Bringing light to a hidden genre: the peer review report

Shannon Mason & Sin Wang Chong

Published online: 11 May 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Bringing light to a hidden genre: the peer review report

Shannon Mason [a,b] and Sin Wang Chong [c]

aFaculty of Education, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki, Japan; bSchool of Education, Murdoch University (Adjunct), Perth, Australia; cSchool of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

ABSTRACT

While early career researchers (ECRs) often read and produce articles for peer reviewed journals, they are of ten less familiar with peer review reports (PRRs). Most ECRs learn about the genre of PRRs by reading reports written about their authored manuscripts, and through hands-on experience crafting their own PRRs, albeit often with little guidance or exposure to exemplars. To demystify this 'hidden' academic genre, this article reports on a genre analysis of 62 'quality' PRRs, focusing on their communicative purposes, and the structural, content, and linguistic elements that serve to support those purposes. Findings show that the central role of the PRR is to elicit various actions on the part of manuscript authors. Other functions serve to circumvent manuscript authors' potential negative emotional response to PRRs, and this is also seen in limited use of high modality verbs and emotional language. PRRs follow a fairly uniform structure, and focus on all elements of the manuscript, with most attention given to the methods section. The article provides numerous examples that provide a practical guide to support writing pedagogies related to this important academic practice.

Introduction

Scholarly articles published in peer reviewed journals are a written genre that researchers regularly consume and are expected to produce. In most institutions, journal articles are valued more than any other output (e.g., book chapters) as proxy measures of institutional and individual research productivity. For this reason, support for article writing is generally available to doctoral, postdoctoral, and other early career researchers (ECRs) (Merga & Mason, 2020). Numerous studies have analysed the genre with a view to informing researchers in their development of journal articles (Burgess & Cargill, 2013; Mur-Dueñas, 2011; Ozturk, 2007; Zhang & Wannaruk, 2016). While journal articles are often given focus in writing pedagogies for ECRs, other genres are often

---

ignored, despite being necessary to knowledge production and academic identity development.

One such genre is the peer review report (PRR), which aims to assess the quality and suitability of a manuscript, and to offer suggestions for improvement (Starck, 2017). Through the review process, a researcher (often anonymously) critiques a manuscript written by others within the same or a closely related discipline, and compiles a PRR outlining their observations and opinions, often alongside a specific recommendation. The PRR is initially sent to the handling editor, who makes a decision based on all of the PRRs received, with two generally considered a minimum, although more is not uncommon. The PRRs, along with the editors' final decision, are then forwarded to the manuscript author/s. If the recommendation is for further revisions, authors are expected to engage closely with the content of the PRRs when developing their manuscript for resubmission.

Unlike the ubiquitous journal article, researchers are not regularly exposed to PRRs, as they remain largely hidden from public view, and as a result may be seen as a 'secret' genre (Yakhontova & Franko, 2019). That means that a researcher's first exposure to a PRR is likely to be one received in response to their own submitted work. While ECRs generally become peer reviewers after successfully publishing their own work, they will likely write their first PRR having previously seen only a small number. Problematically, PRRs that individuals receive may include those that are poor, incomplete, unfocused, biased, unprofessional, rude, and even cruel (Mavrogenis et al., 2020; Silbiger & Stubler, 2019). With limited experience and exposure, writing a PRR can be a challenging and daunting prospect for ECRs (Falkenberg & Soranno, 2018).

Genre analysis

For people looking to produce their own texts, they need to have 'an explicit understanding of how target texts are structured and why they are written the way they are' (Hyland, 2003, p. 26). This can be challenging for genres that are 'hidden' and seldom explicitly taught, such as PRRs. Over thirty years ago, Swales (1990) developed a pedagogical guide to assist non-native speakers of English in writing research articles. Since then it has developed into a school of thought in Genre Analysis, a widely used approach that has been highly influential in teaching and learning, and particularly of academic writing genres (Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans, 2015). Swales (1990) defined a genre as 'a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community' (p. 58). This in turn shapes the choices made by authors, in terms of structure, content, and style.

The central unit of analysis in Swales' approach (2004) is the rhetorical move, defined as a 'unit that performs a coherent communicative function' or purpose (p. 228). For example, Swales (1990) described the moves common in introductions to research articles, which typically see an author first establishing the research territory, then establishing a niche, and finally occupying the niche. Within each of these moves, there are a number of identified steps, which make up the Create a Research Space (CARS) model which has become a highly informative tool for researchers and educators. A small number of studies have investigated PRRs as a distinct academic genre, with several looking specifically at rhetorical moves. Fortanet (2008) identified four moves present in the PRR genre: summarising the outcome of the review, outlining the article, giving

points of criticism, and making a conclusion or recommendation. Paltridge (2017) further examined these moves and their presence in reviews of different outcomes, showing that while some moves are optional, others appear to have an obligatory role in PRRs. More recently, Yakhontova and Franko (2019) investigated the structural and linguistic characteristics of PRRs in two distinct fields, and identified three major communicative functions: gatekeeping, evaluative, and didactic functions, as well as a fourth function that they call 'the function of enculturation' (p. 87), and conclude that the genre may be a 'valuable source of professional assistance and enlightenment' (p. 88).

'In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience' (Swales, 1990, p. 58). The purpose of a peer review, in the eyes of the reviewer, is likely to influence the various choices they make in writing a PRR (Chong & Mason, 2021). In the case of PRRs where there is often little guidance and or support from journals (Coniam, 2011; Freda et al., 2009), there may be different influences on what reviewers focus on. For example, Hewings (2004) found that reviewers of the journal *English for Specific Purposes* focused primarily on the paper, its expressions, claims and analyses, while Belcher (2007) found that reviews of manuscripts written by non-native English users were most focused on language issues, followed by methods.

For ECRs, understanding the various generic conventions and norms of PRRs can provide a 'procedural scaffold' that can assist them in the production of their own texts (Johnstone, 2008). But genre as defined by Swales (1990) is more than a text to be produced; engaging in the peer review process is an indicator of belonging to a community, and thus it is an important part of academic identity development (Nagle, 2017). By engaging in the peer review process as a reviewer and producing a PRR following expected conventions, ECRs may position themselves as members of academia (Paltridge, 2017), making it a particularly important academic practice worthy of further attention.

In this study, we aim to further demystify the PRR, through analysis of a corpus of 'quality' PRRs in order to answer some of the most common concerns raised by ECRs, as observed in our engagement with ECRs in both informal (e.g., on Twitter) and formal settings (e.g., organising and delivering peer review workshops). We observe that these concerns revolve around:

- how to structure a PRR,
- what to focus on, and
- how to write a constructive PRR.

In investigating these three concerns, we hope to provide an informative and comprehensive (but not prescriptive) resource to support academic writing pedagogies for early career (and other) researchers.

Methods

For a number of methodological and practical reasons, this study involves an analysis of PRRs written by the two authors. As a text that is generally not available to the wider public, particularly in the social sciences, sourcing PRRs can be challenging. Further,

because peer review involves individuals who are often unknown to each other, which is seen as necessary to facilitate impartiality (Kmietowicz, 2008), use of externally sourced documents may compromise confidentiality. In using PRRs that we have written ourselves, we overcome these data collection obstacles.

We are both ECRs who began reviewing in 2017, and so our socialisation into the peer review process is relatively new; our feedback skills have developed largely through hands-on experience and engagement in informal online conversations, without any formal training (Chong & Mason, 2021), and while there is no 'typical' ECR experience, this is something we have in common with many other ECRs. Our PRRs may be considered of a somewhat high standard due to our recent joint award of the *Reviewer of the Year Award 2019* for our review activities with the Higher Education Research & Development journal, for which the plurality of our reviews up to that time was conducted. The criteria included timely well-structured, clearly written reviews, consistently constructive in tone, which was assessed by editorial board members of the high-impact journal.

In total, 62 PRRs were included in the analysis, constituting all reviews conducted for indexed journals by the authors up to the time of this study (Table 1). These PRRs were the product of reviews of 50 manuscripts (with some manuscripts undergoing more than one round of review) for 21 journals in the fields of education, higher education, applied linguistics, and bibliometrics. These fields all lie within the social sciences, but include reviews of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. PRRs may be constrained by the norms of particular disciplines, and further research would be needed to determine if the common features identified in this limited sample have wider applicability. We wish to stress that the limited sample is not sufficient for making broad claims about effective peer review, but it is one step in making more transparent the processes that have previously gone on behind closed doors.

The data analysis began with redacting any information that could lead to deductive disclosure of the manuscript authors. While in all but four cases the identity of

Table 1. Characteristics of peer review reports included in the study.

	Shannon, $n = 23$		Sin Wang, $n = 39$		Total, $n = 62$	
	n	in sample	n	in sample	n	in sample
Quartile-ranking[a]						
1	21	91%	29	74%	50	81%
2	2	9%	7	18%	9	15%
3	0	–	3	8%	3	5%
4	0	–	0	–	0	–
Review model						
Double blind	19	83%	39	100%	58	94%
Single blind	4	17%	0	–	4	6%
Recommendation[b]						
Accept	4	17%	0	–	4	6%
Minor revisions	6	26%	6	15%	12	19%
Major revisions	9	39%	8	21%	17	27%
Reject	4	17%	25	64%	29	47%
Average time to review	8 days		14 days		12 days	
Average length of review	764 words		1022 words		927 words	

[a]Quartile ranking as reported on the Scimago Journal Ranking portal (scimagojr.com), January 2021.
[b]Recommendation for each round of review, with 11 manuscripts undergoing at least two rounds of review. Thus, all four 'accept', six 'minor revisions' and two 'major revisions' recommendations were made after at least one earlier round of review.

manuscript authors was unknown at the time of the review (as is protocol in a double blind model), it is possible that authors may be identifiable once a paper is published, and so this was a necessary step in order to preserve confidentiality within the author/reviewer dyad.

Our research design is based on Swale's Genre Analysis approach, and thus the idea of communicative purpose remains at the core of our analysis. The text of all PRRs was uploaded into the MAXQDA20 qualitative data analysis software program (Verbi Software, 2019), which facilitated the organisation and management of the textual data and the manual coding process. With the exception of the tone analysis, PRRs were analysed using content analysis, whereby codes that provide a description of the manifest content are applied to relevant sections of text (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). The central unit of analysis was the rhetorical move, with each move identified describing a specific communicative purpose evident in a segment of text. We also coded structural (paragraphs, bullet points, etc.), content (literature review, methodology, formatting, etc.), and specific linguistic (modality, emotional tone) features of each report to identify patterns, which can 'lead to insights about rhetorical strategies' (Devitt, 2015, p. 45). This also allows us to provide answers to the questions that ECRs commonly ask, and further inform writing pedagogies and practice.

Our approach to linguistic analysis needs further explanation as it was more complex than simple coding of text. In the case of modality, we coded all modal verbs (e.g., *must*, *should*, *could*) which were examined in context, removing cases where it was not part of the feedback to authors (e.g., if it appeared in text quoted from the manuscript). We then used Samraj's (2016) typology to organise each of the codes into *low modality* and *strong modality* groups. For emotional tone, we conducted computerised analyses using LIWC2015 (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), a text analysis software package that quantifies words into meaningful categories to determine (among other things) the tone of texts (Pennebaker, 2011). All data files were uploaded into the software, and we ran four analyses. First, the PRRs were analysed according to 'emotional tone', a summary variable calculated within the software program which is expressed as a percentile score based on comparison with 'big data' samples of text (Pennebaker et al., 2015). Next, PRRs were analysed to determine the percentage of words within each text that express emotional tone, and then more specifically to identify words that express a positive emotional tone, and those that express a negative emotional tone. While the algorithms used to determine tone have been validated across a large number of studies (e.g., Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), they are not made public, and there are limitations to automated analyses that we acknowledge. For example, while the word 'weak' may be considered negative in tone, in feedback such as 'you have done well to identify the weak points of earlier studies', it is used in a positive light. Of course, these complex nuances cannot be captured in this automated analysis, and while the scores are a product of word choices across whole texts rather than individual words alone, important contextual factors and nuance are not reflected in this approach, and thus they serve to complement the manual and descriptive analyses rather than supersede them.

Findings

Most PRRs followed a similar basic structure organised into four distinct sections. All PRRs began with prefacing remarks, followed by manuscript comments which were

the largest component; missing only in two cases where a manuscript was accepted without further comment following previous rounds of review. In some cases, final remarks and a reference list concluded the PRR (Table 2). The manuscript comments make up the main part of the report, ranging in number from one to 37, with each ranging in length from three to 306 words (average 46 words). While the length of a PRR or its components has little bearing on quality, ECRs often express confusion on this front, and thus we include this information for curiosity's sake, taking care not to

Table 2. Section and moves of peer review reports.

Section	n (%) within PRRs n = 62	Move	n (%) within PRRs, n = 62	n (%) within manuscript comments, n = 990
Prefacing remarks (Avg. 120 words)	62 (100%)	To help authors navigate / understand the peer reviewer report	45 (73%)	
		To give a recommendation	43 (69%)	
		To summarise or give examples of weaknesses	41 (66%)	
		To summarise the manuscript	39 (63%)	
		To summarise or give examples of (potential) strengths	35 (56%)	
		To thank the author/s	33 (53%)	
		To note the paper's (potential) significance and suitability	25 (40%)	
		To express appreciation of effort or note improvement	10 (16%)	
		To reflect on the peer review experience	7 (11%)	
		To suggest a possible alternative journal for the manuscript	3 (5%)	
		To offer availability to review a resubmission	2 (3%)	
		To encourage the author in their continued journey	2 (3%)	
Manuscript comments (Avg. 731 words)	60 (97%)	To elicit additional information or detail	55 (92%)	475 (48%)
		To elicit further development or considerations	47 (78%)	282 (28%)
		To elicit corrections or specific changes	47 (78%)	153 (15%)
		To elicit a move or reorganisation	32 (53%)	73 (7%)
		To elicit a deletion or reduction	12 (20%)	15 (2%)
Concluding remarks (Avg. 58 words)	13 (21%)	To give encouragement to the author/s	11 (85%)	
		To express availability for subsequent review	5 (38%)	
		To give a recommendation	4 (31%)	
		To help authors navigate / understand the peer reviewer report	3 (23%)	
		To reveal the reviewer's identity to the author/s	2 (15%)	
		To share a positive review experience	2 (15%)	
		To summarise the findings of the review	2 (15%)	
		To suggest a possible alternative journal for the manuscript	1 (8%)	
Reference list (Avg. 4 references)	16 (26%)	To suggest a reference	16 (100%)	

conflate length with quality. Our PRRs varied in length from 31 to 1913 words, noting that all three PRRs that were less than 150 words were those that recommended acceptance after previous rounds of review. PRRs that did not recommend publication were, on average, longer and included more comments.

We identified 23 unique moves, most of which were found in specific sections of the PRR, although in three cases they were found in both prefacing and concluding remarks (Table 2). The purpose of prefacing and concluding remarks generally assist the author through the process, while manuscript comments serve to elicit an action from authors, most commonly to provide more detailed information. These related to eight identified areas of focus within PRRs, with most attention given to 'reporting of methods', followed by 'preliminary information' which includes introductory and contextual information, as well as the review of existing literature. This was followed by focus on 'reporting of findings', 'discussion and conclusions', 'language and wording', 'tables and figures', 'referencing and formatting' and finally the 'title, abstract, keywords'.

Figure 1 shows a matrix of comments, which may be coded more than once, according to their focus and purpose. The shading, with darker colours indicating higher frequency, shows that most attention is given to eliciting additional information of the methods and preliminary information.

In terms of modality, we identified 813 uses of modal verbs, around two-thirds of which (63%, $n = 514$) were defined as 'low modality' (Table 3).

In terms of the emotional tone, an average score of around 50 was returned (Table 4), indicating 'either a lack of emotionality or different levels of ambivalence' (Pennebaker et al.,

Focus / Move	n	To elicit additional information	To elicit further development or consideration	To elicit corrections or changes	To elicit a move or reorganisation	To elicit a deletion or reduction
Title, abstract, keywords	15	7	3	4	0	0
Preliminary information	263	122	91	15	26	9
Reporting of methods	294	200	63	12	18	2
Reporting of findings	144	62	53	10	19	2
Discussion and conclusions	112	37	58	4	13	1
Tables and figures	54	34	11	9	0	1
Referencing and formatting	48	6	0	48	0	0
Language and wording	63	5	0	58	0	0

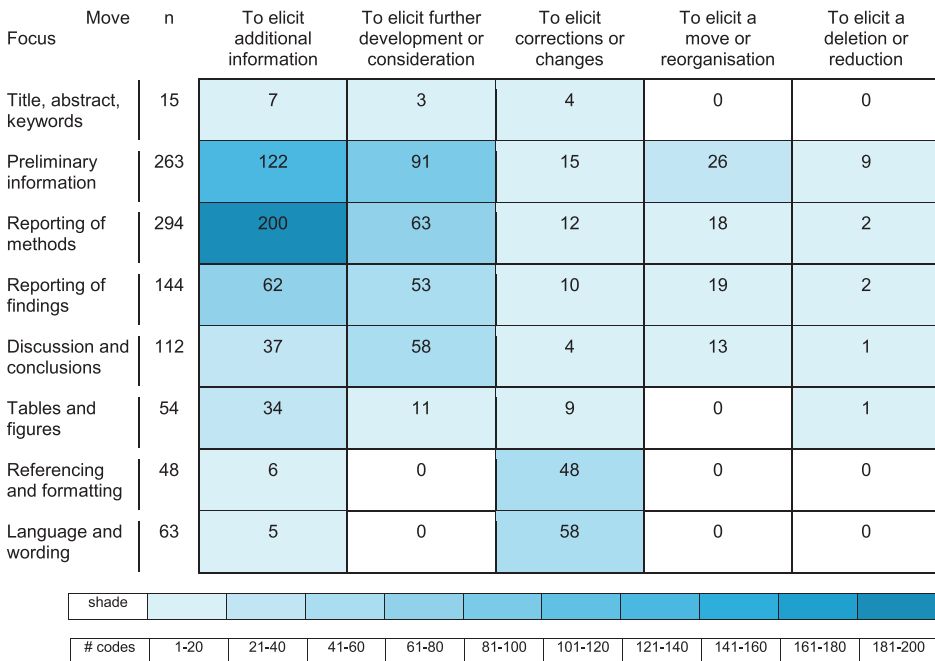| shade										
# codes	1-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120	121-140	141-160	161-180	181-200

Figure 1. Matrix of manuscript comments by move and focus, $n = 990$.

Table 3. Low and high modality expressions used to elicit action, $n = 990$.

	Expression	Example	n
Low modality	would	*Wouldn't it be more meaningful to compare A and B variables?*	159
	can	*You can consider including your interview question in the body of the manuscript.*	137
	may	*It may also be helpful to explore the differences between concept A and concept B.*	68
	could	*Your research questions could be listed here, as they are an essential part of the research design.*	61
	suggest	*I suggest that the introduction needs to include a more detailed description of the study context.*	53
	better to	*It will be better to include an example from each section.*	15
	might	*For readability, you might like to consider merging these two sections.*	12
	recommend	*For consistency, I recommend that the order of the participants in Table 2 be rearranged to match Table 1.*	9
High modality	should	*Your implications should draw from your findings.*	148
	need	*The key concepts need to be defined and discussed.*	111
	necessary	*The discussion reads more like a personal reflection. A reconsideration is absolutely necessary.*	16
	require	*As a mixed-methods study, more elaboration is required to explain why and how the different parts of the study 'mix'.*	11
	has to	*You have to make a stronger justification for applying this theory.*	13

Table 4. Results of tone analysis of PRRs, $n = 62$.

	Lowest score	Highest score	Average score	Most common words[a]
Emotional tone[b]	27.61	99.00	55.09	–
Affective words[c]	1.30	6.25	2.96	–
- Positive	0.96	6.25	2.24	important, interest, help, sure, please, like (verb), better, thank, useful, support, care
- Negative	0.00	2.26	0.60	unclear, concern, confuse, problem, miss, weak, fail, difficult, limited, critical, avoid

[a]Listed in order of frequency, includes derivatives (problem, problems, problematic).
[b]Expressed as a percentile based on comparative samples, 0 being negative, 50 neutral, and 100 positive.
[c]Expressed as a percentage of words within each PRR.

2015, p. 22). An average of less than 3% of words were identified as having an emotional tone. For reference, this is similar to the New York Times (3.82%), but less than informal written genres such as blogs (5.79%) and Twitter (7.67%) (Pennebaker et al., 2015). While emotional language was limited, when present it was more positive than negative in tone.

A possible approach to writing a PRR

In this section, we reflect on our findings to outline our general approach to writing a PRR, and in doing so provide a resource for supporting writing practice and pedagogies. In order to demystify the PRR genre, we have included illustrative examples from our qualitative dataset. Please note that at the reporting phase we have merged, mixed, slightly rearranged and/or lightly paraphrased the text to ensure that our anonymity as reviewers is preserved.

Prefacing remarks

We generally begin our reviews by thanking the author/s, either for the opportunity to review the paper, or for engaging with suggestions raised in a previous round of

review, as in 'Thank-you for taking the time to consider the suggestions from the reviewers'. For resubmissions, there may also be an additional acknowledgement of the efforts of the authors, and/or the development of the manuscript. For example:

> I appreciate the effort the authors have put into the revisions and I feel that the paper is now much improved. Overall, the paper is much more reader-friendly, and the additional contextual information helps to build transparency.

A brief summary of the paper (generally one or two sentences although sometimes more in-depth) often follows. The purpose of the summary, as we reflect on in our separate paper (Chong & Mason, 2021) is two-fold: to show the author that we have engaged with the paper, and also to confirm that our interpretation of the study and its findings is accurate. At this stage, we may comment on the current or potential significance of the study to the research field, and/or to the specific target journal, with adjectives used including, in alphabetical order: *important, interesting, novel, of interest, relevant, timely, topical, useful,* and *worthy.* Where a paper is ultimately not recommended for publication, contrastive conjunctions may be used (e.g., *although, however, nevertheless*). For example:

> Although I believe the topic of your study is an important one, and falls within the remit of the journal, I have some serious concerns regarding some elements of the paper (detailed below), and thus I am not confident that the manuscript is suitable for publication, at least in its present form.

The ultimate purpose of a PRR is to give a recommendation about the suitability of a paper for publication, and while in a small number of cases this was found in the concluding remarks, the recommendation was generally positioned at the end of the prefacing remarks. Often preceding the recommendation is a summary of the weaknesses, and to a lesser extent the strengths of the paper, providing an explanation for the recommendation, often prefaced with adverbs such as *thus* and *therefore.* In Table 5, we offer common phraseology used when explicitly stating particular recommendations, noting that in some cases a recommendation may be indicated in a separate checklist and as such may not necessarily be included explicitly in the PRR itself.

The final element of the preface is also the most common, and is used to help authors navigate the PRR, and to introduce the specific manuscript comments that follow. While

Table 5. Example phrases used to make a recommendation.

Recommendation	Example expressions
Accept[a]	*I am pleased to recommend the manuscript for publication.*
	The authors have sufficiently addressed the issues raised in the previous round of review.
Minor revisions	*I believe that the paper is worthy of publication, after attending to some minor issues.*
	If the authors can address the following concerns, I would be happy to recommend this paper for publication.
Major revisions	*I feel that the paper is in need of a major rework in order to bring it to its full potential.*
	I believe that the study could make an important contribution to the knowledge body in this field, but it needs some more work, particularly in relation to the reporting of the methodology.
Rejection	*The study is flawed in a number of ways that makes it not suitable for publication, at least in its present form.*
	I have some major concerns regarding various sections of the manuscript which makes me hesitant to recommend the article for publication.

[a]Accept recommendation was only given after at least one previous round of review.

this was commonly presented as a simple statement such as, 'following are suggestions for each section of the paper', in some cases further explanation lays out any meaning applied to the order or weight of the specific comments, for example:

> The following comments are listed below for each section of the manuscript. Some are minor issues that can be addressed relatively easily. However, in other cases – particularly related to the conceptual framing of the study, careful consideration and justification is necessary before the paper can be reconsidered for publication.

Bringing in all of these elements, we provide a basic example of a PRR preface in a fictitious example in Figure 2, where we use this very study for the content, and common phrasing from our dataset.

Manuscript comments

The manuscript comments generally take up the main part of the report and are presented in a list, with or without bullet points but nevertheless with a clear separation between each one. They may also additionally be further organised under various headings, generally aligning with the headings used in the manuscript (most commonly Methods, Introduction, and Findings/Results). Comments often include elements that link to specific parts of the manuscript, including page, paragraph, and/or line numbers, and in some cases include sections of the text, either paraphrased or pasted directly from the manuscript. This serves not only to assist the author to navigate the report, but also to ensure that the focus of the review remains clearly on the manuscript itself.
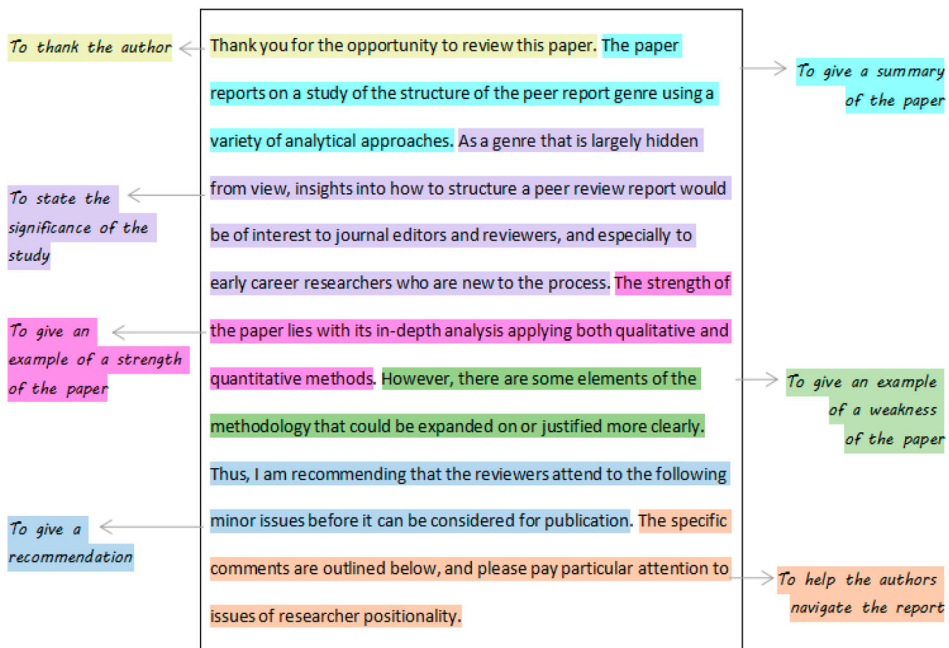
Figure 2. Annotated example of prefacing remarks.

In our approach, comments cover all elements of the manuscript, and each one has a specific purpose to elicit some kind of action from the author. In this way, the feedback to the authors is 'actionable', 'specific', and 'manageable' (Chong, 2021). We also aim to be considerate of the author/s who will read the review, using strong modality verbs and emotional language sparingly. Table 6 provides descriptions and examples of manuscript comments for each of the five moves identified within the manuscript comments section.

As Romero-Olivares (2019) advises, the role of a reviewer is not that of an editor or proofreader. Among our comments related to language and grammar, we may highlight specific examples or general areas in need of attention, along with a general request for proofreading, as in, 'The paper needs a careful grammar check, particularly with subject-verb agreement'. However, unless comprehensibility is an issue, the presence of non-standard language is usually not mentioned, and certainly would not impact the evaluation of the manuscript. Unfortunately this is not always the case, and non-native speakers of English may be discriminated against in the peer review process (Romero-Olivares, 2019).

Figure 3 draws on the information in this section and comments from the dataset to provide examples of two manuscript comments, each with a different focus and function

Table 6. Example phrases used to elicit action in manuscript comments, $n = 990$.

	Description	Examples
To elicit additional information	Comments that aim to elicit additional information to complement, elaborate, or clarify existing information. This may be elicited directly, or indirectly by bringing attention to missing information or detail.	*I think a paragraph is needed explaining your methodological approach, with reference to key sources.* *The limited reporting on data collection procedures leaves me with many unanswered questions. What were the inclusion and exclusion criteria? How many students were there in total? Why were these particular participants selected?*
To elicit further development or consideration	Comments that aim to elicit less concrete and/or more fundamental changes to the manuscript, or to the study itself. This may be elicited directly, or indirectly by bringing attention to weaknesses and/or raising concerns about the 'quality' of the manuscript.	*The factors discussed in this section do not appear to be related to your conceptual framework. At present it reads more like a personal reflection.* *I would suggest taking the most important/ interesting findings from the study. What do you want readers to take away from this paper? Discuss these issues, and their implications.*
To elicit corrections or specific changes	Comments that aim to elicit corrections to 'objective' inaccuracies, or specific changes to improve the manuscript. This may be elicited directly, or indirectly by highlighting specific errors or weaknesses. Such comments often relate to language, terminology, formatting, and referencing issues.	*Please write in full the first instance of acronyms used (e.g., UNESCO).* *Smith (2018) actually does not reference national data, only state-level data.* *There are also still some cited sources that are not in the reference list.*
To elicit a move or reorganisation	Comments that aim to elicit a reorganisation of elements of the manuscript, in order to improve readability. This may be elicited directly, or indirectly by highlighting misplaced or illogically organised information.	*The reporting of the quantitative results is good, although the references to the wider literature need to be moved to the discussion section.* *Paragraph 5 does not read like it belongs in the methodology section.*
To elicit a deletion, reduction, or merge	Comments that aim to elicit the removal of unnecessary or irrelevant information, or the reduction of overly lengthy or erroneous information.	*This part is too long and a lot of the information is a repetition of the findings reported in the previous section.*

(move). We illustrate the actions taken within each comment to elicit action, such as the use of direct questions, and explicit examples.

Concluding remarks and reference list

While not all PRRs include concluding remarks, it provides a final opportunity for reviewers to encourage the authors in their continued development of their manuscript, whether with the current or a subsequent journal. Particularly in this section, we see the presence of 'feedforward' (as opposed to feedback), defined as feedback which is 'timely and future-oriented in relation to the upcoming task' (Hendry et al., 2016, p. 100). In total, 19 mentions are made of the 'present form' or 'current form' of a manuscript, indicating a future orientation. This section is also an opportunity to express availability for future rounds of review, if appropriate, providing further encouragement to authors.

In some cases, a list of references may be included. It is not unusual that a reviewer suggests their own work, and in most cases this is 'appropriate and reflect[s] the reviewer's expertise on a manuscript topic' (Thombs & Razykov, 2012, p. 1864). However, it is not appropriate for reviewers to 'urge the irrelevant citation of their own work' (Mavrogenis et al., 2020, p. 414). While there are a limited number of times ($n = 11$) that we include reference to no more than one of our own manuscripts in a PRR, in no case is it framed as a demand or even a request for citation, but rather a suggestion that the author read or consider a relevant source, in most cases listed alongside other possible sources of interest. For example:
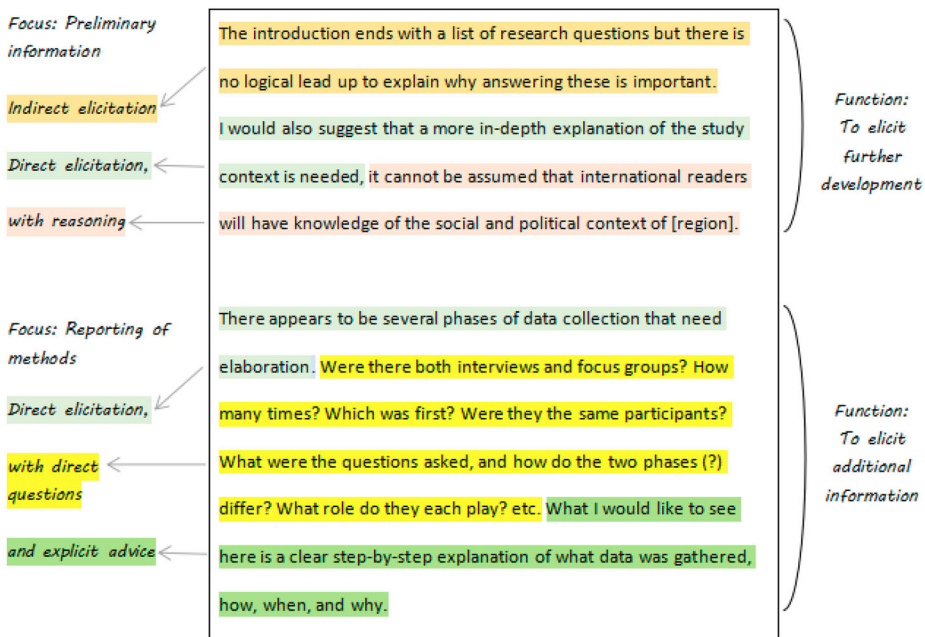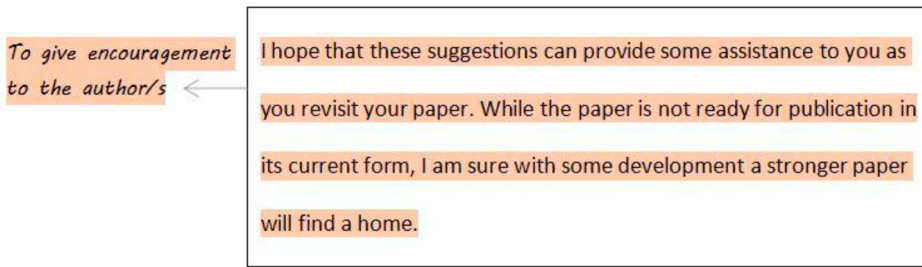
Annotated example of two manuscript comments

Figure 3. Annotated example of two manuscript comments.

To give encouragement to the author/s

I hope that these suggestions can provide some assistance to you as you revisit your paper. While the paper is not ready for publication in its current form, I am sure with some development a stronger paper will find a home.

Figure 4. Annotated example of concluding remarks.

> It is unclear how your literature helps to identify the problem your study addresses. Since your study is about [this particular topic], there should be a section in your literature review which reviews the recent literature on [this area of inquiry] (e.g., Reviewer, 2018; Other manuscript, 2018; Other manuscript, 2017; Other manuscript, 2017).

In Figure 4, we provide an example of concluding remarks for a rejected manuscript, because this section is more common in such manuscripts, and mostly serves to provide emotional encouragement to authors, as rejection can have a considerable negative impact on ECRs (Merga et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In this study, we have attempted to demystify the 'hidden' genre of the peer review report, by analysing 62 PRRs using Swale's Genre Analysis approach. We wish to emphasise that this study draws on PRRs both written and analysed by two individuals relatively new to peer review, and while our PRRs have been evaluated positively, the suggestions and examples we provide are by no means prescriptive, nor do we claim ours is the best or only approach. We also note that beyond attention to the manuscript itself, there is also consideration of the emotional and relational aspects of the peer review process that are an important part of developing a PRR that is constructive yet compassionate. While it is also worthy to look beyond the text itself to the more contextual and philosophical issues that influence how and why reviewers write PRRs, these issues are the focus of a separate paper (Chong & Mason, 2021). We invite others to analyse their own PRRs, or that of others, in order to evaluate the applicability of our findings to the genre more broadly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Shannon Mason http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8999-4448
Sin Wang Chong http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4519-0544

References

Belcher, D. D. (2007). Seeking acceptance in an English-only research world. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *16*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2006.12.001

Burgess, S., & Cargill, M. (2013). Using genre analysis and corpus linguistics to teach research article writing. In V. Matarese (Ed.), *Supporting research writing* (pp. 55–71). Chandos. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-1-84334-666-1.50004-7

Chong, S. (2021). Improving peer-review by developing reviewers' feedback literacy. *Learned Publishing*, *34*(3), 461–467. https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1378

Chong, S., & Mason, S. (2021). Demystifying the process of scholarly peer-review: An autoethnographic investigation of feedback literacy of two award-winning peer reviewers. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, *8*(1), 266. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00951-2

Coniam, D. (2011). Systematising system: One reviewer's analysis of the review process. *System*, *39*(4), 539–553. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.10.018

Devitt, A. J. (2015). Genre performances: John Swales' genre analysis and rhetorical-linguistic genre studies. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *19*, 44–51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.05.008

Falkenberg, L. J., & Soranno, P. A. (2018). Reviewing reviews: An evaluation of peer reviews of journal article submissions. *Limnology and Oceanography Bulletin*, *27*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1002/lob.10217

Flowerdew, J., & Dudley-Evans, T. (2002). Genre analysis of editorial letters to international journal contributors. *Applied Linguistics*, *23*(4), 463–489. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/23.4.463

Fortanet, I. (2008). Evaluative language in peer review referee reports. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *7*(1), 27–37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2008.02.004

Freda, M. C., Kearney, M. H., Baggs, J. G., Broome, M. E., & Dougherty, M. (2009). Peer reviewer training and editor support: Results from an international survey of nursing peer reviewers. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, *25*(2), 101–108. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2008.08.007

Hendry, G. D., White, P., & Herbert, C. (2016). Providing exemplar-based 'feedforward' before an assessment: The role of teacher explanation. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *17*(2), 99–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787416637479

Hewings, M. (2004). An 'important contribution' or 'tiresome reading'?: A study of evaluation in peer reviews of journal article submissions. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *1*(3), 247–274. https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v1.i3.247

Hyland, K. (2003). Genre-based pedagogies: A social response to process. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *12*(1), 17–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1060-3743(02)00124-8

Johnstone, B. (2008). *Discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Kleinheksel, A. J., Rockich-Winston, N., Tawfik, H., & Wyatt, T. R. (2020). Demystifying content analysis. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *84*(1), 127–137. https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7113

Kmietowicz, Z. (2008). Double blind peer reviews are fairer and more objective, say academics. *British Medical Journal*, *336*(7638), 241. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39476.357280.DB

Mavrogenis, A. F., Quaile, A., & Scarlat, M. M. (2020). The good, the bad and the rude peer-review. *International Orthopaedics*, *44*(3), 413–415. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00264-020-04504-1

Merga, M. K., & Mason, S. (2020). Perspectives on institutional valuing and support for academic and translational outputs in Japan and Australia. *Learned Publishing*, *34*(3), 305–314. https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1365

Merga, M. K., Mason, S., & Morris, J. E. (2019). 'The constant rejections hurt': Skills and personal attributes needed to successfully complete a thesis by publication. *Learned Publishing*, *32*(2), 271–281. https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1245

Mur-Dueñas, P. (2011). An intercultural analysis of metadiscourse features in research articles written in English and in Spanish. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *43*(12), 3068–3079. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.05.002

Nagle, J. (2017). Establishing a scholarly identity through peer review. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, *8*(2), 1–4. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjnse/article/view/43163/pdf

Ozturk, I. (2007). The textual organisation of research article introductions in applied linguistics: Variability within a single discipline. *English for Specific Purposes*, *26*(1), 25–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2005.12.003

Paltridge, B. (2017). *The discourse of peer review: Reviewing submissions to academic journals*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pennebaker, J. W. (2011). Using computer analyses to identify language style and aggressive intent: The secret life of function words. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, *4*(2), 92–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2011.627932

Pennebaker, J. W., Boyd, R. L., Jordan, K., & Blackburn, K. (2015). *The development and psychometric properties of LIWC2015*. University of Texas at Austin. https://doi.org/10.15781/T29G6Z

Romero-Olivares, A. L. (2019). Reviewers, don't be rude to nonnative English speakers. *Science*. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.caredit.aaz7179

Samraj, B. (2016). Discourse structure and variation in manuscript reviews: Implications for genre categorization. *English for Specific Purposes*, *42*, 76–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2015.12.003

Silbiger, N. J., & Stubler, A. D. (2019). Unprofessional peer reviews disproportionately harm underrepresented groups in STEM. *PeerJ*, *7*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.8247.

Starck, J. M. (2017). *Scientific peer review: Guidelines for informative peer review*. Springer Spektrum.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres*. Cambridge University Press.

Tausczik, Y. R., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2010). The psychological meaning of words: LIWC and computerized text analysis methods. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *29*(1), 24–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X09351676

Thombs, B. D., & Razykov, I. (2012). A solution to inappropriate self-citation via peer review. *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal / Journal de L'Association Medicale Canadienne*, *184*(16), 1864. https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.120597

Verbi Software. (2019). *MAXQDA 2020* [Computer software]. http://maxqda.com

Yakhontova, T., & Franko, I. (2019). 'The authors have wasted their time … ': Genre features and language of anonymous peer reviews. *Topics in Linguistics*, *20*(2), 67–89. https://doi.org/10.2478/topling-2019-0010

Zhang, B., & Wannaruk, A. (2016). Rhetorical structure of education research article methods sections. *PASAA: Journal of Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand*, *51*, 155–184. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1112248.pdf