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## The Act of Reviewing and Being a Reviewer

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It is a Friday noon, 2 weeks before the end of the fall semester. I go to check my mail and find several letters and a thick, wide envelope. I know from experience that it contains a manuscript to be reviewed. I know this because review manuscripts usually arrive near the end of the week and near the end of the semester. For some odd reason, I get my review requests during the second half of the week. They also arrive more frequently at certain points in the academic calendar—the beginning of the fall, when people finally complete their summer projects, or at the middle of the spring semester, when academicians submit their year-end activity reports. There are certainly particular rhythms to all aspects of academic life.

I dutifully open the envelope, look for the due date, and record it on my calendar. I approach every manuscript I receive with some apprehension. It could be a wonderful piece that can make me appreciate my colleagues'

ingenuity or a dreadful text that can make me lose all patience. Whatever its quality, however, it puts new demands on my time and energy. I now need to find a free afternoon or an evening to do the first reading of the paper. I scan the title, the abstract, and the references to see if I am familiar with the topic. Reviewers are always given the option to return manuscripts if they believe they cannot complete their reviews within the 3 to 4 weeks usually allotted. It is always tempting and sometimes wise to return manuscripts, but in this case, I know the editor personally and also know that such an act will cause an undesirable complication in the journal's schedule. Moreover, the topic is interesting and I may learn something.

A week later, on a Thursday evening, I am sitting in my favorite coffee shop and lamenting the fact that I missed my own deadline to finish reading the paper. I had to prepare final exams, and revisions on a paper of my own are not

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This short essay is dedicated to the memory of Louis R. Pondy, who helped me appreciate the idea of reviewing as participating in our collective conversation.

going as planned. When one faces regular reviewing tasks, time management becomes a must. It takes me at least two separate readings of a manuscript before I am ready to write a review, and another 2 hours to do the actual writing; unless I manage my time well, it is very easy to miss the journal's deadline. Thus postponing the inevitable is in no one's best interest.

### The Review Process

I read the first 11 pages of the manuscript. The introduction is interesting, but I cannot locate the essential question the authors are asking. Two more pages later, I find a set of questions, but they are not really related to the one I personally constructed. I read the first 10 pages again to understand the essence of the paper. I always feel that the first responsibility of a reviewer is to have a good overall understanding of a paper's fundamental objective and to communicate this understanding at the beginning of the review. This not only helps the editorial process but informs the authors as to what the reviewer understood from their text. If there is a misunderstanding, it is at least obvious from the beginning.

At the beginning of my reviewing career, I used to consider my role to be one of providing a long list of specific comments. The result usually was a cryptic text with little coherence of its own. These reviews may have been useful for the authors, but they were probably not valuable to editors. Such lists did not identify the critical issues in the papers reviewed; moreover, they failed to show what I understood from the papers. I was able to realize my mistakes when I got the opportunity to read other reviewers' comments on the same manuscripts. For someone new, as I was, receiving all the reviews when the review process was over was an important learning opportunity. The reviews and the editor's letter to the author were useful reference points; they allowed me to see how much my own review contributed to the editor's judgment. Seeing how others approached the same manuscripts, organized their thoughts, and provided feedback to authors was the most important experience I had in learning to improve my reviewing skills.

The manuscript I have in hand now is, fortunately, an empirical study rather than a con-

ceptual or theoretical piece. In my experience, as well as that of my colleagues with whom I've discussed this, theoretical manuscripts are always more difficult to evaluate, comment on, and write reviews for. Empirical pieces provide a more predictable outline and narrative structure. One can more easily evaluate specific issues, such as the relationship between the theoretical ideas and the hypotheses, the validity and reliability of measures, and the suitability of the method and statistical techniques for the question at hand. It is also much easier to provide concrete suggestions and point out specific weaknesses, if there are any. Theoretical pieces, on the other hand, require the reviewer to engage in more concentrated reading to sort out the critical elements. Furthermore, the reviewer's judgment may be influenced more by the way the paper is written than purely by its content.

My initial difficulty with the theoretical part of the manuscript is eased after I go over the hypotheses and the measurements. It is clear that the front end of the paper is overly dense and requires a new structure. This is one of the most common problems encountered by reviewers. As several editors I have worked for have suggested, most manuscripts get rejected because of their theoretical construction rather than because of their design or empirical analyses. I scribble several more notes in the margins and decide that I need to go back to the beginning of the paper in my second reading. At about 11 p.m. I am finally done with the first reading; I have made a lot of notes that will direct my second reading and my subsequent evaluation of the paper.

A week later, I am getting anxious to complete the review and decide to take a break from reading the term papers I had assigned to my class. I decide to leave the office and go to the coffee shop, the one place I can hide out at busy times of the semester; only a few people know how to contact me there. The second reading of a paper is usually a more intense activity than the first reading; it demands concentration and may require some homework beforehand. In every manuscript there are ideas, techniques, and references with which a reviewer may not be completely familiar. The same is true for this manuscript. The authors use a multinomial logit for the statistical analyses, but their dependent variable is composed of three ordered cate-



gories. I consult my statistics books to find out if the standard multinomial procedure is suitable under these conditions.

### The Reviewer's Yardsticks

In analyzing and evaluating a paper, relevance and rigor are the two critical yardsticks suggested by editors and reviewers. These are, however, highly generalized concepts, and must be made concrete. In place of these yardsticks, I use three criteria that may relate to these more general issues of evaluation. The first is what I call *external consistency*. Is the paper consistent with and built upon existing knowledge? This question usually translates to whether or not the paper includes relevant concepts and references and is asking questions that are pertinent for this area of research. This does not mean, however, that the author has to accept the received wisdom and not question its validity; rather, he or she should be willing to go beyond established ideas. The author should not simply use existing knowledge to build a straw man of these views. The author's arguments should identify critical issues and questions in such a way that the contribution of the manuscript is readily apparent. The second criterion is *internal consistency*. Does the manuscript contain internal contradictions? Are the theoretical propositions or empirical hypotheses derivable from the paper's theoretical argument or conceptual model? This translates into the logical and empirical rigor of the author's thinking. The third criterion I use is probably the most personal: Do I find the paper exciting and worth reading? Do I agree with the author's assessment of the questions and the answers he or she offers?

I should confess here that my criteria did not evolve out of vacuum, but are the products of my cumulative experience in working for a variety of editors, especially the ones who guided the editorial policies of *Administrative Science Quarterly* for the past 15 years. From the time of my first review for Louis R. Pondy, when he was an associate editor of *ASQ*, and in reviewing for his successors, I have learned that a research paper has to do more than report on a competent piece of research—it should help the reader reach a new level of understanding. Among the editors who have influenced my

thinking most is Gerald R. Salancik. I probably did more reviews for him when he was the coeditor of *ASQ* than any other editor of any other journal. I always found in his letters to the authors critical insights that influenced my thinking.

The more I reread the paper, the more questions and comments are filling the margins of the manuscript's pages. On a separate sheet, I try to organize these comments into some meaningful order. As I come to the end of the paper, it is becoming clear that the authors use diverse literatures but fail to integrate them fully. This leads me to the conclusion that either they end up with a straw man argument or I am not fully convinced of their logic. I suddenly become suspicious that my own personal biases on the topic may be influencing my judgment. Maybe my overly critical evaluation of the paper stems from the fact that the questions raised in the manuscript are not really interesting to me. Can I offer an alternative set of questions? But this creates the ultimate dilemma for a reviewer. Many authors' most severe criticism of the review process is that most reviewers supply suggestions for the papers the reviewers would like to write instead of evaluating the authors' papers on their own merits. I think this is a fair criticism. I try to concentrate on the paper itself and accept the questions the authors ask as relevant. I decide that my review should concentrate on their questions rather than mine. Already feeling tired from 2 hours of concentrated work, I finish my coffee and go back to reading term papers.

It is now Tuesday afternoon—I have to write the review now or I will be embarrassingly late. I open my word processor, knowing that this is going to take at least another 2 hours of work. I first organize my notes again and try to integrate them. For the actual writing of a review, there are at least two critical issues. First, the review should be as complete as possible. It should summarize the fundamental ideas and the way the reviewer understands them, and should be specific in criticisms, suggestions, and praise. These conditions are necessary to help guide the editor as well as the authors. The second issue is style. Most editors suggest that a review should be written in a tone that implies a decision of revise and resubmit. Except perhaps in extreme circumstances, the style of a review should be constructive rather than destructive.



Another style consideration is that a review should address issues in the manuscript rather than the manuscript's authors. Every piece of writing, of course, exposes the author, and any research an individual conducts is partly a personal statement. The reviewer, however, cannot take advantage of this situation to criticize the author's intelligence, knowledge, or scientific capabilities. In other words, the reviewer's first duty is to write the kind of review he or she would like to receive on one of his or her own manuscripts.

Gerald R. Salancik and Richard L. Daft probably influenced my writing style the most. As a colleague in the same institution for a long time, I had the opportunity to observe especially Jerry in action. His deep commitment to helping guide authors made a lasting impression on my own style of reviewing. I had seen him spend long hours at his computer, trying to write detailed, constructive reviews for even those manuscripts that were rejected by the reviewers. His sense of duty was always apparent, both in his idea that every manuscript deserves reviewing and in his diligence in carefully articulating the reasons for his decisions.

Finally, as a regular reviewer, I also learned that one needs to develop a rough template that can be used for a variety of manuscripts. This is not simply a timesaving device—the template I use helps me to organize my thoughts and to avoid missing critical elements of a review. The template does not need to be more than a rudimentary outline or structured list of issues to be addressed. When a reviewer works without such a template, his or her reviews can become nothing more than lists of page numbers and comments, without much convincing argument or content.

### The Reviewer's Role

I finally finish writing the review. It is about two single-spaced pages of text, about average length for one of my reviews, excluding the comments to the editor. Most review requests include an evaluation form covering items such as the publishability of the manuscript and its technical and theoretical adequacy. It is very easy and tempting to be noncommittal and pick the midpoints on these scales, but I don't think this strategy is very helpful for editors. By

the end of a review process, a reviewer should be able to develop a fair appraisal of the paper and should report that appraisal. This is always a judgment call, and a reviewer's sincere opinion should be as unequivocal as possible. I mark the space for "major revision" on the form and give a satisfactory mark for the paper's technical adequacy. In my comments to the editor, I reiterate my points in the review that the manuscript should have a more streamlined theoretical focus and that a lot of its unnecessary complexity should be eliminated.

Even though I am satisfied with my review, one nagging issue is still unresolved. Is this a paper the readers of this particular journal will find interesting to read, or would an alternative journal be a better outlet? This is not really an issue a reviewer should ponder specifically for every manuscript; such decisions should ultimately be left to authors and editors. But in this case, I feel that the manuscript may be exposed to a more interested, or wider, audience if it is submitted to another journal. I finally decide to include a couple of sentences about this issue in my comments to the editor.

I print a draft of the review and read it one more time to check for grammatical errors and ambiguous expressions. This step may not be necessary for someone else, but in my case, as English is not my first language, I am always compelled to check my prose. At the beginning of my reviewing career, I used to ask my wife, who is a linguist, to edit my writing. Now neither she nor I has the time to enjoy such a luxury. I also feel more confident of my proficiency and have a lower level of anxiety about writing in a language other than my native tongue of Turkish.

At last, I am done with this review. It is in its envelope and ready to be mailed. After 7 hours of concentrated effort, it is not possible to avoid pondering whether or not it was worth it. I have always believed in the metaphor used by the late Louis R. Pondy, that research and publication are like participating in an intense conversation, and the more public the conversation is, the more effective it will be. The review process is probably the least public part of this conversation. First of all, in most cases reviewers are anonymous, and second, their reviews are available only to the authors and journal editors. Such a structure immediately leads to suspicion, criticism of gatekeeping, and accusations

that journals publish only those manuscripts that support the received wisdom. Given the diversity of opinions, methods, and theories in our fields, these may not be sound criticisms, but they still bother me. I believe that, on the average, most authors spend their valuable time, energy, and resources to work on things that they are committed to and consider valuable. The reviewer's task is to appreciate authors' efforts and lend a sympathetic ear to what they want to say. This is our collective responsibility. The role of a reviewer, as a critic and adviser at the same time, is to fulfill this collective obligation.

Reviewing is a voluntary act. Each time I face a difficult paper, as this one has been, I ask the same question: Why have I kept doing it for the past 15 years? At the beginning, I participated in reviewing because it provided me with a feeling of relevance and of being needed; I felt

that my expertise was valued. Being asked to review a manuscript is a signal that one's opinion counts in our collective conversation. Now, however, I feel that the most important personal reward of being asked to review a manuscript is the learning opportunity it offers. As students of our respective areas of specialization, we reviewers get a firsthand chance to learn from our colleagues' efforts—their successes and their failures. Reviewing gives us the opportunity to read manuscripts in a more intense and careful manner than we might otherwise. But the reward of being a diligent and conscientious reviewer may also be seen as unique punishment—more manuscripts to review. As I am putting my latest review in the mail, I check my mailbox. Through the glass door I see, mixed in with other mail, two thick, wide envelopes and intuitively know . . .



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