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How to review a Paper: Suggestions from the Editors of *Surgery* and the *Journal of Surgical Research*



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THE FOLLOWING ARE THE PROCEEDINGS OF A BREAKFAST SESSION sponsored by Elsevier, held on February 4, 2016, during the 11th Annual Academic Surgical Congress in Jacksonville, FL. The 4 invited speakers were the current editors of *Surgery* and the *Journal of Surgical Research (JSR)*. A selected reference list follows these proceedings.

HOW TO REVIEW A MANUSCRIPT

The first speaker was Michael Sarr, MD, former and Emeritus Professor of Surgery at the Mayo Clinic and the current Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Surgery*. The topic of his talk was “How to Review a Manuscript.” Dr Sarr began with several questions to the audience related to the relevance of the overall session:

1. When asked how many had reviewed a scientific paper, an overwhelming majority raised their hands.
2. When asked how many had done >5 reviews, again, most audience members raised their hands.
3. When asked whether they had been coached or taught how to do a review, <20% of the audience voted affirmatively.

4. When asked whether they had ever been “offended” by the callousness of reviewers’ comments, more than half of the audience agreed.
5. Finally, when asked whether they had ever felt that a reviewer had done a bad job, had not read their paper, or had not understood their paper, again, more than half of the audience agreed.

Having set the stage for the session, Dr Sarr first focused on what an editor wants from reviewers. Although the editor does want the reviewer’s opinion on whether the manuscript should be published, what is most important is a critical, unbiased, comprehensive review of both the good and bad points of the paper. The review should include constructive, positive suggestions to the authors. Additionally, in a section usually titled “confidential comments to the editor,” the editor wants a very clear opinion on the manuscript’s importance and whether it falls into the following categories: (1) warrants publication, (2) requires a minor revision, (3) requires a major revision, or (4) requires a major revision and re-review. Notably, the timely submission of the review (<2 weeks) always is encouraged.

Dr Sarr continued his talk by describing the sections of the review expected by the editor. These include the major sections usually titled “confidential comments to the editor” and “comments to the author.” The latter section usually begins with a short summary of the article (3–5 sentences). Then, when indicated, the reviewer

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Table. Suggested outline for a scientific review

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- **SUMMARY:** The initial paragraph (2–3 sentences) should mention the name and location of the author(s) with a short summary of the aims and goals of the manuscript.
 - **MAJOR POINTS:** These are critical points that the authors must address; they should be numbered separately to help the author and the editor to address a revision in an orderly manner.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 etc.
 - **MINOR POINTS:** These are points that should be easy for the author to address; again, the individual numbering helps authors and editors.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 etc.
 - Finally, the reviewer may elect to sign the review with his or her name; if so, then his or her name will be communicated to the author with the review. However, note that some journals keep the review process completely anonymous.
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should list by number the major points (these represent important points that the author must address or change) and the minor points (these are often correctable by the author or editor with simple editing). Numbering these points facilitates the authors' responses to each point (see suggested outline for a scientific review in [Table](#)). When the review is given as a full paragraph with multiple suggestions embedded within the paragraph, it is very difficult for the author to address all of the criticisms in a logical, easily understood manner; likewise, it is very difficult for the editor to review the authors' responses.

In the "confidential comments to the editor" section, the reviewer should begin with a brief description of the study (2–3 sentences). Next, the reviewer should provide comments about the importance of the topic for that journal, followed by a brief description of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, as well as any limitations or problems that would preclude its acceptance. These comments do not need to be as detailed as the comments provided to the authors, but they may be used to help determine the study's importance and potential for publication. Finally, the reviewer can add his or her *very candid opinion* on whether the article should or should not be published, remembering that the authors will not see this or be able to identify the reviewer. Optionally, if a reviewer enjoys doing reviews, this is a good place to thank the editor and encourage the editor to continue sending manuscripts for review. The reviewers can also sign or type their name in this

part of the review; this is good PR for the reviewer and shows the valuing of what we call "academic citizenship."

In the "comments to the authors" section, the reviewer provides evidence to the authors (and the editor) that he or she critically read the paper and got the "big picture." In a short paragraph (2–3 sentences), the reviewer conveys his or her understanding of the study's goals or aims and its methods and results. The reviewer's goals are to review the underlying science even if the English is poor, identify things that must be changed before publication, and make constructive suggestions for important improvements. Also, the reviewer should try to be the authors' advocate (that is certainly what we would all want when someone reviews our own submissions) and start out by being complimentary to the authors, such as with comments like "the authors identified a potentially important topic" or "the authors did a nice study investigating..." The goal of a reviewer is not to refute and criticize everything in the paper. A reviewer should always be courteous, inoffensive, and constructive and remember that, with constructive criticism, there is always a way to say that the study is not good or appropriate in a nice way, such as "the authors attempted to determine the genomic signature, but unfortunately..." followed by a description of limitations and suggestions for improvement. Overall, the reviewers should convey to the authors that they understood the work and are providing a fair assessment.

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