

Peter J. Frost  
M. Susan Taylor

Editors

# Rhythms of Academic Life

Personal Accounts of  
Careers in Academia

Foundations for  
Organizational  
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# 26 Becoming a Reviewer

## LESSONS SOMEWHAT PAINFULLY LEARNED

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Elaine Romanelli

As I begin this essay, there are three manuscripts sitting on my desk awaiting review. One is already late, and I am feeling guilty. Two are due within the next week, and I am feeling pressured. Editors' protestations notwithstanding, I know that new manuscripts will arrive within a week or two of my returning these. I am also dimly aware of several manuscripts under revision that will probably return to my desk for second review sometime in the near future. In more than 10 years of reviewing now, it seems that there have been only a few short periods when I have not had at least one manuscript to review. It strikes me, then, that one of the most basic challenges of reviewing is handling the ubiquitous deadline. The question I have struggled with during all that time is how to write a good review efficiently.

What does *efficiency* mean? It means that the review is begun and completed in a relatively

short period. There are many ways to do this. One way that I have heard espoused by many colleagues is for the reviewer just to start writing comments, section by section, paragraph by paragraph, as many as are needed, until the entire manuscript has been addressed. For this method, only one thorough reading is required. Another way, also frequently espoused, is to skim the manuscript quickly, making notes about important problems or questions until two or three, or some number deemed sufficient by the reviewer, have been found. The reviewer can then simply write up these few central problems and recommend revision or rejection depending on the severity of the problems. In those rare cases when the reviewer finds few or no major problems, he or she can note this fact, point out a few major contributions, and recommend acceptance.

I believe that there are positive aspects to both these approaches. The first is certainly thorough.

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The author will be treated to a detailed exposition of virtually every question and issue that occurred to the reviewer. The second is probably very effective for gatekeeping for the journal. Manuscripts that exhibit a few basic problems need revision. Manuscripts that exhibit more than a few probably merit rejection, because the likelihood of successful revision tends to be low. I don't believe, however, that either approach satisfies an objective of writing a *good* review efficiently. In my experience (and I have tried all the ways), the first approach is comprehensive, but fails to clarify key problems that the author should address. The second approach is satisfactory for evaluation and probably points out some of the central difficulties, but fails to provide constructive help.

So what is a good review? Today, I think there are some rather straightforward answers to this question, all of which, I must acknowledge, are well presented in the major journals' "instructions to reviewers." A good review clearly identifies key contributions and problems in the manuscript. A good review provides constructive suggestions to the author for improving the manuscript. A good review provides consistent support for a recommendation to the editor about the disposition of the manuscript, and does so without necessarily revealing the recommendation. Unfortunately, although these objectives are straightforward, and I have always understood them in my mind, they have not been easy to achieve in a practical sense. Nobody taught me how to spot key contributions quickly. Nobody taught me the difference between constructive criticism—although it seems like I remember something from fifth grade on this—and just an elaborated list of a paper's deficiencies. Like too many aspects of an academic's job, the good review can be described, but the lessons for writing one are left to individual experimentation, self-doubt, and random conclusions.

It has been an interesting task, in contemplating this essay, to consider what I have learned about reviewing, and when I have learned it. In keeping with the motivations for this book, I think the best way I can tell the story of my learning is through the personal "passages" I have experienced. As I look back at literally hundreds of reviews, what is most clear is that the audience for the reviews—the audience in my mind, of course—has changed quite sub-

stantially. Where I once wrote for editors, I now write for authors. More on that below. In part, the audience has changed because I have grown more secure and more confident in my ability to write a good review. In part also, however, the audience has changed because I have grown more caring about the objectives of my reviews. The following sections identify the changes in the audiences and describe the lessons that have promoted the changes.

### First Reviews: Writing for Editors

I received my first manuscript to review when I was still a doctoral student. I felt both honored and challenged by the assignment. I had no published papers, only one book chapter accepted, and just a few conference presentations. Like most academics in the early stages of their careers, I had dreams of becoming a well-known and well-respected member of my profession. As I observed my mentors, I saw that they spent rather large amounts of time reviewing manuscripts. They were proud of being invited to serve as members of editorial boards of top-tier journals. As I scanned the lists of names on editorial boards, I saw that they comprised a lot of famous people whose names I also saw as authors of articles in the journals. Reviewing, apparently, was a route to status. I wanted to become a reviewer.

Thus when I got that first manuscript—and I am a little embarrassed to say this—before ever reading a word, I had only one objective: to get a second manuscript. Who gets manuscripts, of course, is controlled by editors. I had to figure out how to write a review that would impress the editor. In truth, I hadn't a clue. I thought I had to show that I was up on my literature, and that I knew the relevant research questions. I thought I should demonstrate competence at research methods. No fatal flaw should get by me. In keeping with the "instructions to reviewers to take into account clarity of writing," I supposed I should also help the authors to write more clearly. Thus I set out to comment, having read the paper maybe once, on virtually every aspect of the manuscript.

Needless to say, efficiency was nowhere on my mind (I didn't know then that it would be a problem to worry about). I spent at least a

week worrying about the review and writing it, all the while ignoring the dissertation proposal I was supposed to be writing. I looked up and read many of the paper's important references. That first review was more than eight single-spaced pages long, organized according to sub-headings used by the author. I patiently explained problems in each of the sections and, with some pedantry, described how the author could do better. I didn't know then, and I don't know now, who that author was, but I hereby offer an apology.

As I look back at the review (yes, I still have it), I think maybe the only objective it met was thoroughness. At least the editor got plenty of fuel for the rejection that the paper received. The review was highly evaluative. Although I offered many suggestions for improvement, I don't believe the author got much constructive help for a revision. Mainly, I criticized.

A few months later, I received that second manuscript to review—and then I got a third, and a fourth. Apparently, I was now a reviewer. I followed much the same procedures as before in reviewing the new manuscripts, but two things seemed wrong. First, I was beginning to notice, and feel frustrated, that reviewing took an awful lot of time. I was reading a lot of articles—authors' references—that had little to do with my own research, and the reading didn't seem to be helping much with the reviewing anyway. I was also beginning to notice that editors were only once in a while mentioning my reviews in their letters to the authors. It is a strange fact of reviewing that the only feedback a reviewer ever gets directly on an individual review is the editor's letter to the author. How come my comments weren't guiding the editor's decisions and instructions?

I thought that maybe my reviews weren't sufficiently to the point. Almost certainly, this was true. Perhaps my reviews should focus more directly on the major problems in the manuscript. Maybe I should just concentrate on the central problems of the manuscript, so that the editor would have clear issues (that I had identified) to point to in the decision letter.

My reviews got shorter. I adopted the approach of identifying and discussing a few key problems. My reviews were finished more quickly. I didn't have to read papers in detail, and I didn't have to write comments on every issue that the papers addressed. I guess the real truth

is that I didn't have to bother helping authors to write better papers. As we all know from grading students' papers, evaluating is easier than explaining. For a while, it seemed that I had learned how to review efficiently. Simple gatekeeping was the ticket.

### Later Reviews: Writing for Myself (or, The Paper I Would Have Written)

But not so fast. I learned some hard new lessons about reviewing when, during my first year as a junior faculty member, I got some reviews on a paper of my own. I will never forget Reviewer 2, who called my hypotheses "vapid and inane." Those words set the tone for virtually every comment in the review. The review was evaluative in the extreme, and constructive not at all. Once I was done cursing the reviewer for meanness, cowardice, and stupidity—not necessarily in that order—I was left to revise the paper so as to convince a reviewer who was on record for plain hostility toward my work. I was angry that I would have to respond to this reviewer in a tone that was "appreciative" for help that had not been given. I didn't know how to begin.

The other reviewers were more helpful. Reviewer 1 praised the study's basic research question. This was a very useful focusing device. Through that reviewer's restatement of my objectives, I could see what main line of argument my paper should follow. I was able to initiate the revision easily just by jettisoning all the extraneous discussion and fascinating nuances that were intelligible, in retrospect, only to me. Reviewer 3 liked the data, but pointed out ways in which they might be better analyzed. This reviewer, too, worked hard at linking the analyses to the questions of principal interest. These reviewers showed me how to revise the paper.

Somewhere about this time, I had a conversation with a senior colleague who was then an associate editor for a top-tier journal. He talked about writing, reviewing, and editing. He suggested that the best papers—that is, those that advanced understanding of organizations and got cited a lot—were those that had mainly only one good idea to present and clarify. I thought this was useful advice for me as a writer; maybe it wasn't such a good idea to integrate *all* the

literature and solve quite all the empirical problems every time I wrote a paper. I decided that it was also a good guideline for me as a reviewer. Other reviewers had helped me to see what was interesting and important in my own work. Here was a positive contribution that I too could make. From that point forward, and to this day, my reviews always begin with a short statement of what the useful contribution of the paper might be.

I also vowed never to be callous in my comments to authors. I had learned too well how debilitating it is to contend with a hostile reviewer. It takes a lot of time to be angry and hurt. If I was not so "vapid and inane"—yes, it still rankles—as Reviewer 2 thought, then maybe I owed commensurate credit to the authors I was reviewing. I was pleased to see recently, in the "instructions to reviewers" of one top journal, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, some specific admonishments against scornful or dismissive remarks. The editors point out that the damage of a rude review extends well beyond just the author's hurt feelings. Authors who are too cavalierly dismissed or insulted may be reluctant to submit to the journal again, and some of those authors may someday write very good papers.

So I set out to be positive in my tone and helpful in my suggestions for improvement. One important thing I discovered quickly was that I changed my mind more often about a manuscript. Sometimes, especially for papers that seemed poor on first reading, when I tried to state their central contributions, I discovered new value. Sometimes a recommendation for rejection became a recommendation for revision. Maybe this is only a halo effect from my efforts to write the contribution. Nevertheless, it seems good to err on the side of supposing that the author has something to say.

Of course, this positive reviewing also opened up three new traps for me to fall into. First, there was growing disparity between the positive tone I was taking with the authors and the often negative evaluations I was presenting to the editors. I found myself writing long letters to editors, trying to bridge the gaps. Second, increasingly it seemed that I was spending vast amounts of time (and paper) explaining to authors just exactly how I thought they should revise their papers. Finally, none of this was very efficient. The reviews were getting very

long again, and I was expending rather a lot of creative energy on other people's papers.

I don't know that I've ever solved the first problem satisfactorily. I still write letters to the editors, though they are shorter. I still worry, especially when I get a revision to review, that authors haven't fully "heard" my requests for major revision. Perhaps it is true that the tension between evaluation and constructive help cannot be completely resolved. One small solution I have hit upon is to close the review with a restatement of what I like about the paper, but also a summary of the revisions I think will be required. Mainly, however, I still leave it as the editor's job to communicate the likelihood of successful revision, assuming that revision is the decision.

For the second problem, another senior colleague provided much useful help. A few years ago, at an editorial board meeting, this colleague called into question what he considered the pervasive practice among reviewers of asking an author to write the paper that the reviewer would have written. Guilty, I thought. It is not the reviewer's job to describe the perfect paper the author might write. It is arrogant of a reviewer to believe that he or she could know enough, or even read enough, to do competently all the research authors have tackled. The only real job of the reviewer is to show authors how they might have done their identified research better.

My reviews got shorter again. They also got quicker.

### Current Reviews: Writing for Authors

I began this essay by talking about efficiency and the career concerns that dominated my early reviews. Although it seems obvious that neither efficiency nor career should drive the reviewing process, I believe that both, in subtle but powerful ways, do direct the objectives of reviewers. At least this has been true for me. I would like to close this essay by talking about what efficiency means to me today, and also about how some career changes have affected my reviewing processes.

Efficiency seems a mundane and possibly even a dangerous place to begin an essay on reviewing. On the mundane side, I do not sup-

pose that what I have written is particularly new or insightful for any experienced reviewer. Certainly there are reviewers who have learned these lessons faster and better than I have. On the dangerous side, it would be wrong to convey that efficiency alone is an appropriate objective for reviewing. Efficiency is only a plain flat need for those of us who review frequently.

Efficiency became a silent objective in my reviewing because I seemed always to be struggling to meet deadlines. As you can see from the opening paragraph of this essay, I still struggle with deadlines, but in a different sort of way. Ten years ago, the deadlines were tough because when I began a review I never knew how long it would take to complete. The process was wholly unstructured. Today, when I approach a review, I know that it will be done in just a few hours' time. Deadlines are a problem only because I tend to procrastinate.

I hope it is clear that the keys to this hard-won efficiency are focus and collegiality. Focus saves time because it leads the reviewer to direct comments toward fundamental problems that need to be fixed and away from extraneous issues. For example, if the data overall are inappropriate for the research question, additional amounts of effort don't need to be spent explaining problems with measurement. If the author has made major errors in describing the arguments of other theorists, then the hypotheses that are premised on the errors don't have to be criticized explicitly. The reviewer may wish to offer a brief comment or two about improvements in measures, or describe how hypotheses might change if theories are properly presented, but great detail is unnecessary. The rule of thumb that I use goes as follows: If revisions to improve the fundamental problems in the paper would clearly eliminate associated problems, I spend little time on the associated problems.

Note that I think this is also fair to the author. Nothing annoys me more, as a writer, than a reviewer who nitpicks his or her way through every detail of a manuscript after already calling for "a complete overhaul." Not only may I have to respond to all those comments, even though they may no longer be relevant, I feel somewhat humiliated. I would like a reviewer to give me a little credit, and a little room to revise my paper myself.

This brings me to collegiality: Collegiality saves time because it helps a reviewer to assume

that the author is a competent professional who can probably revise a paper given some general good guidelines. Less detail about minor problems can mean more focus on the broad strokes that most revisions require. If the author can successfully address the large problems, the details can be handled in the second review. The details will always change in a revision, so why spend time in the first round identifying them all? It is not efficient and, in the end, it is not helpful.

Career changes also have led me to greater focus and collegiality in my reviews. Today, I think it is a little funny how concerned I was, 10 years ago, about getting that second manuscript to review. Little did I know that demand for reviewers is so great that reasonable intelligence and general familiarity with the basic questions and methods of our field are about all that is required. But perhaps my ignorance was a good thing. My desire to impress an editor, first to get a second manuscript and later to be the reviewer who gets cited in the editor's letter, led me to care a great deal about the quality of my review. I am uncomfortable, however, that impressing the editor may not be the best objective for producing a helpful review for the author.

Eventually, I was invited to serve on an editorial board. This was a very nice reward for what had been, by then, several years of hard reviewing work. Of course, it also increased my workload, and efficiency became even more important. My attitudes also began to evolve. For a while, I was concerned with justifying the confidence that had been placed in me by the board membership. I wanted the editors to know that they'd made a good decision. Over time, however, as I became more and more secure about my abilities and my credentials as a reviewer, slowly, slowly, I stopped worrying about impressing the editors.

Today, I am a member of three editorial boards, and I have been a member of two more. Although I still feel honored to be invited, the achievement has lost just a bit of its excitement. In some funny way, I don't really care anymore whether I get papers to review. It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway: Reviewing is a service that we provide to our profession and to our colleagues—a service, not a rung on a career ladder. Maybe learning this deep down is the final stage of becoming a reviewer.