

Description

In the world of academic publishing, a formal [peer review](#) can occur at different points in the publication process. Though not formal in structure, the first review of your in-progress work can be requested from your colleagues prior to proceeding with a finished product. Beyond that, there are three distinct opportunities for formal feedback:

- **Pre-publication:** where authors will post [pre-print versions](#) of articles or research papers on their own websites; or blogs on pre-print repositories such as *F1000 Research*, *PeerJ*, *Figshare*, and *ArXiv*; or present their material at symposia or conferences.
- **Publication-based:** as part of the submission process prior to publication. This peer review can be *single-* (author is known to the reviewer) or [double-blind](#) (identity of author and reviewer remains unknown to either party) and is seen as both an error check and qualitative evaluation.
- **Post-publication:** via article reviews, letters to the editor, or in the case of Open Access journals, through direct commentary on the journal site.

The Value of a Peer Review

Assessing the value of a peer review would be a worthy research study in itself. For a researcher in receipt of a rejection slip, the value of a peer review would probably be significantly lower than a reviewer with an acceptance notice.

In general terms, however, the value is in the eye of the beholder. For journal editors, their peer reviewers serve a valuable role in filtering out poorer quality submissions (which helps to support high rejection rates) and also catching errors that can be addressed through "[revise and re-submit](#)" notifications.

For peer reviewers who, up until very recently, perform the task for [no compensation](#), it is a chance to give something back to the academic community while staying current on the research in their field (and adding valuable content to their résumé).

For the fellow researchers who read the academic journals or find the refereed articles in academic databases, the sign that the paper or article has been reviewed is taken as an indicator of a rigorous methodology (at least until there is a retraction).

Remember Your Audience

A good peer review balances the expectations of the journal editor who is considering the article or paper for publication and the authors, who we assume, have put a great deal of work into the original research and the subsequent paper:

- **Accuracy:** you have been recruited as an expert and your feedback should reflect that. Is the research question solid, with relevant hypotheses, and are the conclusions supported by the presented data? This is especially important for any research presenting counterintuitive results.

- **Opportunities to Improve:** this is a professional preference in terms of giving back to the academic community, but as the volume of peer review requests increases, there is less time available to do this.
- **Feedback greater than one line:** again, time and volume pressures are increasingly limiting the amount of time devoted to individual submissions, but researchers deserve more guidance than just “revise and re-submit.”

A Return to Quality

In the face of a rising tide of [journal retractions](#), and the arrival of fraudulent peer review circles where authors collude to review their own or each others' work, peer reviews are starting to come under increased scrutiny.

Balancing complaints for delays against requests for more detailed reviews appears to be a task worthy of Solomon himself, but there are some straightforward options to be considered. Payment for first quality review work would seem to be the first step, but since it will impact journal profitability, it would most likely be the least palatable option.

As an alternative, pass the burden of expense onto researchers by requesting objective, third party reviews prior to submission, again by paid professionals.

However, this option is likely to be as unpalatable to the researchers as the first option is to the journals. In either event, good [peer reviews](#) can no longer be delivered in an environment of a “gentleman's handshake for volunteer work.” The pressure on those volunteers is becoming too great and the consequences for poor performance too severe.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Reviews

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