

The “Peer” in “Peer Review”

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Peer review is the best available mechanism for assessing and improving the quality of scientific work. As herpetology broadens its disciplinary and geographic boundaries, high-quality external review is ever more essential. We are writing this editorial jointly because the review process has become increasingly difficult. The resulting delays slow publication times, negatively affect performance reviews, tenure, promotions, and grant proposal success. It harms authors, agencies, and institutions (Ware, 2011).

In our review process, editors assign each new submission to a knowledgeable Associate Editor, who seeks sufficient expert reviewers to evaluate the manuscript. In recent years, Editors have commented on the increasing difficulty of finding willing reviewers, and have speculated on its causes, often citing selfishness (Ghazoul, 2011; Hochberg, 2010; McPeck et al., 2009; Navarro et al., 2010; Sheppard, 2000; Thompson, 2010). There are certainly people who regularly decline requests to review, but our experience agrees with Ware (2011) that they are the exception. Why, then, is the problem getting worse?

Most reviewers reside at academic institutions and government agencies facing budget cuts, unfunded “accountability” measures, and increasing privatization and commercialization (Perry et al., 2007). Writing an informed and constructive review takes considerable work. As professional responsibilities increase each year, the time and recognition for such unpaid work diminish. Moreover, potential reviewers are sometimes instructed to minimize their service activities (Garrison, 2005). Yet competent peer review is as vital a part of the scientific process as any experiment.

Our goal is to provide a publication process that is objective, efficient, timely, and pleasant. We are exploring various options for addressing the problem, and we need your help. Please help us by taking the following steps:

1. If you are asked to review a manuscript, please respond quickly. This will shorten the process. Delays in review often begin with a tardy response to the request for a review.
2. Please do your best to say "Yes." If you do, please make sure to meet the deadline or explicitly request an extension to a specific date. We are increasingly facing delays because of chasing colleagues who missed the deadline, sometimes by many weeks.

3. If you are not able to do the review, do not have the time to provide an in-depth review, or do not think you can meet the deadline, then please say "No" right away and suggest one or more alternate potential reviewers.
4. Involve your advanced graduate students in the review process while maintaining the confidentiality of the process. Explain that this is an important part of their professional duties.
5. Advocate to administrators the value of reviewer service at every opportunity, explain that it is a performance-related part of your job that helps keep you up-to-date, and ask for it to be part of your annual evaluation.

These are simple steps, but they will greatly help reduce delay and frustration. Many thanks in advance,
Your editors

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