EDITORIAL

How to review manuscripts

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Annals of Clinical Epidemiology (ACE) requires reviewers to provide educational and constructive comments, not to return simple critiques to the authors. Reviewers should attach constructive comments on how to modify the manuscript so that it can be revised to a more attractive version.

This brief paper explains how to review manuscripts; that is, the correct state of mind when reviewing manuscripts.

OBJECTIVE EVALUATION

Good peer review contributes to the advancement of science. Reviewers should give an objective evaluation for submitted manuscripts.

The general role of reviewers is to evaluate accuracy of the description; validity of methods, results, and discussion; and novelty and originality of the research.

Table 1 shows the key points for objective evaluation of manuscripts.

CONSTRUCTIVE AND EDUCATIONAL COMMENTS

Reviewers should provide positive feedback that informs the authors how to add or modify the analysis to improve quality of the manuscript. Reviewers' comments that just state their subjective opinions are not constructive, and may only confuse the authors.

It is also non-constructive to force a modification that cannot be handled at all. If reviewers state a strong denial, they should explain the reasons to the author by quoting relevant evidence or data.

Reviewers should provide as many suggestions as possible to aid manuscript revision. These suggestions may include specific examples of plans for correction.

Peer-review of submitted manuscript is different from critical review of published article. Only finding fault with the authors is not recommended. It is almost meaningless for the development of the research area to just nitpick negative feedback to the authors.

Stereotypical comments such as “because the number

Table 1 Seven key points for objective evaluation

i) Originality
Does the manuscript include original contents which can be added to current knowledge?
ii) Importance
For whom is the manuscript important? (patients, families, clinicians, or healthcare decision makers?)
iii) Purpose
Are the research questions and the purpose of the study clear?
iv) Methods
Are the methods fully considered to answer the research question?
Do the research methods have reproducibility?
v) Results
Is the research question sufficiently answered?
vi) Interpretation
Is the interpretation based on the results?
Are the limitations that can affect the results fully described?
vii) Abstract
Can the whole picture of the manuscript be obtained simply by reading the abstract?

of cases is small” or “because it is not a randomized controlled trial” are far from constructive or educational. All studies have limitations. If the paper has novelty and creativity, some limitation should be allowed.

Reviewers should not point out issues in the second-round peer-review that were not raised in the first-round peer review.

STATE OF MIND WHEN REVIEWING MANUSCRIPTS

Reviewers should not force their personal style or self-taught manner on the authors. Even if the author’s method and consideration are different from their own, reviewers must accept them when scientifically valid.

Reviewers should refrain from impressing their assertion to the author, such as “I am interested in xx, please show relevant data.” Forcing their own style often confuses the authors and has the potential to degrade the quality of the paper and thus possibly interfere with the development of the field.

Reviewers should not write comments on things they do not know well. Evaluating with imperfect knowledge has no meaning, which may deteriorate peer-review process.

Reviewers should remain unbiased and neutral at all times. Recommendations on acceptance or rejection

should not be affected by the following personal feelings: “Contents of the manuscript match my interests”, “The study is similar to my research”, “The authors cited my paper”, “The author is my acquaintance”, “The coauthor is a leading figure in the study area”. They should judge from a neutral position.

Many young authors conduct their research, discuss with co-authors, and write manuscripts with enthusiasm and sincerity. Reviewers should avoid aggressive comments that will only show contempt for the author, as it may lead to breaking down the future of the young researcher.

Through peer review, researchers will be trained. Reviewers should be strongly aware of this and maintain their dignity and courtesy.

CONCLUSION

Most young researchers have poorer skills to write papers than senior investigators. Interaction with good reviewers can be a lifetime property for young researchers. Educational and constructive comments from peer reviewers motivate young researchers to make efforts to modify papers and improve their writings. If appropriate modifications are made and the manuscript is accepted, it will be a great confidence boost for the young researcher and will lead to the next research status.