

The Ins and Outs of the Peer-Review Process

This whole game of peer reviewing is new for some of us librarians. In academic libraries, it is presumed that librarians perform some kind of scholarly activity as part of their responsibilities and as a way to ensure continuing appointment, tenure or promotion. Scholarly activity and creative projects are recognized in various ways, and publishing in a peer reviewed paper can be an integral part of fast-tracking your career path. However, it can also be intimidating. The fact that the peer review process can be scary was part of the *raison d'être* for this journal. The first editorial board wanted a journal that felt approachable and connected to your local or regional library association, but they also knew that rigour and high quality papers were needed to make this publishing venture truly successful for everyone. I believe that we have done that. However, after reviewing some of the peer reviewing documents and communicating with a few of the section editors over the last three issues of the journal, I began to get a little worried and started to ask myself some questions.

So, here are the questions and my answers.

“Are authors starting to feel dejected because their papers need substantial revision or have not been accepted the first time around?”

I sure hope not. The path to high quality, rigorous research is a long and hard one. We have already had to change our publication schedule to accommodate the time it takes for reviewers to do a thorough and comprehensive review of the articles and to allow sufficient time for authors to revise their documents. There have only been one or two articles that have passed through the process with minor revisions. Believe me, these are the exceptions, not the rule. When I speak to professorial colleagues about revisions and rejections, they simply smile and tell me that rejection is par for the course and you just need to persevere, revise and resubmit, sometimes many, many times. So, I encourage you to stick with it, stick with us. Take the criticisms in the spirit outlined in our guidelines. Allow your faceless, nameless allies to help you shine and produce the best article that really showcases your knowledge and expertise. We still plan to start a writing coaches' programme but this has been delayed a little. Hopefully it will be up and running next year.

“Are peer reviewers being too critical or not critical enough?”

This journal is still a fairly new endeavour, so everyone is still learning and we are striving to find a balance that allows new library professionals to gain some experience, but ensures we have a top rate reviewers' pool. Most reviewers have done an excellent job with their assignments. There are only two issues that I have identified as potentially problematic. One is to remember what your role is – a reviewer is not a copyeditor. It is perfectly acceptable for a reviewer to fix typos and comment on grammar, but it is not the main task of the reviewer. The main task is to comment on the content – is the research interesting, valuable, and innovative. Does it have merit? Is the article well organized, does it flow? As a reviewer, you are a very important player in this journal. With the editors, you ensure the quality of the journal, so if you feel that an article is out of your depth or interest, or if you feel you just don't have the time to invest, then please don't accept the assignment. The other note is about the tone of comments. Remember, this is perhaps the first time these writers have submitted work for this type of review, so be kind. I know this sounds cliché, but as you write, put yourself in the

author's shoes and think about how you would feel if someone was discussing your work. By no means should you accept something you do not think is appropriate for publication, but try to be constructive and helpful in your comments to authors. Comments on the acceptability for publication and any strongly worded comments should be saved for the editors. Your role as a reviewer is to be an ally and to use your expertise to make someone else's work better.

“Should we revise or change our peer reviewing guidelines?”

No, I don't think so. After re-reading the guidelines I think they are appropriate and thorough. I have reprinted them below and I would recommend that reviewers re-read the guidelines each and every time they are asked to peer review an article and I would ask they abide by their positive and constructive spirit. We are always looking for good reviewers and reviewing is a great way stay current and to build your own expertise in a subject area.

I am also enabling the comments box on my editorials, please feel free to comment here or by email (jennifer.richard@acadiu.ca). I am always happy to receive suggestions on how we can improve.

Best,
Jennifer Richard
Editor in Chief

Guidelines for Peer Reviewing for Partnership: the Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research

(Text adapted with permission from the Guidelines for Editorial Advisors for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Journal.)

Role of a Peer Reviewer

Papers selected for publication for the Innovations in Practice and Research and Theory sections of Partnership: the Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research are subject to a double-blind peer review process. Refereeing is an essential component in promoting excellence in research, authorship, and the dissemination of knowledge. Referees help the Editors to decide which papers to publish. In return they gain insight into current thinking, trends and the results of research before these come into the public domain.

We hope that you will consider your role as peer reviewer seriously and spend the appropriate and necessary time to provide the section editors and the authors a thorough and unbiased review. If you do not have sufficient time or if you feel that a paper is outside your area of expertise, please let the section editor know as soon as possible so that they can identify an alternative referee. Constructive and positive comments help authors develop their work and to raise the general standard of writing within the library and information sector.

Reviewers should see their role as fundamental to the development and protection of the journal's quality. It is the reviewer's responsibility to ensure that only high quality papers

are published, and that the author(s) are protected from putting poor work into print. From this perspective, the reviewer should not only read the papers thoroughly to find errors, but should also make recommendations to the author(s) as to how the paper might be improved.

Please strive to maintain a positive, impartial attitude toward the manuscript under review. The position of the reviewer should be that of the author's ally, with the aim of promoting effective and accurate communication. In preparing comments intended for the author's eyes, present criticism dispassionately and avoid abrasive comments.

Conflict of interest

Before reviewing a paper, the reviewer should ensure that there is no conflict of interest in his/her reviewing the paper. Although Partnership reviews are double blind, it is possible that a reviewer may be able to recognize the identity of an author. In such cases, the section editor should be contacted immediately regarding the conflict of interest so that an alternate reviewer can be assigned.

Guidelines

An unpublished manuscript is a privileged document. Review and handle the manuscripts in the strictest confidence and protect it from any and all forms of exploitation or misuse. It is essential that the manuscript or any portion of it, is not reproduced, circulated, cited, or referred to prior to its publication.

A double-blind review process is used in the interest of objectivity, in that the author is not identified to the reviewers and the reviewers are not identified to the author. If you suspect the article as the probable work of a particular person, please do not attempt to contact the author to discuss the manuscript.

The Editorial Board appreciates the value of a reviewer's recommendations. Since editorial decisions are based on evaluations from more than one source (i.e. more than one reviewer), a reviewer should not expect the editors to honor every recommendation. For that reason, please do not make specific comments about the acceptability of an article in your comments for transmission to the author. Also, suggested revisions should not be expressed as conditions of acceptance. Feel free, however, to give the editors your opinion regarding the overall acceptability of the manuscript.

Please ensure that your review is comprehensive and exhaustive. The peer reviewer should focus on the substance of the article. Comments on grammar, punctuation and spelling are welcome, but not expected.

It is recommended that you read the draft several times, looking for high-level matters such as interest level, general organization, and clarity of discussion in your first reading.

Be careful about making comments or criticisms based on your own personal style. Base comments and criticisms for improvements on accepted guidelines, concepts and rules. Any criticism, arguments and suggestions concerning the manuscript will be most useful to the author if they are carefully documented and presented fairly and clearly.

Fully explain the problems you find. For example, rather than saying that a paper “seems disorganized”, explain what is disorganized about it, using specific details from the draft to illustrate. Attempt to suggest ways to correct the problem. Identify any unclear or ambiguous passages, possible reorganization, or the need for condensing particular passages.

Avoid rewriting the draft that you are reviewing. In your efforts to suggest improvements and corrections, do not go overboard and rewrite the draft yourself. Doing so will take from the original writer the opportunity to learn and improve.

Find positive, encouraging things to say about the draft that you are reviewing. Compliments, even small ones, are appreciated.

Should you have any questions regarding the peer-review process, your role as a peer-reviewer or these guidelines, do not hesitate to contact a member of the Editorial Team.

Peer Review Questions

Peer reviewers are required to evaluate the manuscript critically and constructively and to provide valid and informative comments to authors and editors, which will facilitate improvement in their work. The following list of questions can be used as a guideline for peer review. Keep in mind that all the questions will not be applicable to every paper, and that some papers will present other questions not included in this list.

Originality and currency

- Does the paper provide anything new to what is already known in the field?
- Does the paper present ideas of interest or practical use to personnel in the library environment?
- Does the paper discuss an issue of current concern in the field?
- Is the paper relevant to the journal’s scope?

Synthesis

- Is there presence of a well-reasoned argument?
- Does the structure of the manuscript reflect the title, abstract, introduction and conclusion?
- Is the writing easy to follow, informative and interesting?
- Does the manuscript follow an organized structure?

Measure of content

- Could the manuscript or any part of it be extended, condensed, combined or deleted?
- Does the paper cover the topic at an appropriate depth?

Research and Theory

- Are the methods used appropriate for the study?
- Is the design and analysis appropriate and correct?
- Are measurements and observations clearly isolated and identifiable?
- Are significant statements justified?

- Are the stated results verifiable from tables, figures, etc. and if so, are they clearly identifiable and appropriate?
- Have any important counter-arguments or contradictory research been appropriately addressed and cited? This will be particularly important when reviewing articles on controversial topics.
- Are research procedures sufficiently described so that the study could be duplicated?
- Are the limitations (e.g., statistical) of results sufficiently described?

Errors

- Are there any errors in fact, technique, calculation, interpretation, or style?
- Do all cited statements accurately reflect the cited document, and are they correctly referenced according to the author's guidelines?
- Does the manuscript demonstrate adequate research of existing literature in support of the topic?
- Are the findings of the manuscript already published?

Conclusion

- Does the manuscript contain information in the conclusion which is not covered in the body of the manuscript?
- Does the conclusion summarize the scope and findings of the manuscript?

Feedback

Let the section editor know if you would like to receive the comments from other reviewers for the same manuscript. Also please indicate if you permit the editor to share your comments with other reviewers.

If you have any other concerns or questions, please contact your section editor or the editor in chief.