/S1743923X23000168](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X23000168).

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