

# Achieving “Reviewer Readiness”

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As a reviewer, I must confess that, at best, I still consider myself to be a relative novice who is still actively trying to navigate up the reviewing learning curve. Even after several years of serving as a reviewer, I still find it to be challenging. When I receive a new manuscript to review, I experience a mix of emotions—part interest, especially when the article focuses on an intriguing question within my research domain, some uncertainty about whether I will be able to do a good job reviewing it, and, at times, some dismay about the tight time frame in which to complete it given competing demands.

This opportunity to comment on some aspect of reviewing led me to reflect on my own progression in the craft. On the basis of the factors that have influenced my development as a reviewer and consideration of what may affect the quality of reviews produced, I will focus on issues relating to “reviewer readiness.” My hope is that my observations on this topic will be of use to individuals who are beginning their career as reviewers as well as those who are in a position to mentor them and guide their development.

## REVIEWER READINESS

Research suggests that for an individual to perform any role well, whether it be for an employee to excel at his or her job or for a customer to perform his or her role in the service delivery process effectively, he or she requires three factors: role clarity, ability, and motivation (Bowen 1986; Schneider and Bowen 1995; Vroom 1964). In the context of customers coproducing a service, this has been referred to as “customer readiness” (Bitner, Ostrom, and Meuter 2002). I think it can be useful to view reviewing in the same manner. To be an excellent reviewer requires having “reviewer readiness” where the individual possesses all three of these characteristics. A reviewer must have role clarity in that he or she understands his or her role as a reviewer, what is expected of him or her, and the steps

involved in completing a review. In addition, a reviewer must have the ability and necessary skills to perform the task as well as possess feelings of self-efficacy as they relate to reviewing. Finally, he or she must be motivated and perceive that there are sufficient rewards for exerting the effort needed to perform the role of reviewer well. In my comments that follow, I will discuss the development of reviewer role clarity, ability, and motivation from my perspective as a reviewer and based on prior research and writings on the topic of reviewing.

How does one achieve “reviewer readiness?” How does one develop the role clarity, ability, and motivation necessary to perform the role of reviewer well?

## ROLE CLARITY

Early in one’s academic career, information about the role of a reviewer and how to review is provided in primarily one way. Insight into the output of the reviewing process is gained by looking at reviews that are done of one’s own research. Although I cannot say that, early on, my first (second or third) thought after reading a review of my own research was, “Wow, I definitely have a better understanding of what I am supposed to do as a reviewer after reading this review.” The cumulative effect of reading a number of reviewers’ comments did help solidify my understanding of the content and structure that are typical of the “comments to authors” component of a review. I also benefited from the fact that, early in my doctoral program, faculty shared reviewer comments they had received evaluating their own research. This broadened my exposure to different examples of approaches used by reviewers to present their comments and suggestions about improving a manuscript to authors.

Much of the rest of my learning about reviewing happened “on the job,” a common experience for reviewers that is noted by both Crandall (1991) and Lynch (1998). Given this, when individuals first begin their career as a reviewer, journal editors often play a significant role in shaping novice reviewers’ perceptions of a reviewer’s role and the steps involved in the reviewing process. Instructions to reviewers about rules for reviewing can help

provide role clarity. One of the best examples of this is the detailed instructions to reviewers provided on the *Journal of Consumer Research's* (*JCR*) Web site (<http://wiscinfo.doit.wisc.edu/jcr/instr-revs.htm>). The instructions include specific suggestions for conducting and crafting a review, a description of the characteristics of a quality review, a detailed explanation of the components of a *JCR* review including the suggested content and format for comments to the authors, and information concerning the appropriate way to send a review to *JCR*. Although the information is intended only for individuals reviewing for *JCR*, much of it would help novice reviewers of other journals that provide less explicit instructions gain insight into many key aspects of a reviewer's role.

While it seems that few marketing journals provide as explicit instructions as *JCR*, most marketing journals have standardized evaluation forms that clearly specify the criteria to be used to evaluate a manuscript. Knowing and understanding these criteria are a critical aspect of reviewing. Across marketing journals (and, in fact, many disciplines), the criteria are similar (e.g., the evaluation of a manuscript is commonly based on the importance of the topic to the discipline, conceptual and methodological rigor, presentation quality, and the contribution the manuscript makes to the discipline; see Weller [2001] for an extensive discussion of criteria and guidelines used across disciplines identified in prior research).

However, in many cases, less guidance is provided about the form and content of the comments to the authors. Novice reviewers who have not had much exposure to reviewer comments may find the act of crafting comments for authors to be the least clear aspect of the reviewing process. Also, they might not know exactly how the nature and presentation of the comments might differ by type of journal or for a journal versus a conference submission. Sample reviews or instructions could easily be provided for less experienced reviewers, which would enhance their role clarity.

Part of having role clarity also involves understanding the characteristics of a good review and reviewer. Often journal editors will make some of these explicit (e.g., be prompt with your review; do not convey anything about your recommendation of rejection or acceptance of the manuscript in your comments to the authors). In addition, individuals just starting to review have several useful resources to refer to for insights into how to approach reviewing. For example, both Holbrook (1986) and Summers (2001) provide helpful suggestions for reviewers (e.g., find a way to make the tone of your review positive; strive to identify all essential changes during the first review of a manuscript).

In my opinion, Lynch (1998), in his *Advances in Consumer Research* Presidential Address, provides the most comprehensive discussion of potential reviewer pitfalls. He highlights the "Seven Deadly Sins of Reviewing" that I

continue to keep in mind when I review. For example, he notes that reviewers often suffer from both hindsight bias (Hawkins and Hastie 1990) and a form of false consensus. As reviewers, we often lose sight of the fact that findings that appear obvious after reading a manuscript might not have been beforehand and, although an article may not dramatically shift our own beliefs, it may do so for others possessing different priors. Given the usefulness of his article for enhancing both role clarity and one's skills as a reviewer, his article should be required reading for new reviewers.

## ABILITY

In terms of ability, what we learn in our doctoral program about research design, methodology, and data analysis helps us develop the necessary skills to evaluate research. The practice we receive critiquing articles in our doctoral program also teaches us how to evaluate the merits and shortcomings of research effectively. Given the importance of being able to evaluate research, it might be desirable to institutionalize a critique of an academic article as a central component of doctoral students' comprehensive exam. When students receive feedback on their critique, a by-product of the process will be that it contributes to their skill development as a reviewer.

Although there are no doubt exceptions, overall, as reviewers, we tend to get very little in the way of formal training on how to review. In fact, Crandall (1991) found that only 2 out of 76 social and behavioral sciences editors indicated that they offered training for reviewers. However, more recently, some innovative approaches have been implemented. For example, several years ago, *School Psychology Quarterly* created a Student Editorial Review Board made up of doctoral students. Students are nominated to be on the board as well as closely supervised and mentored by a member of the journal's Editorial Review Board. When the student completes a review of a manuscript, the student's mentor on the Editorial Review Board evaluates the review and signs off on it prior to it being submitted to the editor. Although this requires effort on the part of Editorial Review Board members to ensure that student reviews are of acceptable quality, this seems like a nice introduction to reviewing that differs in nature from the "start reviewing for conferences and work your way up" perspective that is prevalent in marketing. Although there are important issues associated with implementing a Student Editorial Review Board that need to be addressed (e.g., authors' concerns given their expectation that a submitted manuscript will be reviewed by acknowledged experts in the field), the introduction of a Doctoral Student Editorial Board by *Marketing Science* in 2002 indicates that there is some interest in exploring this idea within the field.

In addition to a lack of training, I think one of the difficult aspects of being a new reviewer is that often one gets little or no direct feedback on one's reviewing skills, which also affects ability. I vividly remember working diligently on a number of reviews as a new assistant professor and, even after sending them off, wondering if they were any good. At times, even looking at what the other reviewers wrote, I was not sure. My reviews were at times similar but, in a number of cases, they were not. Was this good or bad? Numerous studies have documented the existence of low reliability among reviewers' ratings and evaluation of manuscripts (e.g., Cicchetti 1991; Ernst, Saradeth, and Resch 1993). Some scholars view this as a problem to be fixed, whereas others suggest it is irrelevant given that editors purposefully ask reviewers with different skills and perspectives to review a manuscript (Bailar 1991; Fletcher and Fletcher 1997; see Weller 2001 for a comprehensive literature review of research addressing the issue of reviewer agreement). Regardless of the cause, this means that for a novice reviewer, just reading the other reviewers' comments rarely provides unequivocal feedback.

Editors can help in this regard. For example, some editors highlight for authors key aspects of each of the reviews that they think are important for authors to address. They do this in a detailed manner (verbally in the letter to the authors as well as, in some instances, by marking on the reviewer comments themselves), which authors no doubt appreciate. As a reviewer, it is a great form of indirect feedback. I always look to see whether I have effectively captured or missed what appear to be the primary areas of concern with a manuscript, the bases for rejection, or the issues that need to be addressed in a revision.

As I have done more reviewing over the years, I also have increased my ability by reading the comments of the other reviewers of a manuscript in conjunction with the editor's decision letter to the authors. This has helped me identify how the application of the manuscript evaluation criteria relates to the ultimate decision about the manuscript. Although not privy to the manuscript recommendation made by the other reviewers, reading their comments and the editor's letter to the authors has helped me to be better able to judge manuscript contribution and the most appropriate recommendation for a manuscript given its strengths and shortcomings.

## MOTIVATION

I purposely left the issue of motivation for last because I think that as one gains experience as a reviewer, role clarity and ability are present, but motivation then has the most impact on the quality of reviews that are produced. Over the years, several authors in their discussion of how to improve review quality have focused on steps that would enhance motivation. Some have proposed monetary

incentives be offered to reviewers (e.g., direct payment, reduced journal subscription rates) or increased academic recognition, which is more commonly done in marketing (e.g., asking good reviewers to be on the editorial review board for a journal; Blank 2002; Gleser 1986; Markland 1989). The *Journal of Finance* assigns the best reviewers to manuscripts whose authors have provided excellent reviews in the past (Laband 1990). It is a practice that no doubt increases motivation. Lynch (1998) focuses on the issue of accountability for reviewers and suggests that systematic feedback from editors, other reviewers of the same manuscript, and authors to reviewers would increase accountability and, hence, motivation (not to mention provide feedback that would likely improve one's ability as a reviewer). However, journals' limited financial resources and the time constraints of those involved are likely to make providing much of the above challenging.

The trick to motivation may be to keep salient the reasons why reviewing is important and the responsibility that is entrusted to us as reviewers. As researchers, we realize that for the scientific publishing process to work, those of us who publish in academic journals must reciprocate and serve as reviewers. We recognize that, at a macro level, the reviewing process dictates what ultimately gets published, which then guides the direction of knowledge creation and understanding within our discipline. At a micro level, by determining what gets published, we also play a significant role in who gets tenured and promoted. However, these points can easily be forgotten when one is confronted with many reviews to do and an ever-dwindling supply of uninterrupted time. To keep this from happening, I do two things. I try not to commit to more reviews than I can effectively handle, and I make every effort to practice the golden rule as it relates to reviewing (e.g., "Referee the manuscript as you would like to have your own papers treated"; Siegelman 1988:360).

We have all learned and benefited from reviewing for journals. For this, we owe a debt of gratitude to our mentors who have had a lasting impact by introducing us to reviewing, clarifying for us our role as reviewers, enhancing our ability as reviewers, and motivating us to excel at reviewing.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank three mentors who have contributed to my role clarity as a reviewer and my ability and motivation to review. The first is Robert Cialdini, Regents' professor of psychology at Arizona State University, who, as my undergraduate thesis director, helped me navigate through my first initial attempts at evaluating academic research. The second is Dawn Iacobucci, professor of marketing at Northwestern University, who, through our work together, gave me my first exposure to the academic

review process. The third is Mary Jo Bitner, AT&T Professor of Services Marketing and Management at Arizona State University, who, through our research endeavors, has helped me gain additional insights into the reviewing process that have helped me become a better reviewer.

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