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Reviewing a Manuscript for Publication

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Abstract

This paper offers suggestions about how to review a manuscript submitted for publication in the fields of management information systems, organizational studies, operations management, and management in general. Rationales for the suggestions and illustrative sample comments are provided.

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Abstract

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Action 12: If rejecting the manuscript, suggest what future research efforts might examine. Action 13: If recommending a revision, spell out alternative scenarios for how the revision could be done. Action 14: Provide citations or a bibliography.

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Why Review?

Conclusion

As management researchers, we regard the behavior of managers, systems professionals, and other organizational participants to be a manifestation of the values that they hold as members of their organization and their profession. In the same way, we may regard our own behaviors, as reviewers of manuscripts in the “double blind” reviewing process, to be a manifestation of the values that we hold as members of the community of scholars. As an author and editor, I have seen our community manifest the best and the worst of human values in the anonymous reviews offered on manuscripts submitted for publication. Some reviewers rise to the occasion and give extensive help, even though the anonymous reviewing process promises them nothing in return for their efforts. Other reviewers hide behind the anonymity of the reviewing process, offering negative remarks that they would not have the courage to voice in public. My immediate purpose is to offer suggestions, based on the reviews I have seen as an author and editor, about how to provide useful, kind, constructive, and responsible reviews of manuscripts submitted for publication. I offer these suggestions to my colleagues who review manuscripts submitted for publication in research journals in management information systems, organizational studies, operations management, and other fields of management.

1. Suggestions for Reviewing a Manuscript For many of the suggestions below, I offer sample comments to illustrate my points. I have based these comments on actual reviews.

1.1 Start out with Your Own Summary of the Manuscript

As a reviewer for a manuscript, I was surprised, upon subsequently receiving the associate editor’s own review, to see that he began with a summary of the manuscript. After all, an author knows what his or her own manuscript is about, so why summarize it?

Apparently, at least in this case, the summary was provided for the benefit of the senior editor, not necessarily the author. The associate editor’s review was, I realized, as much a recommendation to the senior editor as it was an explanation to the authors. Because a reviewer’s review is, in the same way, a recommendation to an editor, I have come to believe that a summary of the manuscript being considered is no less useful in the reviewer’s review.

I now believe that an opening summary may also be useful to the manuscript’s author and to the reviewer himself or herself. For the author, how effectively the reviewer’s summary does or does not capture the gist of the manuscript may serve as one measure of how effectively the manuscript communicates its message. For the reviewer, the very exercise of composing a summary encourages and virtually assures a thorough reading of the manuscript.

Opening summaries are also useful to the editor when the manuscript is controversial. Occasionally, as an editor, I have wondered if the different reviewers assigned to a controversial manuscript have actually been sent the same manuscript. An opening summary of the manuscript, presented from the reviewer’s own perspective, would be a big help to the editor when he or she is trying to reach a decision on a manuscript that evokes controversial reactions.

Some illustrative sample comments are:

This paper represents a major effort to test two competing theories about user satisfaction with electronic mail... The methodology of the paper consists of... The data were gathered from two field sites... The major finding was that... The contributions to theory and practice would appear to be...

This manuscript pursues two somewhat conflicting goals. It attempts to..., while it also tries to.... The authors do a good job of the first one, but their treatment of the second one raises more questions than it answers.

1. 2 Let the Editor and Author Know What Your Expertise Does, and Does Not, Cover

By stating where you have expertise and, no less important, where you lack expertise, you will be helping the editor and author in their job of interpreting and weighing your comments. Reviewers, in voluntarily identifying where their expertise may be lacking with regard to the manuscript being reviewed, might even gain additional credibility for their claims about where they do have expertise.

I read the paper from two perspectives: 1) someone who has employed the same methodology that the authors are using and 2) someone who is not familiar at all with the substantive area that the authors are investigating. My criticisms and suggestions are offered entirely from the first perspective.

For the reader, such as myself, who is unfamiliar with concepts X, Y, and Z, the authors present no helpful explanation of these concepts or justification for their inclusion in the study in the first place...

Another problem I had is that, probably like most of the people who read this journal, I am not deeply read in all three of the research fields that the authors draw upon. I cannot judge how well this paper builds on past research.

1. 3 Give "Action-able" Advice

Advice stated in the form of do-able tasks is mutually advantageous to the author and the reviewer in the event that the editor asks for a revision. For the author, the advised actions point to a "fixed target" where he or she may aim the revision. For the reviewer, the advised actions (as further interpreted by the editor) may serve as the criteria on which to judge the revision. In contrast, a reviewer who offers vague generalities, and no action-able advice, in his or her first review would have no real "handle" with which to approve or disapprove the revision; such a reviewer might very well find a revision returning to "haunt" him or her.

If my concerns can be addressed successfully in a revision, then I believe the paper should be published. I have four major concerns. They are...

Therefore, I recommend rejection, but would be willing to review a revised version if (1) ... and (2) ...

The following suggestions are provided to improve the weaknesses pointed out above:

1. Clearly state the objectives, contributions, and limitations of the study.
2. Provide a definition of what you mean by Organizational Support System and use it consistently throughout the paper.
3. Using this definition, narrow down the literature review.

1. 4 Convince the Authors by Arguing from Their Own Assumptions and Framework

A reviewer can always take issue with a manuscript's assumptions and framework. However, disagreeing with the assumptions is not always an effective reviewing strategy because, strictly speaking, all assumptions are incorrect for what they assume away. An alternative strategy is to accept the manuscript's assumptions (if only for the sake of argument) and then to point out any shortcomings in the manuscript by examining the consequences that follow from these assumptions. (Indeed, if the assumptions lead to no objectionable consequences, then the assumptions might not be bad assumptions in the first place.) By casting the review in terms of the authors' own framework, the reviewer might then be more likely to convince the authors by courting and affirming the authors, rather than by disputing the authors.

On the first page, the paper says that it will do the following... The rest of the paper, however, does not follow through adequately on what it promised to do. In particular, according to the standards of the research framework that the authors themselves have chosen, the following things still need to be done or need to be done better... Still, there is much potential value in what the paper initially proposed and I encourage the authors to flesh out the paper's ideas more thoroughly. Along these lines, my suggestions are...

If the reviewer wishes to suggest a different framework and set of assumptions to the authors, this suggestion would be more convincing after the reviewer has demonstrated that he or she has given due consideration to the authors' original framework, rather than dismissing it outright.

1.5 Provide Both (1) Your General, Overall Reaction and (2) a List of Specific, Numbered Point-by-Point Comments

As an author, I have received some reviews consisting entirely of numbered, point-by-point comments that give the impression that the reviewer was simply typing up his or her review as he or she was reading my manuscript linearly, sentence-by-sentence, turning it page-by-page. Whereas such a review might be detailed and even exhaustive, I have found that such reviews sometimes negatively criticize me on matters that I actually address satisfactorily later in the manuscript. These reviewers do a good job of analyzing the words in my manuscript, but they appear to put no effort into discerning what I meant by these words. My impression has been that these reviewers considered the reviewing job to be a burden and just wanted to get it over. I have found that if there is no statement of an overall reaction from the reviewer, I am sometimes left wondering about what the reviewer really means. In fact, in this situation, I sometimes wonder if the reviewer himself knows what he means. For these reasons, I believe that a general, overall reaction or overview from the reviewer is needed as much as his or her specific, point-by-point comments.

However, there is at least one occasion in which a linear, sentence-by-sentence, and page-by-page reading might be useful. When I am a reviewer, I will occasionally amend my review by paging through the manuscript once more and enumerating, point-by-point, any comments which I had planned to make when I first read the manuscript, but which somehow did not make their way into the main body of my review.

Numbering the major points in a review is helpful to the editor and author. For instance, an editor could then conveniently say to the author, "Pay particular attention to points 2, 3, and 5 by Reviewer 1."

1. 6 List the Manuscript's Strengths

Perhaps the most disheartening review I have ever seen is one that began with the single-sentence paragraph, "There are several problems with this paper," and followed with a numbered, blow-by-blow listing of all the alleged problems in the manuscript. An accompanying listing of the manuscript's strengths would have made the review more palatable (and hence convincing) to the author.

A listing of the manuscript's strengths takes on added importance when the reviewer's recommendation is that the manuscript should be rejected. Is there really nothing in the manuscript that would make it worthy of a revision? Making up a list of the manuscript's strengths would help make sure that no stone is left unturned. The major asset of this manuscript is that it presents a new approach to... This, in turn, raises interesting general issues such as: (1)...(2)...(3)...

Major strengths.

1. The objective of this paper is of high interest and use to IS managers.
2. The authors are exceptionally clear about how this study builds on past studies.
3. The methodology, while new to IS, is clearly explained.

1. 7 Quote, Give the Page Number, or Otherwise Explicitly Locate the Parts of the Manuscript to Which You Are Referring

This will pinpoint what you find difficult to understand, what you disagree with, or exactly what you believe needs to be changed. Moreover, if the author should disagree with your assessment, then the author may respond precisely to your objection.

In the third paragraph on page 9, it is not clear to me that the authors understand the concept of construct validity.

On page 3, in the literature review section, the paper says, "...only 12 percent of the past studies examined the same factors we will be examining in this study..." Exactly which studies were these? I do not doubt your statement, but I would like to be able to evaluate it for myself.

On page 2, why does the prior research necessarily suggest that we need to study this topic, as you claim?

1. 8 Offer Comments on Tables, Figures, and Diagrams

Because tables, figures, and diagrams often appear at the end of the manuscript, they often do not receive the attention they deserve. However, I believe that reviewing an illustration can be equivalent to reviewing a thousand words. Because illustrations are often overlooked in reviews, a detailed comment about an illustration might favorably impress the author and editor, suggesting to them that the reviewer is especially conscientious. Also, suggesting a new table, figure, or diagram may encourage the author to sharpen his or her argument.

Table 6 makes no sense to me. The labels along the vertical axis are mentioned nowhere in the text.

I don't understand the reason for including Figure 4. What is the relevance of the number of X broken down into three categories?

1. 9 Be Kind

There are tactful ways to express negative criticisms. For example, if you are unsure what the contribution of the manuscript is, say "What's new?" instead of "So what?" I believe that if the criticism cannot be stated in a kind and constructive way, then the criticism might not be worth stating at all. Also, unkind remarks in a review that is otherwise valid may create difficulties for the editor who would like to persuade the author that the review does have merit.

1. 10 Be Frank, in a Tactful Way, about Your Own Emotional Reaction

Some reviews tend to be dry. As an author and editor, I find that any hint or explicit statement about the reviewer's feelings will help me to interpret what he or she means.

I had a hard time making a recommendation on this manuscript . . . The paper is nicely written and competent, but dull. It is hard to get excited about the findings.

I am very excited about this paper. At a recent conference a colleague and I were on a panel where we debated similar points...

1. 11 Do Some of Your Own Library Research

In my experience as an author and editor, I tend to give an extra measure of credibility to reviewers who have done some library or other research for their review. This effort makes the review appear sincere and convincing. A quotation from a book or article that the reviewer has looked up can be impressive.

On page 14, I was intrigued by the paper's quotation of Carlson, so I decided to look up Carlson's article. My interpretation of Carlson's article is. . .

1. 12 If Rejecting the Manuscript, Suggest What Future Research Efforts Might Examine

Our own behavior as reviewers in the “double blind” review process reveals our individual values, which may include adversarial values and collegial values. Rejecting a manuscript and offering only the reasons for rejection reveals a person who has no contribution to make to the overall community of scholars. Rejecting a manuscript, but also offering suggestions about what the author could pursue instead or pursue differently in future research, reveals a person who is integrated into the community of scholars and seeks to foster its growth.

1. 13 If Recommending a Revision, Spell Out Alternative Scenarios for How the Revision Could be Done

Simply saying “this paper needs a good re-write” is not, by itself, helpful, especially if it is true. Often, there is more than one way to revise a manuscript. Suggest two or more scenarios, mention what you believe to be the advantages or disadvantages of each one, and leave the choice up to the author.

1. 14 Provide Citations or a Bibliography

A citation that the author finds helpful can be as valuable as a thousand or more words in the rest of the review.

1. 15 Date Your Review

As an author and editor, I do not appreciate late reviews. Once, I noticed that a colleague of mine prominently displayed the current date at the top of a review that he was about to send in. He said that the date would let the authors of the manuscript know that, if the overall cycle time on their manuscript was excessive, he was not the cause. I also suspect that a date on a review can function as an incentive for subsequent participants in the review process to act on the manuscript promptly.

2. Why Review?

I see four benefits to engaging in the effort of reviewing a manuscript submitted for publication.

Benefits to the Reviewer in the Short Run Typically, a reviewer will receive the reviews by the other reviewers and the editor. Doing a review therefore confers an insider’s view of the reviewing process. The reactions of the other reviewers and the editor all contain potential lessons for one’s own manuscripts to be submitted for publication. In reviewing manuscripts, one also gains access to invaluable bibliographies. Access to these bibliographies is sufficient justification, in itself, to find the time to participate in the reviewing process.

Benefits to the Reviewer in the Long Run Good reviewers are hard to find. A track record of good reviews will enhance one’s reputation with editors, who may then serve (if need be) as job contacts or outside reviewers in one’s tenure, promotion, and re-appointment process. In this regard, one’s performance in his or her review of a manuscript can be compared to one’s performance in a job interview. Good reviews can benefit one’s career.

Benefits to Others Numerous people have helped me launch my career as an university teacher and researcher. When they ask me to review a manuscript for which they are the editor or track chair, I regard their request as an opportunity for me to return some of the help they have given me. In our research culture, doing a review of a manuscript is a socially significant gesture.

Benefits to One’s Own School of Thought As an author, I often have the experience in which reviewers, hostile to and ignorant of the research traditions that I embrace, misreview my submission. Therefore, whenever I find that I am a reviewer for a submission that falls in my own school of thought, I expend extra efforts to give it a careful, constructive review. Realizing that the refereeing process is political, I will do my best to be supportive and affirmingly critical, drawing attention to any major significant points in the submission and delineating in explicit, constructive, and “action-able” ways how the author’s research can be improved. As a result, the editor would, if necessary, have some “ammunition” with which to neutralize any hostile and ignorant reviews and thereby to justify a positive editorial decision on this submission.

3. Conclusion

No review of a manuscript must incorporate all the features I have described above. I am also confident that there are additional useful features I have not yet encountered. I have identified these features based on my own experience as a member of the management research community. I encourage my colleagues to do the same.

Do actual instances of good reviews follow from rules for how to review a manuscript for publication, or do rules for how to review a manuscript for publication follow from actual instances of good reviews? I believe that there is some truth to both. Following any set of guidelines for how to do a review may be helpful, but should not dissuade the creative and caring reviewer from innovating additional reviewing methods.