

Peer reviewer: what commitment is that?

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Journals are the medium of excellence for intellectually disseminating academic production and scientific advancements, and today they may be considered the main providers/judges of scientific merit for most fields of knowledge. In this process, reviewing papers and selecting those that fulfill the criteria of ethical integrity, scientific quality, and relevance for professional practice are a responsibility shared by journal publishers and their reviewers.

Starting in the late 1990s, the Brazilian academic-scientific community has benefitted from a significant expansion in the access to and dissemination of scientific information, a fact related mostly to the increased number of titles available in electronic format⁽¹⁾. Such growth came along with a host of other challenges, among which we have the makeup of the team of reviewers for such journals.

Being an *ad hoc* reviewer/editor is a role that requires people to dedicate their time and knowledge, as well as be committed and responsible towards the advancement of science. However, this activity is undervalued at times, given its anonymity and somewhat unclear benefits.

Another relevant issue is that journals need to have expert reviewers capable of adding quality to the publications, both in terms of the practical contributions from their assessment of the merit of papers submitted and their influence on journal rating (Qualis) by the Coordination of Support for Higher Education Personnel (*Coordenação de Apoio ao Pessoal de Nível Superior* - CAPES). As a result, there emerge specific requirements for putting together a team of reviewers, which must be staffed by top researchers specializing either in the topic addressed or the literature and methods evaluated. By mastering the knowledge and practice in their specialties, reviewers can offer authors precious advice⁽²⁾.

In the context of scientific journals, the official academic paper analysis process conducted by reviewers is peer review, in which the identity of reviewers and authors is kept confidential. In this process, the peers collaborate with the publisher's efforts to identify studies that are scientifically rigorous and ethical, as well as relevant for the practice and advancement of knowledge.

Journal publishers must clearly let reviewers know what their roles and duties are, and especially about the confidential nature of the document submitted for evaluation⁽³⁾, to guarantee the quality of the review by making sure the peers are impartial, objective, and meet deadlines.

From this standpoint, it is suitable to expect publishers to regularly monitor the performance of their reviewers and stop requesting reviews from those who repeatedly deliver work that lacks quality and/or is not constructive, or miss deadlines^(3,4). Meeting review completion deadlines is an important aspect of the peer-review process. When reviewers accept an invitation and fail to finish their work on time, the review process becomes longer and the authors' become more anxious as they wait for a reply on their submission, besides compromising deadlines and the dynamics of flows followed by publishers to finalize a volume.

To emphasize the ethical side of reviewers' role, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has set the basic principles to be followed by peers when reviewing academic papers⁽⁵⁾:

- only agree to review manuscripts for which they have the subject expertise required and which they can assess in a timely manner;
- respect the confidentiality of peer review and manuscript contents, during or after the peer-review process;

- not use information obtained during the peer-review process for their own or any other person's or organization's advantage, or to disadvantage or discredit others;
- declare all potential conflicting interests, including when they are unsure about such conflicts;
- not allow their reviews to be influenced by the origins of a manuscript, by the nationality, religious or political beliefs, gender or other characteristics of the authors, or by commercial considerations;
- be objective and constructive in their reviews, and refrain from making derogatory personal comments;
- acknowledge that peer review is largely a reciprocal endeavor and undertake to carry out their fair share of reviewing and in a timely manner;
- provide journals with personal and professional information that is accurate and a true representation of their expertise;
- recognize that impersonation of another individual during the review process is considered serious misconduct.

While researchers are expected to be honest and truthful when reporting on their studies, reviewers are expected to review manuscripts in a thorough, constructive manner. Although reviewing papers is time-consuming work, it stands as a significant contribution to scientific knowledge⁽⁶⁾.

It should be said that reviewers offer their time and expertise generously and voluntarily but, on the other hand, they are authors as well and have certainly had the opportunity to improve their papers through other reviewers' careful considerations, and should therefore consider reviewing a professional commitment⁽²⁾. From such standpoint, we may consider that, at the same time reviewers improve the quality of their reviews, they can also improve their own scientific production⁽⁷⁾.

The academic paper publishing process is implicitly based on a contract of trust between publishers and reviewers, authors, publishers and readers, and also on transparency and strictness about the procedures employed to review papers. While publishers expect reviewers to be correct and competent in their reviews, authors believe that publishers are committed to choosing pertinent reviewers. In turn, readers believe in the journal's review process⁽³⁾.

In view of the foregoing, we believe that researchers, as experts in their field of knowledge, have the social-educational commitment to playing the role of peer reviewers in order to advance their field of work, thereby assuming a responsibility towards the scientific community and society at large. However, we should emphasize the ethical aspect of the commitment assumed by reviewers, which aspect is essentially related to the ethical nature of their own intellectual efforts as researchers.

■ REFERENCES

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