



Peer Reviewed

Charles C. Fischer (chuck@pittstate.edu) is a Professor of Economics, Department of Economics, Finance and Banking, Pittsburg State University.

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the ethical responsibilities of manuscript reviewers and is intended to help guide them through the ethical landmines of the review process. The goal of this article is to provide guidelines that will lead to authors receiving fair appraisals of their manuscripts and to promote the integrity of academic journals in their treatment of authors. In it, an ethical framework is proposed to guide reviewers in their decision making and comments to authors. This framework is incorporated into a “contract” between journal editors and their reviewers. The formal acceptance of such a contract by a reviewer prior to the review process makes it explicit upfront what is ethically expected. The ethical treatment of authors by reviewers (and editors) is an important part of the overall manuscript review process and contributes to the quality of published research.

INTRODUCTION

In the academic world, a journal's manuscript reviewers have substantial power to influence the careers of university faculty (Fischer, 2004). Reviewers usually are a key factor in an editor's decision as to whether or not a manuscript submission is published. It is uncommon for an editor to override reviewers' recommendations to reject a submission. For journals with very low acceptance rates (less than 10 percent), it may take only a few negative reviewer comments for an editor to make a decision to reject. Yet so much is at stake for authors—tenure, promotion, their careers.

This raises some important questions—who are the reviewers and what kind of training do they have? Most journal reviewers are academics who have volunteered to review in their areas of expertise. The implicit assumption is that if one is an expert in certain areas, then one is qualified to review in those areas. There is no formal training, and most Editors provide very little, if any, instruction to their reviewers. Some reviewers do a wonderful job, but many do not.

As the editor of a journal in management for twenty years and as the author of over sixty publications, I have seen many poor reviews from both sides of the publishing equation. A poorly done manuscript review is an injustice to the author and can be quite problematic for the editor dedicated to making good decisions about the fate of submitted research. (Though multiple authorships are common, for convenience the singular term “author” is used throughout this article.) A poorly done manuscript review may impede the development of an author's contribution to the literature. Reviewers have an important role to play in the development of a paper. Their contribution can be diminished by an unwillingness or inability to be fair minded, constructive, timely, etc. in their evaluation of submitted research.

While there are many aspects of a quality manuscript review (e.g., competency of the reviewer, clear and thorough feedback to the author and editor), this article deals only with the ethical aspect of reviewing manuscripts. It explores the ethical responsibilities of reviewers and how they can they be achieved (made operational). Ethical responsibilities (expectations by the editor) are explored in the next section. This is followed by an illustrative ethical contract between the reviewer and editor and, finally, there is a discussion of how to implement the contract.

REVIEWER'S ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES: RECIPROCITY, LANDMINES AND SLIPPERY SLOPES

In order to guide the discussion, the ethic of reciprocity will serve as our framework. This is commonly expressed in the “Golden Rule” on how to treat others (See the appendix of this article for examples of its incorporation into some of the prominent religions and philosophies of the world as an indication of its near universal appeal as an ethical principal). It is a simple notion and one that would serve the author

well in the review process. The idea is that reviewers (who are also authors) should treat authors as they would want to be treated as an author. This seems quite straightforward and unobjectionable. However, in the real world of manuscript reviewing, the Golden Rule may be sabotaged by the culture of reviewing, which is largely a gate-keeping culture (Fischer, 2004), and what I label hidden “land mines” and “slippery slopes.”

The concept of the reviewer as a gate-keeper refers to the common practice in the publishing industry that the editor accepts manuscripts and reviewers reject them, thereby playing the role of a gate-keeper. The concept of hidden land mines in this context is that even a reviewer with good intentions may unknowingly breach the ethic of reciprocity. It is a slippery slope in that small ethical breaches can lead to larger ones. The point here is that even though most reviewers want to be ethical, they may, nonetheless, run into trouble, especially in the absence of a clear code of ethics that could, perhaps, be conveyed by way of a contract between the editor and his or her reviewers.

In exploring these issues, I draw upon my experience as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Managerial Issues* (<http://www.pittstate.edu/departments/economics/journal-of-managerial-issues/>). During my twenty-year tenure (1989-2008), I read several thousand manuscript reviews (a conservative estimate based on average number of submissions per year). Our Editorial Review Board (<http://www.pittstate.edu/departments/economics/journal-of-managerial-issues/staff-and-review-board---jmi.dot>) and pool of *ad hoc* reviewers consisted of over 500 academics and a fair number of business leaders with advanced degrees. The academics represented nearly every major research university in the United States as well as many other academic institutions throughout the world. Among our reviewers, a wide variety of business disciplines were included: accounting; finance; management—behavioral, international, legal and social, human resource management, production/operations, strategy and policy; management information systems; and marketing. From this large, diverse pool of reviewers, spanning two decades of review work, the following significant and commonly-committed ethical problem areas came to my attention.

OWNERSHIP

It is important to keep in mind that the reviewer does not own the submission; it belongs to the author. This seems like an obvious point; yet reviewers sometime put pressure on the author to write the paper in the reviewer’s own image, so to speak. It is an issue of balance—while serious consideration must be given to the reviewer’s comments, the author should not be “held hostage” by a reviewer’s ideas, especially when a disagreement exists that is a matter of personal preference (Dewey, 1993). It may be tempting for the reviewer to think, “If I was writing this paper I would...”, but this is a slippery slope, and such thinking can lead to the reviewer co-opting the paper--something a reviewer would certainly not want to happen to his/her own paper. This is a violation of the ethic of reciprocity.

To keep the reviewer on track, an editor can provide guidelines for distinguishing between improving a paper as opposed to taking it over--a point that is covered in the contract that will be presented in a subsequent section of this paper. While there is no fail-safe way to do this, alerting the reviewer to this ethical issue is an important step in minimizing the occurrence of this kind of abuse. And, if necessary, an editor can “save” the author from reviewer demands that go beyond improving the author’s work as is illustrated by a manuscript in which the statistical analysis used by the author is quite appropriate, but the reviewer prefers an alternative approach.

FAIR-MINDEDNESS

It seems that, without question, in the spirit of the Golden Rule, reviewers should be fair-minded in their evaluation of a submission. Yet here we have here another ethical slippery slope. The problem is that people in general feel that they are fair-minded whether or not they actually are. It can be difficult to “own up” to one’s own (academic) biases, prejudices and the like. An ethical contract can help by calling attention to the pitfalls or landmines that can sabotage fair treatment of authors. The goal is to be objective and open-minded about the manuscript under consideration.

Consider the following situation I faced while I was an editor. A reviewer informed me that he initially did not like the paper, but after further examination he completely changed his mind based on its merits. What had happened is that he had gotten past his initial reactions, which often are just one’s way of quickly sorting things out via pre-determined “filters.” Preconceived notions, “pet” theories, philosophical differences, and so forth should be set aside (Martin, 2008). As a reviewer, the issue should not be whether one personally likes the paper, but whether it meets high standards of scholarship and has the potential to make a contribution to the literature. A contract can alert the reviewer to this ethical imperative.

PUNCTUALITY

The need for reviewers to be punctual is both critical and highly problematic. It is a ticking time-bomb for authors. Overly long reviewing periods can render time-sensitive data useless and, worse yet, can jeopardize tenure and/or promotion decisions for the author. Unfortunately, it is a common problem in the journal industry (Rockwell, 2011). The requirement of timely reviews should be made exceptionally clear in an ethics contract. (It also will require an editor to be very proactive in getting reviews in on time.)

Reviewers may have the best of intentions when accepting a reviewing assignment, but once the assignment is received those intentions can be sabotaged. In the busy world of academe (and life in general) there often are many tasks competing for one’s time. And they can seem more important than completing a review (e.g., deadline for a submission to a professional conference, committee report for their college's dean, grading student projects, etc.). So, the manuscript collects dust--sometimes over a year in the absence of a vigilant editor--while more “important” work is done. To help mitigate

such obstacles to a timely review, it is important for the editor to ask the reviewer upfront to give the assignment the priority needed and, if this is not possible, to pass on the assignment or return it promptly if it has already been received and “more important” things have come up. An ethics contract can reinforce the importance of this commitment.

CONSTRUCTIVENESS

Reviewers should be constructive in their comments. This is related to the notion of the fair mindedness that was mentioned above, but it is not quite the same. One can be fair (characterized in this article as being objective, open-minded) and yet not constructive. A constructive reviewer takes a value-added approach in the review process, setting aside the common view of the role of reviewers as gate-keepers who see their job as only separating the wheat from the chaff. This view overly focuses attention on the evaluative aspect of the reviewer's role. Reviewing as a constructive process is designed to go beyond that and maximize the potential contribution of a piece of work. It is one thing to write a review that condemns a flawed research effort; it is something much more challenging--and perhaps more satisfying--to offer suggestions for salvaging the meritorious portion of the research.

Ideally, a constructive reviewer can provide fruitful direction even for a submission that is rejected. In this case, the author is given some ideas about what to do when “going back to the drawing board,” instead of just being told to do so. The constructive review is in sharp contrast to the destructive (and often humiliating) review which only points out what is wrong with the research (Epstein, 1995), and often in harsh terms.

DIPLOMACY

A diplomatic review delivers the critique in an instructive fashion, rather than through the use of inflammatory language. This is best done by directing the critique to the manuscript and not at the author, such as assumed motives of author, lack of competence, etc. (Blackwell, 2004). An insulting, inflammatory review not only violates the ethic of reciprocity, but it fails to achieve the goal of effectively communicating with the author and may damage the journal's reputation. A diplomatic review can enhance the value-added contribution of the review process, which should be its ultimate goal—contributing to better research. A caustic, insulting review adds no real value and can be quite demoralizing for authors, especially those new to publishing. It serves only the ego of the reviewer and is unworthy of a quality journal.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Most academic journals use a double-blind review process, attempting to protect the identity of reviewers and authors. However, in some cases author and/or reviewer identities can be ascertained (Rumsey, 1999). Often within disciplines there are specialized lines of research involving a small number of researchers who are quite

familiar with each other's work. In such cases it is not difficult for a reviewer to "guess" who the author is (and vice versa). This knowledge should be kept confidential during the review process, avoiding any "gossip" about one's recent review work. It is not fair to the author or the Editor or the journal for reviewers to discuss what the journal has promised will remain confidential (Rockwell, 2011). Avoiding this is the goal of double-blind reviews.

BALANCE

The Chinese notion of Yin (the negative) and Yang (the positive) are that there are natural, complementary forces in the universe. They balance one another. Unfortunately, some reviewers tend to write only one-sided, negative reviews. Along with the common reviewer practice of gate-keeping is the notion that the reviewer's job is only to criticize. However, in the spirit of the Golden Rule, it is appropriate--even desirable--to point out what is positive as well. Even a seriously flawed paper will have some positive features worthy of mention (e.g., logically developed, written well, important topic). Note that balance goes beyond constructiveness in that one may write constructive comments to help remedy what is wrong with a paper, but a balanced review will also offer an appraisal on what the author did well.

Not only do authors deserve to be informed of what they have done well, but positive comments can help add value to the paper by focusing the attention of the author on those parts of the research done well and then building from there (Rabinovich, 1996). As an editor, I have seen papers actually weakened during the resubmission process due to some of the best parts being omitted or changed for the worse. Reviewer comments on those parts done well might help avoid this ("if it is not broken, do not fix it").

IN PERSPECTIVE

The ethic of reciprocity is aimed at guiding the process of the review, not the bottom-line assessment (e.g., revise and resubmit, reject). A key part of the review process is that it is conducted in an ethical manner. This involves respect of ownership, fair-mindedness, punctuality, constructiveness, diplomacy, confidentiality, and balance.

In an attempt to achieve the goals outlined above, a contract is set forth below. This contract is intended to make clear to reviewers the ethical expectations of the journal. While such a contract would be useful for most reviewers, it is of particular importance for what I term the "Mr. Hide" type of reviewer in contrast to "Dr Jekyll" type. This is a tough one for an editor to manage and deserves comment.

MR. HIDE

As an editor, I observed that sometimes otherwise congenial/collegial individuals would become rather brutal (Blackwell, 2004) in their role as manuscript reviewer. This is somewhat akin to the person who is usually quite considerate and polite until he/she

gets behind the wheel of a car. This is the kind of reviewer who makes personal, snide comments about the author, is sarcastic, and tends to be quite destructive in tone. Such behavior is a blatant violation of the ethic of reciprocity and sabotages the goal of adding value to the manuscript by offering ways to improve it.

It is, perhaps, an issue of “what goes around comes around.” The reviewer may think this is the kind of review he or she often receives about their work; so this is how it is done. Bad reviews, unfortunately, may become the model for new reviewers. They contribute to a culture of bad reviewing. Here, more than ever, an ethical contract between the reviewer and the journal is needed to make it clear that such behavior is neither sought nor tolerated by the editor. It is important to let reviewers know upfront what is expected of them by the editor and to discontinue the use of reviewers who significantly breach those expectations, as the ethics contract should have consequences (Fine, 1996).

THE ETHICS CONTRACT

The purpose of the ethics contract is to communicate to reviewers the ethical expectations of the editor. The editor might ask reviewers to indicate acceptance of the contract prior to accepting a reviewing assignment. (This could be done efficiently by email.) The idea is to get the reviewer to think about the aspects of the review process described above. Admittedly, the term “contract” may be a bit misleading since it is not intended to be enforced in any legal sense. The only realistic enforcement of the contract is for the editor to guide reviewers in this matter and, if this fails, to discontinue using these reviewers. Thus, while the ethics contract, like many business contracts, is not strictly enforceable, it does have merit as a means for setting expectations.

The term “contract” is a good attention-getter, but an editor might want to soften the language and refer to it as an “agreement” or “set of guidelines,” or some similar term. This is a matter of personal preference. I prefer “contract.”

A SAMPLE CONTRACT

Upon accepting this reviewing assignment, I _____
(full name and title please) agree to adhere to each of the following ethical principles to the best of my ability.

1. **TO RESPECT THE AUTHOR’S OWNERSHIP RIGHTS:** I accept that the manuscript is the author’s, and not mine. As a reviewer my comments should be aimed at improving the scholarship of the paper (focusing on the substantive elements) and not attempting to recast it as I would prefer it to be.
2. **TO BE FAIR-MINDED:** I will keep an open mind about the manuscript—the topic, analytical model, statistical analysis, etc. I will set aside preconceived notions, personal preferences, biases, and “pet notions” and evaluate the paper solely on its merits.

3. **TO BE PUNCTUAL:** I agree to give this review the priority necessary to complete it no later than the requested time of return. If, for some reason, I am not able to do that, I will return it promptly—in ample time for a replacement reviewer to review it in a timely manner. I will not “sit on it” past the return date.
4. **TO BE CONSTRUCTIVE:** I will strive to add value to the manuscript by way of constructive comments to the author, as opposed to only pointing out its flaws, shortcomings, and the like. I will aim at maximizing the potential contribution of research suitable for resubmission to this journal or salvaging the meritorious portion of research that presently does not merit resubmission to this journal.
5. **TO BE DIPLOMATIC:** I will avoid caustic, inflammatory, and insulting comments. I will direct my review toward the manuscript, not the author, and strive to be as instructive as possible, with the aim of enhancing the value-added contribution of the review process.
6. **TO MAINTAIN STRICT CONFIDENTIALITY:** I will respect the intent of the journal’s double-blind review process. In those instances when I may surmise the identity of the author, I will keep that information strictly confidential during the review process.
7. **TO BE BALANCED IN MY REVIEW:** In addition to offering critical (but constructive) comments, I will also point out what is done well in the paper, recognizing that even a seriously flawed paper will have positive features.

My responsibility: I understand that if I am not willing to accept these ethical principles, I am expected to promptly return the manuscript to the Editor, so that it may be sent to a replacement reviewer in a timely manner.

EDITOR’S RESPONSIBILITY

For an ethics contract to have real impact, it must be made operational in some way. As an editor, I made brief notes on the quality of reviews received. Reviewers who repeatedly fell substantially below our expectations (as outlined in the material sent to reviewers) were diplomatically dropped and replaced. This resulted in an ever-improving pool of reviewers over time. In fact, one of the most gratifying type of comments we received from authors related to the quality of our review process. Positive feedback was sometimes received even in the case of a rejected paper, for the author was grateful for timely and helpful feedback that might lead to eventual publication of the manuscript in another journal.

Whether this approach is used or not, it ultimately comes down to what the editor does—the reviewing culture established and promoted. Culture is set at the top, and in this case that means the editor.

MAKING IT WORK

People generally believe they are good, considerate individuals, and accept the ethical principal of treating others as one would want to be treated as the right thing to do. Yet in the real world of academic manuscript reviewing, there is “many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip.” Ethically speaking, things can go wrong. Part of the problem may be a misunderstanding of what is expected from the reviewer by the editor (i.e., poor communication) (Henige, 2001). Another part of the problem concerns the hidden land mines and slippery slopes inherent in the process. As such, it is easy for the reviewer to get off track. This is especially so in the case of reviewers who see their role only as gate-keepers.

This article suggests some ways to mitigate these problems and promote ethical reviews by way of the following:

- The Editor **adopts a culture of collaboration** between the reviewers and the author (Seitz, 1996). The goal is to move reviewers from mere gate-keeping (only pointing out what is wrong for the purpose of possible rejection) to a broader approach where the reviewer is a blind **partner** in adding value to promising research. A culture of collaboration is better suited to the ethics of reciprocity than is the widely-used gate-keeping model where the reviewer’s job is to reject, and the editor’s job is to accept.
- The Editor **fosters a culture of collaboration** with reviewers. For example, the editor might send (along with the manuscript for review) a statement of his/her review philosophy and practical guidelines for writing the review. Also, the editor could provide relevant feedback to the reviewer upon completion of the review in an attempt to improve the quality of reviews (Levinson, 1996).
- The Editor **establishes an Ethical Code (or Guidelines) and communicates it to reviewers** (e.g., including a copy of the code with the other materials sent to the reviewer). This is to alert reviewers to their ethical responsibilities and help them better navigate the ethical land mines and slippery slopes of the review process (Rockwell, 2011).
- Finally, the editor takes steps to **foster reviewer compliance** with the Ethical Code. This might include constructive/corrective feedback to reviewers and when that fails, dropping them from further service.

With the *Journal of Managerial Issues*, each of the above were followed, with the exception that the ethical expectations of reviewers were made part of a comprehensive statement of the "Review Policy" and "Review Process." Looking back, I would now recommend stating those expectations separately/explicitly in the form of an ethics code, as suggested in this article. That would give it the attention it deserves and needs.

The key is letting reviewers know what is expected of them, monitoring the quality of reviews received, and taking remedial action when necessary. That is a fair amount of work for the editor, but that should be part of his/her ethical responsibilities as the editor. The payoff is the promotion of better manuscript reviews and, therefore, better published research where reviewers are blind partners with the author in the publication process.

APPENDIX

The Golden Rule (The Ethic of Reciprocity) as Stated in Prominent Religions and Philosophies

The Golden Rule, also known as the Ethic of Reciprocity, is incorporated within most major religions and philosophies throughout the world. It may be one of the most consistent moral teachings throughout history. Within Christianity the Golden Rule is often stated as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." What follows are similar statements of this concept in some other religions and philosophies (The Golden Rule, 2011):

Baha'i

"Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself." -- Baha'u'llah"

And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choolest for thyself." -- Epistle to the Son of the Wolf

Buddhism

"Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." -- Udana-Varga 5.18

Christianity

"All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." -- Matthew 7:1

Confucianism

"Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do not unto others that you would not have them do unto you." -- Analects 12:2

Hinduism

"This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you." -- Mahabharata 5:1517

Islam

"None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." -
- Number 13 of Imam "Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadiths"

Jainism

"One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated." -- Mahavira,
Sutrakritanga 1.11.33

Judaism

"What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the law: all the rest is
commentary" -- Talmud, Shabbath 31a

Native American

"All things are our relatives; what we do to everything, we do to ourselves. All is really
One." -- Black Elk

Sikhism

"I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all."
-- Guru Granth Sahib, p.1299

Taoism

"Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own
loss." -- T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien 213-218

Unitarianism

"We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we
are a part." -- Unitarian principle

Wiccan

"And it harm none, do what ye will." -- Wiccan Rede

Zoroastrianism

"Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself. -- Shayast-na-Shayast 13.29

"No act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted." (Aesop)

REFERENCES

- Blackwell, A. H. 2004. Reviews of journal manuscripts: Nasty, petty, arrogant. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 46, B10 (June 2).
- Dewey, M. E. 1993. Authors have rights too. *British Medical Journal*, 306, 318-320.
- Epstein, S. 1995. What can be done to improve the journal review process? *American Psychologist*, 50, 883-885.
- Fine, M. A. 1996. Reflections on enhancing accountability in the peer review process. *American Psychologist*, 51, 1190-1191.
- Fischer, C. 2004. Editor as Good Steward of Manuscript Submissions: 'Culture,' Tone, and Procedures. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 36(1), 34-42.
- Henige, D. 2001. Reviewing Reviewing. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 33(1), 23-36.
- Levenson, R. L. 1996. Enhance the journals, not the review process. *American Psychologist*, 51, 1191-1193.
- Martin, B. 2008. Writing a Helpful Referee's Report. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 39(3), 301-306.
- Rabinovich, B. A. 1996. A perspective on the journal review process. *American Psychologist*, 51, 1190.
- Rockwell, Sara. 2011. Ethics of Peer Review: A Guide for Manuscript Reviewers. Website: <http://ori.dhhs.gov/education/products/yale/prethics.pdf>
- Rumsey, T. S. 1999. One editor's views on conflict of interest. *Journal of Animal Science*, 77, 2379-2383.
- Seitz, J. & O'Neil, P. 1996. Ethical decision-making and the code of ethics of the Canadian Psychological Association. *Canadian Psychology*, 37, 21-30.
- The Golden Rule—The Ethic of Reciprocity, 2011: <http://hubpages.com/hub/remember-the-golden-rule>

Note: The title graphic was created by Carole E. Scott.

