

Peer review from both sides of the fence

Frances Kelly

Question:

Can you explain the process of peer review? How does it work for authors, and how does it work for reviewers?

Keywords: journal articles; peer review; publication; research

Answer:

Peer review is the standard process for reviewing articles for academic journals. The most robust form is the double blind peer review, where an article that has been submitted is sent 'blind' or without information identifying its author to two or more reviewers who are themselves not identified in any editorial correspondence with the author. The idea is to ensure objectivity. The editor acts as a "broker" (Kamler, 2010) in the publication process, mediating between the author and reviewers in the production of the final text.

For authors

The great thing about this process is that your fame or reputation has nothing to do with the decision to accept or reject your work: the reviewers are reading it without a preconceived idea of its quality and decisions are made based on the research and writing itself. Another term used to describe this process is 'quality assured'.

The other important benefit of receiving peer review is that you get input from your peers or other researchers – and if you are an early career researcher that is particularly beneficial. It is important to remember the developmental element of peer review and the potential that reviewers can have in terms of input into the text itself (see Kamler, 2010).

For reviewers

On the other side of the fence, in a reviewer role you have an opportunity to read and comment on cutting edge research before it even goes to press, which is exciting. As the author's identity is protected, you can read without preconceived ideas about the quality or interest of the article. And although it might be human nature to try and guess – don't! It works better if you are 'blind' and can put aside your own ideas about particular researchers' work (not to mention that your knowledge of the author's identity compromises the process). It is also important that reviewers never say anything from the shield of anonymity that you would not be willing to say face to face to the author. The system should be one in which a community work together productively.

The role of the reviewer involves three aspects: to ensure that papers meet standards of research, to provide formative feedback to authors, and to be objective (HERDSA, 2011). Some reviewers see themselves as gatekeepers, whereas others regard themselves as teachers. Hartley (2008) encourages reviewers to be courteous, to judge the paper on its own merits (and not in terms of what you might have done), and to be able to explain any criticism. Again, the emphasis here is on the developmental or formative role of reviewers.

Experiencing peer review as an early career author: a tale of two articles

In 2007 I submitted an article on the oral examination for the PhD, or *viva voce*, to a top international higher education journal. My choice of journal was a bit ambitious: I had never published in the field before, and the research project I reported on was fairly small in scale and possibly local in relevance. The article was rejected, and although two reviewers made positive comments, all three felt it needed further work. The comments from the two who were constructive in their criticism were used to improve the article, which I sent to another (also highly ranked) international journal in the same field. The second journal in turn rejected the article and sent two quite vicious reviews. The third journal to which I submitted was a New Zealand journal, which was possibly the most appropriate in terms of audience. The paper only received one review, which was so positive the editors decided to publish the article, with some revisions. It finally came out in 2010.

In 2008 I sent a different article to a top international journal. Within six months I was asked to 'revise and resubmit'. I made revisions based on the reviewers' comments, and the article was published in 2009.

I am equally proud of these two articles: the first because it survived some hefty criticism (some of which was deserved), got battered about (by me as well as the reviewers), and finally made it into print nearly three years after I first wrote it; the second because it was so straightforward, so clean, involved a minimal amount of pain and made it into print into a UK journal that I much admire.

The point is, if you have an experience like the first tale – well, so does every academic from time to time! Some articles have a difficult gestation. The important thing is not to give up or to take to heart the less than kind comments that some reviewers make. Only some reviewers will see themselves as gatekeepers; others will see it as their task to help you develop your work.

Revise and resubmit

There are three main outcomes when you submit an article to a journal: *accept*, *revise and resubmit*, or *reject*. In many ways, the hardest to deal with is 'revise and resubmit', which may involve having to balance two differing opinions on how the work could be improved. How do you keep both reviewers happy – when they don't agree? How do you maintain your own integrity, your own stamp on your work, and yet take into account the opinions of well-informed others?

A really useful article on these issues is from Kamler (2010), who outlines the complexities of 'revise and resubmit' and argues that the process is not unproblematic. The production of any text, as Kamler point out, involves a number of different forces – and it may be useful to regard reviewer comments as one of the (many) forces that shape research writing, rather than as a personal attack.

Tikanga Māori

Like 'revise and resubmit' the peer-review process overall is collaborative: a community of researchers is involved in the production of a journal text. While the anonymity of peer review may contribute to a sense that it is impersonal, and therefore quite daunting, it is actually a process that draws on and requires connection and exchange between scholars.

References

Hartley, J. (2008) *Academic writing and publishing: A practical handbook*. London: Routledge.

HERDSA (2011). *Higher Education on the Edge*. Retrieved from <http://conference.hersa.org.au/2011/>

Kamler, B. (2010). Revise and resubmit: The role of publication brokers. In C. Aitchison, B. Kamler, & A. Lee (Eds.). *Publishing Pedagogies for the doctorate and beyond* (pp. 64–84). London and New York: Routledge.

Author Notes

Dr. Frances Kelly is a lecturer in doctoral skills development in the Student Learning Centre at the University of Auckland.

Email: f.kelly@auckland.ac.nz