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WHAT MUST YOU KNOW ABOUT JOURNAL PEER REVIEWERS?

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What must you know about journal peer reviewers?

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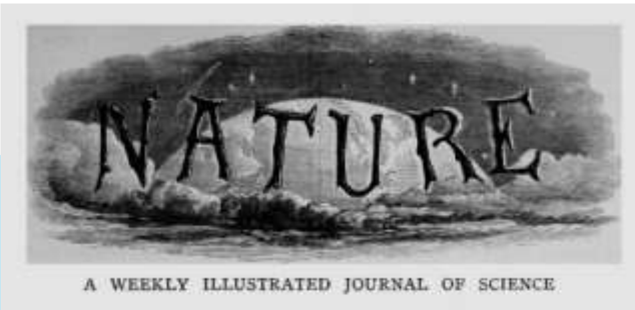
History of Peer Review

Peer Review as we know it today dates back to 1967, when the term was first used in the U.S. to describe “a process by which something proposed (as for research or publication) is evaluated by a group of experts in the appropriate field” (Merriam Webster, 2017). The term became widely used in English in the 1970s.

Prior to 1967, and for most of the history of scientific journals, the journal editor made most of the decisions regarding the selection, review, and evaluation of suitable manuscripts. However, journal editors such as Norman Lockyer, the founding editor of *Nature*, sometimes sought the opinions of their connections in the scientific community, which highlighted the limitations of relying on the judgement of a single scholar (Fyfe, 2015).



To limit the potential for bias, The Royal Society in London introduced editorial regulations in 1752 by setting up a Committee of Papers to evaluate contributions presented at the society’s meetings for possible publication. This committee had to reach its decisions collectively and therefore implemented a voting system. Around the same time, the Académie Royale des Sciences in Paris appointed small committees comprising paid academics to investigate and assess the merits of inventions and discoveries by non-academics and report back in writing (Fyfe, 2105). Both of these systems ensured that more than one person was involved in the decision-making process and that expert judgement was sought.

THE ROYAL SOCIETY

INSTITUT DE FRANCE
Académie des sciences

The early nineteenth century saw the start of the practice we now recognize as “peer review,” over 100 years before the term “peer review” was born. The Royal Society, among other learned societies in London, started to seek reports from referees to ensure more expertise in the editorial decision-making process. After experimenting with jointly authored reports, from 1832 onwards, the Royal Society opted for independently written reports, which were used to inform the Committee of Papers’ decisions. Refereeing quickly became a normal part of the publication process at the learned societies, and by the mid-nineteenth century, George Gabriel Stokes, secretary of the Royal Society in 1854–1885, had developed the practice of sharing referees’ suggestions with authors and guiding authors on how to respond (Fyfe, 2015). In the late twentieth century, refereeing was rebranded as “peer review” and has remained unchanged for the best part of 50 years.

About this chapter

But what is the future of peer review? Is the peer review process set to continue as it is for the foreseeable future or will the progressions of the Internet increase transparency in the process and move toward open peer reviews? Will there be a move away from journals altogether as the essential method of sharing new science?

To discuss these questions and gain insights into the current Peer Review process that might help in your endeavors to publish your work, I interviewed four academics who perform peer reviews for journals in their fields and with different levels of experience as peer reviewers (PRs). The interviewees are post-doctoral researchers and professors with PR experience ranging from five to multiple papers over 20 years, and they conduct reviews for various journals in the fields of international marketing (Judith), sport management (Stephen), environmental change (Sara), and the social sciences (Geraldine). Pseudonyms have been used for all four interviewees.

Who are the interviewees?

Judith became a Professor of International Marketing in 2000 and was awarded Emeritus Professor status on her retirement. She has received two awards for her lifelong research in global marketing and for her efforts and dedication to a journal in the field of international marketing. She has served on the editorial boards of a number of marketing journals and has conducted peer reviews for more than six journals over more than 15 years.

Stephen completed his Ph.D. in Sport Management in 2016 and started working as an Assistant Professor. During his time as a doctoral student, he published eight peer-reviewed articles and two non-reviewed articles in *Journal of Sport Management*, *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, and *Journal of Sport*. The primary areas of his research are sport marketing, consumer behavior, and organizational behavior.

Sara is a postdoc at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. She started her academic career with a four-year undergraduate degree in Wildlife Science. Following her Master's in Mammal Ecology, she completed her PhD in 2012 examining large terrestrial birds and environmental change. She then completed a one-year postdoc on secretarybirds and environmental change, followed by a two-year postdoc on Science Communication. Sara has reviewed papers for *PLoS One*, *Ostrich*, *Journal of Avian Research*, and *Ornis Fennica*.

Geraldine is a social sciences researcher and has been conducting peer reviews for 13 years. She has experience as editor-in-chief, associate editor, and guest editor and has conducted reviews for 18 journals including *Consumption, Markets and Culture; Current Issues in Tourism; Equal Opportunities International; European Journal of Marketing; Human Relations; Journal of Advertising Research; Journal of Asia Pacific Marketing; Journal of Business Ethics; Marketing Intelligence and Planning; Marketing Theory; and The Journal of Quality Assurance for Hospitality and Tourism.*

Interviewees’ Responses: Peer Reviewers in General

How can you become a peer reviewer?

Prospective PRs need to have—or be working toward—a PhD in a relevant discipline, and they need to have published papers in that discipline. Most academics become a PR when a journal editor invites them to review a paper for their journal. However, this can happen in several different ways. The most common requests for PRs come from editors of journals in which the PR has previously published. However, requests can also result from recommendations from professors and department supervisors. For example, Stephen recounted that he was invited to review a paper after a professor within his department, who was also a journal editor, noted that a submission he had received was aligned with Stephen’s research area. In another instance, the chair of Stephen’s department received an email request from a journal editor asking for PRs; thus, Stephen was recommended as someone who could review submissions pertaining to the topic. Sara explained a case in which a journal editor found her details on her departmental website; he had been looking at the website because he knew that her supervisor worked on similar subject material to that of the paper in question.

While many PRs receive requests based on a connection with either the supervisor or professor, this is not always the case. According to Sara, journal editors can sometimes identify suitable PRs based on the information academics provide about their specific subject areas when setting up their author accounts on the journal’s website. Journal editors may also search the Internet for authors of particular topics; for example, Sara was asked by a journal editor, who was previously unknown to her, to conduct a PR on a very specific subject about which she had previously published a paper. Additionally, Geraldine, who also works as a journal editor, reported that “an academic can approach a journal editor to offer their services as a PR, and they will be added to a database of potential PRs.” Therefore, you can become a PR in a variety of ways providing you have the right credentials, contacts, or even better, both.

How many reviews do peer reviewers conduct and how do they choose which ones to do?

The PRs' responses indicate that relatively new PRs—typically junior academics—review one to two manuscripts per year, while more experienced PRs—senior academics—conduct between four and 12 reviews each year. However, even senior academics will usually conduct no more than four peer reviews per journal each year. In each case, the PRs receive an email from the journal editor, which inquiries about whether they would be interested in undertaking a review, and it typically includes the article. PRs do not have to accept every paper they are offered; indeed, all four PRs concurred that they only agree to conduct a review if they have sufficient expertise and interest in the subject, which according to Sara, "might not be in all aspects of the paper; for example, you might be a subject expert, but not an expert with the methodology." According to Judith, it is acceptable for PRs to decline the paper if they can't meet the timescale requested because of other commitments, although journal editors will often be flexible to get a good PR on board.

What are the perceived benefits and responsibilities involved in conducting peer reviews?

Even though conducting peer reviews is entirely optional, as publishing scientists, academics are generally expected by the academic community to participate in the process of peer reviewing voluntarily, because it is an essential aspect of the scientific process. The PRs thus perceive that the role brings many responsibilities, which they take very seriously. However, they also perceive there to be many benefits to the PR role. The following lists show a good balance between the number of perceived benefits and responsibilities of the PR role.

Benefits	**Responsibilities**
participate in the scientific process	provide unbiased feedback
become familiar with other PRs' expectations	ensure that research appearing in the publication is theoretically or conceptually appropriate
put their service to each journal on their CVs and profiles, indicating their investment in the field	maintain confidentiality and avoid personal comments or criticisms

receive recognition and status in the field (depending on the status of the journal)	provide a thorough, timely, and robust review
experience satisfaction for helping in the process of getting good quality and interesting research published	offer clear guidance as to where improvement is needed
improve their writing and publishing skills by observing their peers	provide a constructively critical, useful, and relevant review that draws on their expertise in the area
learn about current research in the field	encourage excellent research and ideas that push the boundaries of our knowledge

How does a peer reviewer feel when conducting a peer review?

While conducting the review, the PRs reported to experience feelings ranging from interest, excitement, engagement, and pleasure, when they receive a new manuscript, to frustration, deflation, and annoyance, when a piece of work is poorly executed. For example, Sara stated, “If the English is not very good, I get frustrated and annoyed because it is careless, and I may not be able to work out what they did in their study without puzzling over it for hours.”

However, problems with the English language in manuscripts were not cited as the most difficult parts of being a PR. For example, Stephen found it more problematic to find diplomatic ways to tell the author(s) “they have got something completely wrong or that they have just done bad work,” adding that it is difficult to know how much detail to go into and how to balance the amount of time you spend on the review versus the risk of poor science being published. In addition, Geraldine highlighted the difficulty in finding whether the statistical methods they have used are appropriate without going into great detail and reading up a lot about it, which is not always feasible. The PRs are also concerned with ensuring that their feedback is constructive and useful to the authors for the development of their paper.

Regarding what the PRs consider the easiest part of a peer review, Geraldine reported that “not much of it is easy, as it is an intellectually demanding process if done well.” However, she added that the excitement of seeing new pieces of work makes accepting a paper for review the easiest part of the whole process. Stephen found making the decision about what to recommend (e.g., revise and resubmit or reject) the easiest part of the review because this usually becomes clear after reading the paper a few times.

When asked about their enjoyment of the role, the PRs' responses were somewhat mixed. Those in the earlier stages of their career felt it not overly enjoyable because they consider that a journal editor is unlikely to send a high-quality submission to a relatively inexperienced scholar. Similarly, if they receive a submission that is likely to be rejected upon review (based on initial screening), it is likely to be sent to a more junior scholar. The PRs enjoyment lessens if they feel that the authors of the manuscript are not engaging in the review process fully and professionally.

In many cases, the PRs' level of enjoyment rests heavily on the quality of writing because a poorly written paper leads to frustration that the authors, whether native or non-native speakers of English (NSEs or NNSEs), failed to ensure the paper was well written before submitting it. The PRs' enjoyment is also affected by how well the PR understands the methods used in the paper, which could also be determined by the quality of the English used. Stephen pointed out the arduousness of finding diplomatic ways to point out fairly evident flaws in sub-par work; however, as a junior academic, he remained hopeful that this would become easier with experience.

The most satisfying aspects of the PR role include being able to read good research papers, seeing the substantial improvements from the initially submitted version to the final version, and learning that the journal accepted the paper for publication.

The Peer Review Process

How does the journal editor choose suitable peer reviewers?

When journal editors receive a paper for consideration, they typically send it to two or three academics who are experts in the field. Journals in the field of sport management usually use only two PRs, unless the initial round of reviews raises differing opinions on the work, and the field of social sciences sometimes invites four to participate in the initial round.

Choosing suitable PRs for can be a very time-consuming and laborious task for journal editors. To simplify the task, some journal editors invite authors to nominate PRs who have expertise that is specific to their manuscripts. While some authors avoid this in case their suggestion is ignored, according to John E. Dolbow (2013), Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Duke University and journal editor of *Finite Elements in Analysis and Design*, provided you give adequate justification, the journal editor will typically include your suggestion as one of the selected PRs. In her capacity as an author, Geraldine sometimes takes the opportunity to "nominate an expert in the field, whose work I am building on." Thus, it is worth remembering that taking the time to suggest good reviewers for your manuscripts will greatly facilitate the review process.

To speed up the process of selecting suitable PRs, many journals have adopted electronic peer-review systems; however, these have seen an increase in the amount of ethical problems caused by "fake reviewers." In such cases, authors suggest seemingly legitimate academic reviewers, but the webmail addresses that accompany the suggestions are controlled either by a biased close associate of the author or the author of the manuscript posing as a qualified reviewer (Doffegnies & Haire, 2016).

To overcome these problems, ScholarOne Manuscript, a journal and peer review tool, has implemented a Reviewer Locator, which automatically searches for reviewers based on a manuscript's keywords and abstract. The keywords and abstracts are "fed into the Web of Science and a complex algorithm discovers potential reviewers based on their previous publications in the same area of expertise" (Doffegnies & Haire, 2016). This method broadens the search for potential

PRs for the journal and ensures that a wide range of experts in the field can evaluate the research being presented.

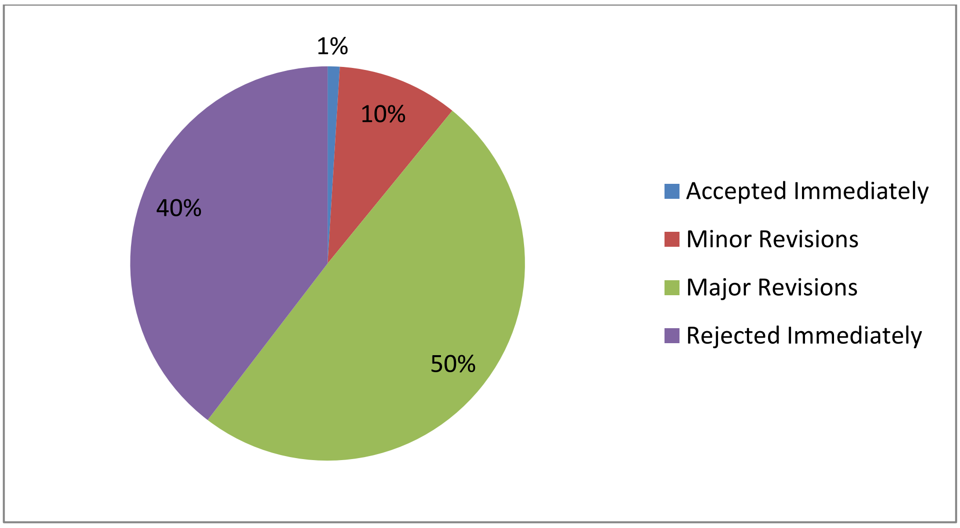
What does the peer reviewer do?

The journal editor usually asks the PR to recommend either (1) accepting the paper as it is, (2) telling the authors to make minor revisions, (3) telling the authors to make major revisions, or (4) rejecting the paper altogether.

Although the journal editors don't tend to give the PRs specific criteria to work to, collectively, the PRs reported that they aim to answer the following questions when working on their reviews:

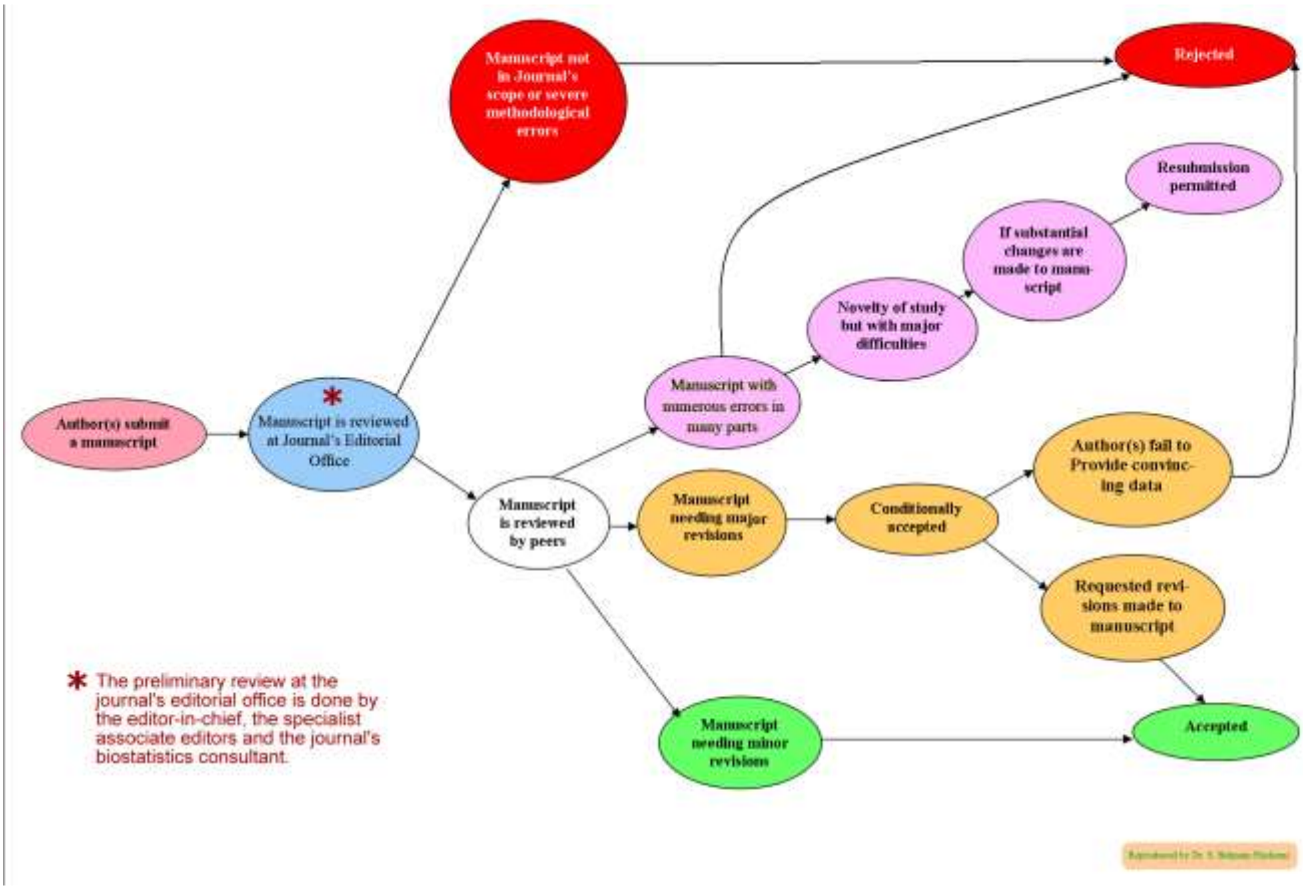
1. Is the topic clear and relevant to the readership?
2. Is the work theoretically and conceptually appropriate?
3. Are the statistics and analytical and experimental methods used appropriate and correctly executed?
4. Does the paper cover all the relevant literature?
5. Is it well written?
6. Does the author convey the information effectively?

Once all the PRs have submitted their reviews, the journal editor reads the reviews and the manuscript and makes a decision (accept/minor revision/major revision/reject) to give to the author(s). As the pie chart below shows, it is very rare for a paper to be accepted for publication without any further revisions being required by the author (1%), and the majority of papers require major revisions (50%) or are rejected immediately (40%).



Few papers receive recommendations for rejection from the PRs because most rejections are desk-rejections, which means that the journal editor decides that the paper is not relevant to the remit of the journal or that it is so clearly underdeveloped and executed that it cannot be sent to busy, volunteer PRs in its current state.

The review process is repeated until the PRs and journal editor are happy that the paper is ready to be published; most articles that are eventually accepted go through between one and three rounds of reviews. The entire process (shown below) from submitting your paper to publication can thus take up to two years in general.



What process does the peer reviewer use to conduct a review?

The PRs all follow slightly different methods of conducting a peer review. Judith reads and makes notes about what needs to be improved as she goes, and she might correct inaccuracies. She usually works at a PC but sometimes prints a hard copy to read on her commute. She typically completes a peer review within two to four hours.

When Sara receives a paper, she usually reads through a printed copy, making notes as she goes. Once she has read it and has a good idea of what she wants to say about it, she either completes the online form or compiles a Word document with comments, questions, and suggestions to submit online.

Geraldine follows a similar process to Sara and reads a printed copy of the paper thoroughly, which she annotates with extensive comments and notes as she is reading it. She usually leaves it for a day or two so that she can think about the paper and her comments before writing the review and submitting it electronically.

Stephen takes a seemingly more thorough approach than the other three PRs. Upon receiving the submission, he usually prints out a hard copy to read through the first time, as if he were not reviewing it, to get an overall sense of the ideas and topic and of the clarity with which the author(s) communicate. He then reviews to the references section and skims through to see whether the author(s) have included important scholars within their area of interest: “If not, I make a mental note, as this will require justification within.” He then reads the submission for a second time on his office computer and makes comments and tracked changes throughout. After leaving the submission for a day or two, he reads it a third time, checking over his comments as he goes, and then he begins writing his response based on his comments, including his recommendations. Finally, he reviews his response to the author(s) to ensure his tone is respectful and that his overall feedback is useful and potentially productive. Stephen thus usually spends two full days cumulatively (over three or four days) on each review.

I asked the PRs about whether they do any additional reading to understand the content of the paper. All four PRs replied that it is rare for them to do extra reading while performing a peer review because if they are reviewing a paper, it is usually because they have some expertise in the topic area. However, Stephen stated, "If the author(s) cite a study with which I am not familiar, I will find the article to ensure it supports the point being made.” Additionally, if the author(s) relies heavily on one or a few article(s), Stephen will read it (them) thoroughly. Geraldine agreed that it might be necessary to read one or two extra papers to assist in writing the review.

Despite there being several PRs for each paper, the reviews are conducted blindly, meaning the PRs are not told the identities of the authors or the other PRs, and they are thus unable to collaborate with the other PRs when conducting the review. However, it is possible that PRs could be aware of who the authors are if the community of authors is small, if they have heard about the research through the grapevine, or if they know the author's style of writing. While there is a concern that this would affect bias, Dolbow (2013) affirmed that acquaintances can be just as brutal with reviews as anyone else.

Once the PRs have completed their review, they are asked to provide a report to the journal editor, which typically takes the form of a detailed, structured report under a number of specific headings, with the main narrative review (sometimes several pages long) being the primary focus (Judith). Additional comments that are not visible to the author(s) are usually forwarded to the journal editor, and sometimes PRs are required to rate the submission on various criteria on a given scoresheet.

The PRs are generally required to complete a web-based form on an academic journal interface designed specifically for the process of submitting and reviewing papers, such as ScholarOne Manuscript or Manuscript Central. These interfaces allow accompanying files to be uploaded, e.g., a Word document that includes detailed comments. However, some journals still conduct the process via email, which is clearly less efficient, and different systems require different things, i.e., some ask for an evaluation on a number of key criteria using a scale and for qualitative feedback, while others ask for qualitative feedback on a series of questions about such things as academic contribution, knowledge of the literature, quality of the methodology (if relevant), quality of findings, and quality of writing.

Overall, PRs are typically asked to report on the appropriateness of the methods and statistical analyses that have been used, the thoroughness of the literature review, the quality of the writing, and the flow of arguments in the paper. Therefore, the quality of the English is not something PRs are generally required to report on; however, if they feel there is an issue with the English, they are expected to comment on it.

After receiving the feedback from all the PRs, the journal editor decides about the next step for the manuscript, and they often send a copy of all of the PRs' comments to the involved PRs by email. This is very helpful and interesting for the PRs because they are able to compare their review with those of the other PRs.

Do peer reviewers follow the progress of the papers after their initial review?

In many cases, the PRs receive a reply from the editor to thank them for the review, and the PRs get to hear about the paper again if it is sent for second (third, fourth) revisions and re-submissions because it is generally the practice to ask the original PRs to comment on the revised versions wherever possible. Once the paper is accepted, the journal editors often write to inform the PR of the outcome and include the comments from the other PRs. However, in other cases, the journal editor may not advise the PRs of the final decision. For example, Sara only found out that one of the papers she reviewed was published coincidentally “because a friend happened to point it out to me (because it was relevant to my work).”

Do peer reviewers receive feedback on the quality of the reviews?

In most cases, the PRs do not receive feedback on quality of their reviews; however, if they are asked to do multiple reviews by several journals, they can assume that they did a good job. Similarly, being able to see other PRs' comments regarding the manuscript is helpful to see how their reviews line up with those of other experts in the field.

Judith reported that some journals in the field of international marketing have implemented a process of naming outstanding PRs annually, based on the journal editors' assessments.

Are peer reviewers always right?

Overall, the PRs were quite strong in their responses to this question, stating that PRs are “absolutely not” always right. As an author, Stephen has received shockingly misguided reviews in the past, which he found extremely frustrating, because it is rarely advisable to call out a PR “in front of” the journal editor, as you ultimately require their sign-off to get published. Conversely, as a PR, Stephen stated that “you don’t suddenly become perfect”; thus, sometimes an author has perfectly reasonable grounds to reject a PR’s recommendation. The most important thing as a PR is to put your ego aside and acknowledge that the review process is supposed to be a dialogue and a discussion, rather than the giving and fulfilment of orders.

Geraldine echoed this sentiment with her response: “Given that PRs are experts in the field, their knowledge and critiques should be respected, but authors should provide a case for their approach and ideas if they feel that the PR has misunderstood or is not right.”

Judith stated that the collective decision based on reviews by three PRs is reasonable in the vast majority of cases; thus, PRs should bear in mind that the aim is to promote a positive approach to reviewing, which requires PRs to offer guidance on improvement so that even when a paper is rejected, the author(s) can take something positive from the process for future work.

How do peer reviewers manage conflicts of interest?

Even though authors are ‘blinded’ in the peer review process, conflicts of interest can arise if the PR recognizes the author. In smaller, narrower fields in particular, you often know whose work it is, which isn’t a problem most of the time because PRs are able to be objective in the review process. However, sometimes, if you have already seen and reviewed the work, either at conferences or at other journals, this can make the review process less objective and thus compromise the ‘blind’ review process (Geraldine).

While Stephen has yet to encounter a conflict of interest, he explained that journals usually have a number of associate editors to avoid any conflict of interest so that, for example, colleagues or students of associate editor 1 can have their submissions handled by associate editor 2. Additionally, journal editors should avoid assigning submissions to PRs at the same institution that they know have a relationship with the author(s).

As a professional English editor for Uni-Edit, Sara encountered a possible conflict of interest when asked to edit a PLoS One review paper that she had been involved in reviewing. To avoid the conflict of interest, she merely explained to Uni-Edit that she was unable to edit the paper.

Sara also recounted the following situation involving a colleague of hers: Her colleague was sent a paper to review, which involved an analysis of data that he and other colleagues had submitted to a group for use in a workshop. This group had not agreed to it being used in a publication, because one of them was using it for her PhD thesis and was planning to publish it herself first. This caused a conflict of interest because her colleague was unable to review the paper fairly because he was angry about their data being used and he wanted to stop the paper from being published. To resolve the matter, he contacted the journal editor to explain the situation and they launched a process within the university to stop the other authors (who worked at the same university) from publishing the paper.

Another example of a possible conflict is if a paper is sent to an author's former supervisor or mentor to review. Judith stated that the PR is required to notify the journal editor of all conflicts of interest and usually withdraw from the review process.

Peer Reviews and the English Language

Because the reviews are blind, it is difficult for the PRs to know the exact proportion of papers written by NSE or NNSE authors. The senior PRs (Judith & Geraldine) suggested that, based on the clarity of the English, they consider that NNSE authors make up a considerable part of the papers they review, although it is not always obvious because, in their experiences as journal editors (rather than PRs), they have received poorly written papers that lack clarity, have poorly arranged ideas, and contain questionable logic for arguments from NSEs.

International fields also attract a higher number of English as an International Language (EIL) papers, making it often difficult to know where the authors are from. Incidentally, I use the term EIL here to refer to people from a non-English speaking country writing in English for people from many other countries to read. This term differs from English as a Second Language (ESL), which refers to authors of non-English speaking countries writing in English for local people (native speakers) to read. ESL writers need to have impeccable English, whereas EIL writers need to ensure clarity and can thus perhaps use a simpler style of writing.

Geraldine stated, “I have been the journal editor associate editor for papers written by NNSE authors where the writing has been fantastic and where it has been poor. But I have also been the journal editor or associate editor for papers written by NSEs that have been both fantastic and poor as well.”

She added that “very few papers that are too difficult to understand should reach the PRs, as they are usually desk-rejected immediately by the journal editor.”

How do peer reviewers deal with poor English?

The junior PRs reported having had one paper each that they found too difficult to understand in places but while other papers lacked clarity, they were not too difficult to decipher. Geraldine stated, “I have received a very small handful of papers where the quality of the writing is simply too poor to be able to understand properly.” While the interviews with these PRs cover only a small selection of all peer reviews, these responses suggest that reaching the review stage generally reflects positively on your clarity of your English.

Nevertheless, the PRs do experience frustration when papers are written in unclear English because it makes the paper automatically unsuitable for publication, and it could take some time for an EIL author to get better at writing in a foreign language, which is not likely something that can be remedied over the course of a peer review process (Stephen). Additionally, difficult English makes the PR feel that authors are wasting their time “because I have to struggle to understand what they are talking about” (Sara) and that poor writing, whether by NSEs or NNSEs, can obfuscate good research (Geraldine).

Judith added that if the style of writing is inappropriate for the journal, she questions why the paper has been submitted to the specific journal, and why the journal editor has sent it out for review. Nevertheless, if the content is good, the outcome in terms of the eventual acceptance of the paper will not really be affected (Judith), as poor English is not a valid reason to reject a paper, unless it is a revised manuscript, the English is particularly bad, and/or the authors refuse to have it edited by a native speaker. However, if the content is unclear because the English is poor, the paper has not presented its arguments clearly (Judith), and while authors do not have to possess absolute mastery of the English language, they must be able to write clearly and concisely (Stephen).

Geraldine summed this up by saying, “Poor quality of writing will detract from the quality of the paper and it would definitely need to be addressed, and therefore revisions would always be required in such a situation. However, the extent of the revisions will also depend on the quality of the research and the arguments contained in the paper as a whole.”

What are the most common mistakes made in academic English writing?

The most common English language mistakes the PRs have noticed in the manuscripts they have reviewed are related to style, sentence structure, and grammar, particularly the correct use of conjunctions. Papers by NNSEs are particularly noticeable because NNSEs tend to have more difficulties meeting the requirements of the referencing system. In such situations, “journal editors might sometimes comment that the paper needs editing for English, but that it has been sent for review at this stage because it seems to offer an interesting and novel study” (Judith). The PRs also reported that they could generally recognize different mistakes between different native tongues. For example, the English written by authors from Brazil is quite different from that written by authors from Japan (Sara). Additionally, helped by her abilities as a linguist, Judith can easily tell the difference between writers with native tongues in languages from Asia, Europe, and Eastern Europe. Similarly, a poorly written paper by an NSE stands out from that of an NNSE, because it contains typical mistakes NSEs make when they don’t take proper care with their writing, which are usually related to the way they speak in English.

Should I use a professional English editing service?

The PRs explained that they cannot distinguish easily between a paper written by a native speaker and one written by a NNSE and edited by a professional editing service, especially because many native speakers also use editing services: “not all good scientists are good writers, regardless of whether they are working in their native language or not, and there is no shame in using an editing or proofreading service” (Geraldine).

Nevertheless, Sara recounted a situation where she could clearly tell that the paper had received editing by Uni-Edit: “I could see where the authors had made changes after the professional English editor had edited the paper, or possibly rejected the English editor’s changes, because there were places where the English was good and flowed well, and then suddenly I would be brought up short by a strange or awkward phrasing, or something that didn’t quite make sense.” Thus, if the author has the paper edited by a professional editing service, makes amendments, and fails to have the paper proofread again before submitting the paper to the journal, the mistakes are likely to be more obvious to the PR.

> ~~The m~~Measures of mental workload ~~has~~ have become crucial ~~in search of~~for developing safe and ~~efficiency~~ efficient ~~and safe~~workplacesty ~~in~~ of high automated technology ~~of the workplace~~. The effect of overload ~~have~~ has long been recognized as a factor ~~which~~ that leads to injury and accident. ~~On the other hand~~However, recent study ~~iesy~~ ~~has~~ havehas raised concerns ~~in~~ about the risk of ~~being~~ being ~~work~~ *underload*, which may lead to boredom and low motivation to perform the task (Becker et al., 1991-; Hancock & Warm, 1989).

However, the PRs agreed that there is a chance that having the English corrected might also unmask bad science: “If the science is bad, then the science is bad. Poor English won’t hide it” (Judith), and conversely, “Good English will not mask bad science either” (Geraldine). Judith sometimes edits a part of the paper to show the essentialness of having it edited by a native speaker, and Geraldine will make suggestions for grammatical revisions in her reviews, but she doesn’t usually edit a whole section of a paper for an author.

What advice do peer reviewers have for authors?

As NSE academics who have submitted many papers for review, these PRs understand the peer review process from the perspective of an author. After submitting a paper, Judith is always anxious, but hopes that after the first review, the door will be open towards publication. In other words, there is never any expectation it will be accepted, but rather a level of hope that the PRs will see enough in the paper to open a conversation, so that the paper can be improved over the, sometimes lengthy, review process towards acceptance.

Geraldine and Stephen both reported feeling excited but nervous after submitting a paper, although Stephen explains that he generally feels “pretty great” initially, because “it's something I've put a decent amount of time into.”

When asked what advice the PRs would offer NNSEs regarding their academic writing, they responded with the following items:

- Work with co-authors in the field who are native English speakers to revise the paper (Judith)
- Have a native English speaker proofread or edit your paper—preferably someone who is also familiar with the subject area (Stephen)
- Use a professional editing service to make sure the finer grammatical issues have not been overlooked (Stephen)
- Use what help you can get, learn as much as you can from that help, and don’t feel ashamed of doing so. Doing academic research and getting published is hard enough without having to deal with a language of which you are not a native speaker. (Geraldine)
- Factor in more time for the project lifecycle to allow for English language editing (Sara)

For all authors, Judith stated that, while it is always upsetting to be rejected or to be asked to make major revisions—and sometimes authors feel that PRs have missed the point or got it wrong—the key is to not take things personally. Thus, if given the opportunity, it is essential to revise and re-submit, to explain clearly how you have made the recommended changes and, if appropriate, why you haven’t.

Stephen takes a strategic view of the entire review process. As the process from submission to publication varies from journal to journal, it is advisable to send a few papers to lower-tier journals that are likely to go through quicker and a few to higher-tier journals that will probably take longer. That way, your productivity is less affected if you fail to succeed with some of the more ambitious journals.

Why do some peer reviewers use poor English in their comments to authors?

When reading over the comments you receive from PRs, it is possible that you have noticed that some PRs use poor English in the reviews, which isn't necessarily related to the native tongue of the PR. I therefore asked the interviewees for their thoughts about why some PRs fail to ensure their English is error free.

Judith stated that as a journal editor, she has been aware of poorly written English in a few reviews. However, if the review is good overall, she usually edits the errors before forwarding it to the author.

Possible reasons for such errors are that PRs—as unpaid volunteers—take on too much and rush their responses to get the reviews done; sometimes academics are frustrated with the poor quality of the paper, in terms of the language or content; and younger academics, in particular, sometimes don't like to say no when asked to review by senior academics they want to impress, though of course that can backfire if a review is poor.

Geraldine stated the following: "I think this is poor practice. We can all make mistakes from time to time, but reviews should also be well written and easy to understand. I couldn't say why people don't take the time to fix it, as I always try to write a comprehensible (and comprehensive!) review."

Stephen agreed that while seeing errors in the PRs' reviews is suboptimal, "the value PRs bring should be judged by the quality of their feedback, as opposed to the level of care taken in their writing. Ideally, both would be addressed."

Sara raised the point that sometimes academics are NNSEs themselves, which raises the question about whether NNSEs should conduct peer reviews in a foreign language.

Should NNSEs comment on the English in their peer reviews?

Overall, the PRs considered that NNSEs who have experience of publishing in an English journal of high quality—a requirement to be recruited as a PR—are capable of conducting PRs in English because the quality of a peer review depends on the academic him- or herself and not whether they are good at languages (Judith).

Whether they are NSEs or NNSEs, PRs are only required to comment on the standard of writing in an article if it is problematic. Those problems might be grammatical issues, for which they only need recommend using a professional English editing service, but they might also relate to the style of writing, which could mean that the author is using technical language that is incomprehensible to anyone other than the most specialized researchers. For grammatical errors, a NNSE could perhaps declare that they are not a native speaker of English by saying something similar to the following: "This appears to be a grammatical error – please check."

Geraldine stated, "I don't think that journal editors do or should differentiate between NNSEs and NSEs" because of the variety of people's names. It is almost impossible to know whether potential PRs are native English speakers or not, unless you are close personal friends with them. Using herself as an example, Geraldine explained, "I have a continental European name, but I am a native New-Zealand English speaker living in the UK."

As an Editor for Uni-edit, I have read many peer review reports in which PRs are requested to comment on the quality of writing. However, there are two aspects to the quality of writing: the composition of the paper and the quality of English. These can differ. For example, a paper might be superbly assembled with facts, references, logical argument, insight, and conclusions but could have numerous grammatical problems. By contrast, a paper could be written in superb English but just not put forward a meaningful argument. PRs sometimes comment on the composition and sometimes on the English usage. If a PR is a NNSE, commenting on the English might be challenging, and further, the author will be likewise challenged to put such comments into perspective.

The Future of Peer Review

While it is not a perfect system, the PRs generally felt that the current peer review process works reasonably well and will continue as it is for the foreseeable future, because it is solidly embedded in academic publishing (Geraldine) and a better method has yet to be proposed (Stephen).

However, they do make some suggestions to improve the current included, which involve doing something to speed up the review process, training and rewarding PRs in some way (e.g., departments could give greater weighting to service as a PR when considering applications for promotion and tenure to provide more of an incentive for PRs to perform reviews thoroughly and in a timely manner), and providing more information on the whereabouts a submission is in the process because “Under review” gives little indication as to how long authors should expect to wait.

However, the PRs were aware that the current process is somewhat challenged by the emergence of mostly online journals that adopt alternative methods. Some online journals refuse to adopt a peer-review process and instead take a pay-to-publish approach. However, Geraldine claimed that someone with academic training will likely understand the difference between these two types of journals and will thus view the ‘pay-to-publish’ journals that do not adopt a PR process as being less-rigorous. Thus, this method is unlikely to gain popularity over time.

Another online method involves conducting open peer reviews, where the identity of the PR is known to the author. This process is supposed to improve the speed of publishing the article (online) and allows the author and readers to determine whether the review process has been just. However, the PRs were “not particularly in favor of it,” confirming that they would be unwilling to participate in this method if asked.

When asked about this method, Judith responded: “This might speed things up a little, but I don’t see how this would improve how far an author can tell if the review is ‘just’. Authors see the full review in a blind review process, and why would readers need to see the review? The quality of the journal and its process is a surrogate indicator of ‘justness’.”

While Stephen agrees that transparency would be good, he felt this method could raise just as many questions—if not more—than it answered. For example, “it could call into question the legitimacy of reviews involving individuals that do or do not get on, and it might pressure PRs to give more or less favorable responses based on personal factors.” Additionally, junior academics would likely be very hesitant to give poor reviews to more established scholars, which could lead to less people agreeing to perform reviews and decrease the overall standard of subsequent reviews.

Geraldine was aware of situations where open reviews have been conducted, but not necessarily where the readers would know who the PRs were. While she can see some advantages to this process, i.e., people are less likely to provide poor or personal reviews if their identity is known, and there can be a fruitful engagement between the authors and PRs, she agreed with Stephen that potential problems exist with power relations (i.e., junior academics would feel pressured to give positive reviews of manuscripts submitted by established names in the field).

While the Web is an incredible place for new ideas to be shared and to take hold, the current peer review process will likely continue for some time, although there is no doubt that new peer review mechanisms will emerge in the future.

“That’s the gist of what I want to say. Now get me some statistics to base it on.”