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How to be a Good Peer Reviewer

Diane Powers Dirette
Western Michigan University, ot-ojot@wmich.edu

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How to be a Good Peer Reviewer

Keywords

blind peer review, conflicts of interest, ethics, critical review

Credentials Display

Diane Powers Dirette, PhD, OTL, FAOTA

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Peer review is the editorial process by which qualified individuals, who are from the scientific community and have expertise in specified areas, review and critique scholarly work before it is published. The purpose of a peer review is to assess the validity and reliability of the scholarly work and its potential contribution to the body of knowledge of a profession or discipline. This letter from the editor will discuss the history, types, and merits of the peer review process and provide tips for being a good peer reviewer.

History and Significance

Peer review of scholarly works has a long history. As early as 460-322 BC, Hippocrates and Aristotle engaged with their colleagues to get feedback on their ideas, which ultimately would become the basis of the scientific process. Into the 1600s the Church regulated the scientific process, as is well-documented in the case of Galileo. By the 1700s, however, the focus of oversight had shifted to the scientific community with groups like the Royal Society of Edinburgh introducing the use of peers in the review process in 1731 (Shema, 2014). Despite that early introduction, most journals still gave all of the decision power regarding publication to the editor-in-chief. It was not until the 1940s that the *Journal of the American Medical Association* implemented peer review, and the prestigious English medical journal, *The Lancet*, did not do so until 1976 (Shema, 2014). Since that time, blind peer review has become the gold standard for the scholarly scientific publication process.

Types of Peer Review

There are four types of peer review: open, single-blind, double-blind, and triple-blind (Elsevier, 2020). Open peer reviews allow the editor, reviewers, and authors to all know the names and affiliations of one another. For single-blind peer review only the reviewers are anonymous to the author, but the authors' names, their affiliations, and the editor's name are known to the reviewers. For double-blind peer review the authors, their affiliations, and the reviewers are anonymous to one another and only the editor's name is known to both parties.

In triple-blind peer review all names, including that of the editor, are unknown to one another.

The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy (OJOT) uses a double-blind peer review process. This process allows the reviewers and the authors to communicate openly with the editor but to remain anonymous to one another. The anonymity of the author and reviewer encourages an impartial review and revision process. Because the affiliations are also unknown, double-blind peer review reduces bias against or in favor of institutional affiliations and allows for a review of the scholarly work based on its contents and not on the reputations of the institutions.

Pros and Cons of Peer Review

There are several pros and cons to the peer review process. The pros are that the peer reviews provide additional oversight of manuscripts, increase the credibility of the publication, and ultimately increase the impact factor. Because an editor does not have expertise in all of the content covered by a journal, the peer reviewers, who are selected to review based on their topic and methodological expertise, can provide the detailed critique necessary to make decisions regarding the validity and reliability of the scholarly work and its potential contribution to the profession.

The cons are that the peer review process is time consuming and slows down the speed at which scientific information reaches the consumer. The process typically relies on scholars who are willing to volunteer their time to the process; therefore, the time frame for review can be variable depending on the availability and schedule of these reviewers. In addition, despite the efforts of the journals to ensure unbiased reviews, there is always the possibility of abuse in the system with a reviewer expressing

dissatisfaction with a method or topic with which they disagree rather than evaluating the quality of the work itself. The use of multiple reviewers for each manuscript can help deter the influence of this type of reviewer bias.

Conflicts of Interest and Ethics

During the review process conflicts of interest and other ethical issues are considered. Because of potential conflicts of interest, OJOT uses a double-blind peer review, and reviewers who work at the same institutions as the authors are not requested to review those submissions. Despite the use of double-blind peer review, there are times when reviewers are able to determine authorship based on their knowledge of the literature in their areas of expertise. In those situations, the reviewer is asked to contact the editor to discuss possible bias. If the reviewer is able to complete an unbiased review of the work, the review is allowed to proceed. If not, the review is declined and a different reviewer is requested. In addition, if the reviewer has done a review of the manuscript for another journal, the reviewer should notify the editor, and a decision regarding that review will be determined.

Other ethical considerations include levels of expertise, confidentiality, and personal bias. If reviewers determine that they do not have the necessary content or methodological expertise to review a manuscript, they should decline the review or discuss it with the editor, who may ask them to review only part of the manuscript or decide to withdraw the request. Reviewers also should maintain confidentiality related to the content of the manuscript by not disclosing or using the information gained from the reviews in any presentations or publications until the manuscript is published. Reviewers should also be careful not to be influenced in their reviews by the language of the authors or their religious or political positions. The reviewer is allowed to provide feedback regarding these issues, but they should steadfastly review the merits of the work despite any disagreements with the authors' positions. Finally, reviewers should be careful to provide reviews that are not hostile or personal but that maintain a professional, objective tone.

Critical Review of Scholarly Work

A critical review is a written analysis and summary of the merits and flaws of the manuscript. The analysis should include the potential of the work to contribute to the profession and constructive feedback about the writing, organization, and content of the manuscript. For a research manuscript, the reviewer should also consider the robustness of the method, the reliability and validity of results, and the accuracy of the interpretation of those results. Constructive feedback is the core of critical reviews of scholarly work in the peer review process as it will assist the authors with revisions of the manuscript.

If the reviewers think that the manuscript does not merit revisions and recommends that it be rejected, then that also can be done in a constructive manner. For example, reviewers may suggest that the manuscript be submitted to another publication that is a better fit for the manuscript or they may suggest further data collection that would add to and strengthen the work for future submission. All critical reviews should provide suggestions that would improve the viability of the work.

10 Tips for Being a Good Peer Reviewer

- 1. Decide Promptly.** Decide if you can agree to complete the review and respond to that request promptly, preferably in one week.
- 2. Address Conflicts.** Contact the editor if there are any conflicts of interest or ethical issues.

3. **Use the Author Guidelines.** Review the author guidelines that match with the category of the submission so that you know the expectations for each specific manuscript that you review.
4. **Be a Mentor.** Enter the review process with the intention of providing detailed feedback that will improve the manuscript. It may help to reframe your role as a reviewer to one of mentor instead of critic.
5. **Use a System.** Use an organized, comprehensive process, such as the outline from the author guidelines or the OJOT reviewer checklists for each category. See Appendices A-D.
6. **Be Professional.** Provide objective, constructive feedback on the overall quality and the specific sections of each manuscript. Do not make personal or disparaging remarks about the work but rather provide professional feedback that leads to positive improvements in the work, even if you recommend that the manuscript be rejected.
7. **Forgo Copy Editing.** The journal has a copy editor; as a reviewer, you can focus on the quality of the writing and not get caught up in detailed copy editing.
8. **Be Timely.** Complete the review in a timely manner by keeping in mind that the author is waiting to get a decision on the manuscript. If an extension is needed, request it at the initial agreement or at least before the deadline.
9. **Take Credit.** Keep track of the number of reviews you have completed and take credit for those by recording them on your curriculum vitae. Peer reviews are a voluntary service to your profession and should be acknowledged as such.
10. **Improve Your Skills.** If you want to improve your skills as a peer reviewer, consider taking a free online peer reviewer training course at one of the following sites.
 - <https://publons.com/community/academy/>
 - <https://authorservices.wiley.com/Reviewers/journal-reviewers/becoming-a-reviewer.html/peer-review-training.html>
 - <https://researcheracademy.elsevier.com/navigating-peer-review/certified-peer-reviewer-course>

As the editor-in-chief of OJOT, I am grateful to the dedicated, professional reviewers who contribute to the quality of the journal by providing timely, detailed, double-blind peer reviews on a consistent basis. OJOT could not function without their voluntary service that not only improves the quality of the journal, but also helps build the body of knowledge in the profession of occupational therapy. If you are an expert in a practice or education area of occupational therapy and are interested in serving as a peer reviewer, please contact us at ot-ojot@wmich.edu and we will assist you in applying for a position on the OJOT editorial review board.

References

- Elsevier. (2020). What is peer review? Retrieved from <https://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/what-is-peer-review>
- Shema, H. (2014). The birth of modern peer review. *Scientific American*. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/information-culture/the-birth-of-modern-peer-review/>

Appendix A



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Review Guideline/Checklist for Editorial Review Board Members

Reviewers: Please use the following checklist as a guide for your written review that will be uploaded to ojot.org and shared with the author(s). You may upload this checklist with comments in conjunction with your written report, but it is not intended to take the place of your full review.

Category: APPLIED RESEARCH

MANUSCRIPT #: _____

Title	
Includes major variables in the study and the population	
Reflects the paper	
Abstract	
Appropriate length for category of submission (200 words max)	
Includes subheadings, background, methods, results, conclusions	
Accurately and concisely conveys content	
Introduction	
Nature and scope of problem are presented	
Rationale, need, and importance for the study are described	
Purpose is clearly stated	
Purpose addresses clinical need or professional direction	
Definitions	
Given for all independent and dependent variables	
Provided for all terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader	
Literature Review	
Discussion of related studies	
Relevant and up-to-date citations	
Authors clearly describe what their study/paper will uniquely contribute to the literature	
Research questions/hypotheses are clearly articulated	
Methodology	
HSIRB approval is stated	
Research design is clearly stated	
Research design is appropriate to the research question	

Adequate description of instruments, participant selection, setting, procedures/methods, data collection, data analyses	
Validity and reliability of data collection addressed	
Strategies used to assure validity/trustworthiness	
Written clearly enough to be replicated	
Results	
Participant demographics are discussed	
Text agrees with data presented in figures and tables	
Includes relevant statistical analyses	
Analyses are clearly and accurately described	
Includes description of themes that emerged from the findings	
Objectively and clearly presented	
Discussion	
Relates findings to the problem statement and to the research questions and to the work of others	
Expands on and interprets results	
Discusses limitations	
Includes suggestions for further research or next step in this study	
References	
Pertinent and current citations (20-30)	
Figures and Tables	
As needed to clarify data (1-6)	
Clearly labeled and understandable	
Style	
Well written, organized	
Clear and precise language	
Key terms well-defined and retain the same definition throughout the paper	
Overall	
Provides important information that is easily translatable to clinical practice	
Potential to contribute to the OT profession	

Appendix B



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Category: TOPICS IN EDUCATION

MANUSCRIPT #: _____

Title	Reflects the paper	
Abstract	Appropriate length for category of submission (200 words max)	
	Accurately and concisely conveys content	
Content	Topic examines general curricular, specific course, or fieldwork issues	
	Presents a clear and concise position regarding the issue presented	
	Supports that position with either adequate research methods or a clear, concise literature review	
References	Adequate (15-25)	
Figures and Tables	As needed to clarify data or information (1-6)	
	Clearly labeled and understandable	
Style	Well written, organized	
	Clear and precise language	
	Key terms well defined and retain the same definition throughout the paper	
Overall	Examines issue(s) of importance for the education of occupational therapists	
	Potential to contribute to OT profession	

Appendix C



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Category: GUIDELINES FOR PRACTICE AND TECHNOLOGICAL GUIDELINES

MANUSCRIPT #: _____

Title	Reflects the paper	
Abstract	Appropriate length for category of submission (200 words max)	
	Accurately and concisely conveys content	
Content	Original or modified guidelines	
	Addresses clinical problems in OT domain	
	Provides guidelines for problem identification and amelioration	
	Guidelines are based on most current and valid theoretical information	
Guidelines for practice should include:	Background information and definitions for the problem(s)	
	Description of theoretical base	
	Description of evaluation guidelines	
	Description of treatment guidelines	
Technological guidelines should provide:	Directions for fabrication or use of technological products	
References	Pertinent and current citations (20-30)	
Figures and Tables	As needed to clarify information (1-6)	
	Clearly labeled and understandable	
Style	Well written, organized	
	Clear and precise language	
	Key terms well-defined and retain the same definition throughout the paper	
Overall	Provides important information that is easily translatable to clinical practice	
	Potential to contribute to the OT profession	

Appendix D



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Category: OPINIONS IN THE PROFESSION

MANUSCRIPT #: _____

Title	Reflects the paper	
Abstract	Appropriate length for category of submission (200 words max)	
	Accurately and concisely conveys content	
	Leads to a productive suggestion of implications for the future of the profession	
Content	Topic examines general curricular, specific course, or fieldwork issues	
	Presents clear and concise position regarding issue(s) presented	
	Position is supported with either adequate research methods or clear, concise literature review	
References	Adequate (15-25)	
Figures and Tables	As needed to clarify data or information (1-6)	
	Clearly labeled and understandable	
Style	Well written, organized	
	Clear and precise language	
	Key terms well-defined and retain the same definition throughout the paper	
Overall	Examines issue(s) of importance for the education of occupational therapists	
	Potential to contribute to the OT profession	