distributed errors tend to cancel across large samples. As we also argued, an advantage of clinician reports is that researchers can measure and control effects associated with training or theoretical orientation if these occur.

Finally, we cannot help but note that this series of comments and our reply to them provide a prototypical example of “clinical” judgment in science—that is, subjective, informal aggregation of data, often leading to a “gestalt” judgment. Different individuals, given the same information, seem to have come to very different conclusions. But, hopefully, science, civility, and good judgment will ultimately, as Wood and Nezworski (2005) and Garb and Grove (2005) suggest, prevail.

REFERENCES


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DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.60.6.661

What Authors Want From Journal Reviewers and Editors

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Peer review is the primary means of ensuring the maintenance of standards that are deemed appropriate for scientific publications. There are many similarities, but also some differences, in the way the review process is conducted by different editors, and there are differences among reviewers in how they deal with the same manuscript—the standards they apply, the type and quality of feedback they provide, the attitude they project.

Editors differ with respect to what they expect, or would like to get, from reviewers. The nature of the journal dictates some differences, but apart from that consideration, editors may also differ with respect to the kinds of advice from reviewers they value most highly and the kinds of feedback they want most to be able to give to authors. Reviewers differ in their views of what constitutes a good review and in the types of reviews they produce. Authors differ in what they hope to get in reviews and in their reactions to the reviews they receive.

My guess is that few, if any, editors, reviewers, or authors will contest these observations or find them surprising. This comment concerns the question of whether there are points about reviews or the review process on which editors, reviewers, and authors would generally agree. What have I to say is based in part on personal experience as an editor, reviewer, and author and in part on the results of a small questionnaire study. The study was motivated by a desire to determine what submitters of manuscripts to the journal I was editing hoped to obtain from reviewers and the editor and the extent to which the process we were using was meeting expectations. My hope is that other reviewers and submitters of manuscripts, as well as editors of journals, will find the conclusions I have drawn of some use, even if only to take exception to them.

A questionnaire was sent to the corresponding authors of the first 275 manuscripts submitted to the Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied during my tenure as editor, beginning in 1994. Approximately 63% (173) were at least partially completed and returned. These were categorized in terms of the initial decision: conditional acceptance (16, including one unconditional acceptance), rejection with encouragement to resubmit (153), or rejection (106). The percentage of returns was the same for manuscripts that were conditionally accepted (68.7) or rejected with encouragement to resubmit (68.6) but considerably lower (52.8) for manuscripts that were simply rejected.

Authors rated each review and action letter on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = maximally). With respect to these questions: (a) Were the comments clear? (b) Were they justified in your view? (c) Was the review/action letter generally helpful to you? The mean ratings for these three questions were 6.05, 5.27, and 5.35, respectively, for the reviews and 6.56, 5.99, and 6.14, for the action letters. One expects the ratings for action letters to be generally higher than those for reviews, because action letters were written with the reviews in hand. These numbers suggest that, on balance, respondents were relatively satisfied with the quality of the reviews and letters they received. There were only a few exceptions. Authors whose manuscripts were conditionally accepted gave slightly higher ratings than did those whose manuscripts were rejected with encouragement to resubmit, and the latter gave slightly higher ratings than did those whose manuscripts were rejected, but the differences were small—about 0.5 between the average ratings produced by authors in the first and third categories.

The questionnaire asked for ratings on the same 7-point scale of the importance of feedback with respect to several issues: soundness of method, appropriateness of data analyses, evidential justification of conclusions, clarity of exposition, theoretical importance of findings, objectivity of interpretation of results, adequacy of coupling to related work, practical importance of findings, and uniqueness of contribution. The order just given is from highest-to-lowest rated, but the mean ratings were uniformly high and the differences among them small (range = 6.10–5.23).

Ninety percent of the respondents answered yes to whether reviewers should be expected to do substantially more than advise an editor regarding the publishability.
of a manuscript. Estimates of the time a reviewer should spend on a 7,500-word manuscript with the potential to be a good article but needing a lot of work were highly varied, with a mean of 5.8 (median = 5.00) hours. (My guess is that these numbers understate the time that typically gets spent on such manuscripts.) For a 7,500-word manuscript that one judges to be of quality that is too poor to warrant further consideration, the comparable mean was 2.5 (median = 1.6) hours, but some suggested that more time should be spent if one thinks the author is a relatively experienced investigator.

About 74% of the respondents thought it is better for authors, and about 81% thought it is better for the field, if reviewers err on the side of being too demanding (too critical) rather than too lenient (not critical enough). The importance of criticism being tactfully phrased was given a mean rating of 5.03, suggesting that tact is appreciated, but not more than substantive feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of a manuscript. About 77% of respondents expressed a preference for an editorial decision with detailed substantive feedback regarding problems and suggestions for improvement 10 to 14 weeks after submission than for a minimal response (editorial decision and main reasons if rejected) 4 to 6 weeks after submission. The strong preference for a more substantive review at the cost of a greater delay appeared to be independent of the initial editorial decision regarding the manuscript.

The restriction of this study to one journal, the modest sample size, and the self-selected nature of the respondents dictate caution with respect to any conclusions drawn. With that caveat in mind, here is my view of what the results (including invited general comments) suggest that most authors want from editors and reviewers of their manuscripts.

1. From an editor, they want, in order of preference: (a) acceptance of a manuscript, possibly with a list of minor revisions that are necessary; (b) a promise of acceptance if specified changes are made; (c) a commitment to consider a revision on its merits, with guidance regarding the major problems that need to be addressed, including—especially—how to deal with conflicting reactions or suggestions from reviewers; or (d) rejection with specification of the reasons for that decision. What they do not want is an action letter that tells them that the manuscript is unacceptable but leaves them without a clear understanding of what the editor considers its major defects to be or helpful guidance regarding what to do now.

2. From reviewers, authors want specifics regarding problems they see and, when feasible, concrete suggestions for fixing them and for otherwise improving the presentation. They consider all the types of feedback mentioned in the questionnaire to be important, and no one type to be greatly more important than the others. Pointers to other relevant references and suggestions of alternative possible interpretations of results were identified as other desirable types of feedback. Complaints were registered about comments considered superficial, vague, unjustified, biased, unfair, or inappropriate in some other way. Pompous, opinionated, condescending, or accusatory comments are not appreciated, nor are those perceived to be self-serving—for example, inappropriate attempts to increase the citations of one’s own work.

Having noted what I think the questionnaire responses reveal about what submitters of manuscripts hope to get from reviewers and editors, perhaps it is not out of place to make some comments about what (I think) editors would like from submitters and reviewers. Of course they want submissions that report interesting, scientifically sound, and theoretically and/or practically important work. But cosmetics matter as well; they expect manuscripts that represent what the submitters consider finished products. Editors (as well as reviewers) are likely to react negatively to an otherwise good manuscript that shows signs of haste or lack of care in preparation. Receiving a manuscript that had been rejected by another journal never bothered me except when the author had submitted it before revising it in response to legitimate concerns raised by reviewers of the previous submission. Cover letters with subtle or not-so-subtle pleas for special treatment (“I am up for tenure”) or that prejudice the editor’s decision (“I know you will like this manuscript”) are not helpful.

From reviewers, editors want objective, insightful, constructive, tactful reviews—on time. Reviewers who commit to reviews and then fail to deliver or who deliver only after being hounded repeatedly are a source of frustration. Perfunctory or superficial reviews are a waste of everyone’s time. Caustic reviews, ad hominem comments, and imperious or insensitive phrasing of points can be worse than a waste of time—they can do real harm.

Happily, I can report that my experience as an editor included very few instances of useless or destructive reviews. I was impressed with the seriousness with which the vast majority of reviewers take their task and the great value of the service they provide to authors and to their profession. I got a clear sense, too, that most authors recognize the value of a careful critical review and are highly appreciative of reviewers who provide them.