

Responsibility and the importance of peer reviews for a scientific periodical

As a channel for divulging new knowledge, a scientific periodical cannot fail to take into consideration a number of criteria that concern not only methodology but also fairly rigorous editing. Without this, its message cannot be not true to that which it intends to communicate. Since scientific knowledge refers to concrete or abstract entities, the problem emerges of the extent to which, given the aforementioned requirements regarding rigor, an article is capable of expressing a fact or a process under investigation. Often, the author finds it difficult in his or her manuscript to describe what has been studied. Therefore, a reviewer or an editor is confronted with the problem of being faithful, or, at least, adjusting what was done to what is said. There are texts that are unnecessarily long with expansive and rambling descriptions not clearly or directly related to the object of study. In short, this is a case where the author writes, but says nothing. It is worth noting that the content of an article may be of interest, but the way it is described impoverishes it or puts too great a burden on the reader. Most seriously, however much the reviewer recommends that the text be edited, some authors fail to do so adequately, meaning that the same manuscript has to be reviewed over and over again.

At present, periodicals take care to limit the number of words in articles. This is an important step. However, some authors find it difficult to meet this requirement, since the problem is intrinsic to their own style of writing. Such authors, when asked to reduce the size of the text, sometimes cut whole paragraphs which may be important. The tiresome style is a relatively common problem in periodicals of a broad scope that cover social and psychological issues and even collective health. In fact, a publication such as ours – which focuses on clinical biology but extends to social and epidemiological issues – must confront this problem, this increases the number of rejected articles. This kind of text does not respect the well-known principle of Ockham's razor – fundamental for scientific writing—whereby - “we should not needlessly multiply things”. A rambling text is unlikely to be published, but it is a shame to reject a study that has good content for this reason. We know that nature is complex and society no less so. All the more reason for us not to complicate things further. As Professor Bezerra Coutinho used to say “complexity is one thing, complication another”. The complex may, in fact, have some kind of organization, the complicated does not. Einstein put it well when he said “everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler than that”. The content should not be lost because of poor writing.

This is not to say that it is easy to be simple. However, it is by achieving this that our message becomes easier to understand.

For all these reasons, the editors of a scientific periodical need to take the greatest care in their choice of reviewers, just as they should be able to assess their reports and come to a judicious decision as to whether or not to accept or reject a manuscript.

All of this may appear obvious but it is always worth giving verbal support to reviewers, because they are overburdened by countless professional and technical-scientific demands. It is thus extremely important that the work not only of the editor, but also the scientific reviewer be valued by all the organizations that support and promote scientific publication. And their work should be regarded not just as one service among others, but as a way of evaluating the transmission of knowledge in such a way as to ensure that it is as faithful as possible to the facts that an article wishes to convey. Organizations such as universities, institutes and funding agencies should provide better conditions for reviewers and editors to dedicate sufficient time to this activity to ensure that they produce an adequate and rigorous analysis of the manuscripts that fall into their hands.

This is an appeal to everybody to be alert to these issues, especially the problem of professionals being so overloaded with work that they see the task of editing or reviewing as an added chore, carried out in the little time that remains when other tasks have been completed.

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