Reviewers' Manual

Step-by-Step Guide to Reviewing a Manuscript

Review Checklists

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INTRODUCTION

When invited to peer review, you'll receive the manuscript's abstract to help you decide whether to accept the invitation and conduct the review. Respond promptly to avoid delays and declare any potential conflicts of interest early.

Editors rely on timely, constructive feedback for decision-making. Provide clear, helpful comments—vague or unhelpful ones offer little value. Your review should include comments to the authors and possibly confidential ones to the editors.

Remember: while peer review is often anonymous, never include anything in your report that you wouldn't discuss with the author in person.

PART I: THE FIRST READ-THROUGH

You should already understand the aims, key data, and conclusions of the manuscript from reading the abstract. Your first read-through should be a quick skim to form an initial impression and decide whether your final recommendation will be to accept, revise, or reject the paper.

Key Considerations

- **Take Notes:** Keep a pen and paper nearby for jotting down thoughts, including line numbers. This makes it easier to reference specific sections when writing your review.
- **Research Relevance & Originality:** Ask yourself if the main question addressed by the research is interesting, relevant, and original. How does the manuscript contribute to the field?
- **Clarity & Quality:** Evaluate whether the paper is clearly written and whether the authors' conclusions are well-supported by the evidence presented.
- **Data Presentation:** Assess whether the tables, figures, and images effectively support the manuscript's findings.

Identifying Major Flaws

Focus on finding major issues that could affect the manuscript's credibility or reliability. Key flaws may include:

- **Conclusions vs. Evidence:** Are the conclusions supported by the data, or do they contradict the author's own statistical or qualitative data?
- **Methodological Concerns:** Are outdated or unreliable research methods used? Check that the methodology aligns with best practices.
- **Overlooked Key Processes:** Has the author ignored a process known to have a strong influence on the area under study?

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Experimental Design Checklist

When reviewing a paper with a focus on experimental design, assess the following:

- Sampling methods in analytical papers
- Sufficient use of control experiments
- Precision of process data
- Regularity of sampling in time-dependent studies
- Validity of research questions and systematic data analysis (qualitative research)
- Qualitative research extending beyond the author's opinions, with descriptive elements and appropriate quotes

Major Flaws in Information

If the methodology appears sound, examine the data tables, figures, or images. Critical flaws here likely require rejection. Look for:

- Insufficient data
- Unclear data tables
- Contradictory data that is not self-consistent or disagrees with the conclusions
- Confirmatory data that adds little to current understanding without strong justification

Concluding Your First Read

After reviewing the paper, draft the first two paragraphs of your review:

Paragraph 1: Summarize the research question, methodology, goals, and conclusions. Highlight key messages and emphasize the paper's successful aspects.

Paragraph 2: Provide a conceptual overview of the manuscript's contribution. Does the paper introduce new, significant findings? Are the methods appropriate and the data reliable?

Even if you spot serious flaws, read the entire paper to identify positive aspects. A full read-through ensures initial concerns are correct and fair—you need the full context before recommending rejection.

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PART II: THE SECOND READ-THROUGH

After the first read-through and deciding the paper is publishable in principle, the second detailed review aims to refine the manuscript for publication. You may still decide to recommend rejection following a second reading.

Tips to Save Time

- Make separate notes instead of relying solely on manuscript comments.
- Group similar concerns or praise for easier reference.
- Keep images, graphs, and data tables visible—either printed or on a second monitor.

Focus Areas

- **Argument Construction:** Identify unclear or ambiguous sections, factual errors, or invalid arguments.
- **Clarity & Style:** Evaluate whether the title accurately reflects the paper's subject and whether the abstract provides a clear summary. Check keyword alignment.
- **Language:** Your role is to judge research content and ensure meaning is clear—not to fix language issues. Suggest improvements where needed; grammar only matters if it affects clarity.

PART III: SECTION-BY-SECTION GUIDANCE

1 The Introduction

The introduction should clearly set out the research argument and summarize recent literature related to the topic. It should highlight existing gaps in knowledge or conflicts in current understanding, establishing the need for the research.

Originality and Topicality

Originality and topicality can only be established in the light of recent authoritative research. Authors may cite older seminal papers, but must reference recent developments to justify revisiting a topic.

Research Aims

The introduction typically ends by stating the research aims. These should be clear from the introduction; if the aims are a surprise, the introduction needs improvement.

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2 Materials and Methods

Academic research should be replicable, repeatable, and robust—and follow best practice.

- **Replicable Research:** The study should make sufficient use of control experiments, repeated analyses, and adequate sampling. Where research is not replicable, recommend rejection.
- **Repeatable Methods:** Provide enough detail so other researchers can replicate the same research. Where methods are not detailed enough, request revision.
- **Robust Research:** A sufficient number of data points is necessary. Recommend revision if there is insufficient data or unaddressed potential biases.
- **Best Practice:** The study must follow established standards (e.g., CONSORT for randomized trials) with no compromise to participant health and safety. Failure to meet best practice standards typically warrants rejection.

3 Results and Discussion

This section should provide a clear and coherent narrative answering: What were the findings? What new insights were gained? Authors should:

- Describe in simple terms what the data show
- Refer to statistical analyses such as significance or goodness of fit
- Evaluate observed trends and explain their significance by referencing published research
- Gather all information into a complete critical analysis with discussion of any gaps or inconsistencies

4 Conclusions

Usually no more than a few paragraphs. Conclusions should reflect upon the aims—whether achieved or not—and should not be surprising. If the conclusions are not evidence-based, ask for them to be rewritten.

5 Images, Graphs & Data Tables

If you cannot discern a story from a piece of information, ask for improvements in presentation (titles, labels, statistical notation, or image quality). Where information is clear, check that:

- The results seem plausible (no data gathering errors)
- The trends support the paper's discussion and conclusions
- There is sufficient data to support described trends
- Any image editing is reported and appropriate. Unreported manipulation should be flagged confidentially to the editor.

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6 List of References

Check referencing for accuracy, adequacy, and balance.

- **Accuracy:** Verify accuracy of references central to the author's argument. Editors handle exhaustive checking.
- **Adequacy:** Assess whether references adequately support claims and whether significant studies are missing. Ensure references are current, relevant, and retrievable.
- **Balance:** Check for a well-balanced list that is fair to competing authors, not over-reliant on self-citation, and that recognizes initial discoveries in the field.

7 Plagiarism

If you suspect plagiarism, thoroughly assess the paper's originality.

- **Identified concern:** If you find —or already know of —a very similar paper, this may be because the author overlooked it in their literature search, or because it is very recent or published in a journal slightly outside their usual field. You may advise the author to emphasize the novel aspects of their study and differentiate it from similar work —for instance, by revisiting their aims, results, or conclusions in light of the overlapping article. Of course, if the research similarities are so great that they render the work unoriginal, you may have no choice but to recommend rejection.
- **Suspected concern:** If you suspect plagiarism, including self-plagiarism, but cannot recall or locate exactly what is being plagiarized, thoroughly assess the paper's originality. Most editors have access to software that can check for plagiarism. Editors do not seek to scrutinize every paper, but when plagiarism is discovered during peer review, it can be properly addressed ahead of publication. If plagiarism is discovered only after publication, the consequences are more serious for both authors and readers, as a retraction may be necessary. For detailed guidelines see our Best Practice Guidelines on Research Integrity and Publishing Ethics.

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PART IV: HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR REPORT

Summary Section

- Give positive feedback first—authors are more likely to read your review. Don't overdo it if recommending rejection.
- Briefly summarize the paper's content and findings.
- Put the findings in the context of existing literature, noting significance and originality.
- Highlight the work's strengths, quality, and completeness.
- State any major flaws or weaknesses and note special considerations.

Major Issues

- Are there major flaws? State what they are and their severity.
- Has similar work been published without the authors acknowledging it?
- Are the authors challenging current thinking? Is the evidence strong enough?
- If major revisions are required, indicate clearly what they are.
- Are there major presentational problems with figures, tables, language, or structure?
- Are there ethical issues? Disclose these in the confidential comments section if unsure.

Minor Issues

- Are there places where meaning is ambiguous? How can this be corrected?
- Are the correct references cited? Are citations excessive, limited, or biased?
- Are there factual, numerical, or unit errors?
- Are all tables and figures appropriate, sufficient, and correctly labelled?

Presentation & Style

Your review should ultimately help the author improve their article. Be polite, honest, and clear. Additionally:

- Write clearly, avoiding complex language that may confuse non-native English speakers.
- Number your points and refer to page and line numbers in the manuscript for specific comments.
- If asked to review only certain aspects, state which ones clearly.
- Treat the author's work the way you would like your own work to be treated.

Confidential Comments to Editors

Most journals give reviewers the option to provide confidential comments to editors. Reserve this area for communicating suspected plagiarism, fraud, unattributed work, unethical procedures, duplicate publication, bias, or other conflicts of interest.

Remember: authors cannot see this feedback. However, write comments to editors as though authors might read them too.

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PART V: PEER REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Reviewers should check the preferences of individual journals for where they want review decisions stated. You will normally be asked to indicate your recommendation from a fixed-choice list and enter comments in a separate text box.

Recommendation	Guidance
Accept	Provide details outlining why, and note any areas that could be improved.
Revise	State specific changes needed. Indicate whether you opt in or out of post-revision review. Some journals offer rejection with the possibility of resubmission for substantial revisions.
Reject	Do not spend time polishing the review or giving detailed advice on presentation. Instead: • Give constructive feedback on how the research could be improved. • Keep feedback focused on the research, not the author. • Avoid making critical confidential comments to the editor while being encouraging to the author—this could trigger an appeal.

Key Reminder: Always give constructive criticism even when recommending rejection. This helps developing researchers improve their work and explains to the editor why the manuscript should not be published.

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Reviewers' Checklist

1. **Original article checklist**
2. **Review article checklist**
3. **Case report & case series checklist**
4. **Miscellaneous checklist**

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Original article/Review checklist

Kindly respond with YES, NO, or Not Applicable (NA)

Criteria	Comments	Response
General comments	Is the work relevance to the journal field?	
	Is the work original/novel/important?	
	Is the language good, and the work well-written?	
Detailed comments		
Research title	Does the title accurately say what the study is about?	
Abstract	Is the background well-written?	
	Is the aim stated clearly?	
	Is the method explained briefly?	
	Is the results described concisely and precisely?	
	Are the conclusions related to the study?	
keywords	Are the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) keywords included?	
Introduction	Is there a general statements about the topic?	
	Is the existing gap revealed clearly?	
	Is the importance of the topic Highlighted adequately?	
	Is the aim of the study clearly described?	
Methods	Is the study design, population, and setting are described?	
	Are there a clear inclusion & exclusion criteria?	
	Are there a clear definitions for the variables?	
	Are the sample size calculation, and sampling explained properly?	
	Are the statistical methods applied described adequately, including the software used?	
	Is the study get the necessary ethical approval?	
	For prospective study, Is the consent obtained from each patient or from his guardian?	
Results	Are the presented data address the research question?	
	Are there tables or graphs help in describing the findings?	
Discussion	Is the discussion focused on the findings of the study?	
	Have the results been accurately interpreted and analyzed, including a review of the literature to assess how they align with prior research?	
	Is the limitation of the study recognized and described?	
Conclusions	Is the conclusion summarizing the main findings?	
	Is it conveying the larger implications of these findings?	
	Are their clear recommendations or ”take home” messages?	
	Is their a recommendation for future research?	
References	Are the references cited properly and are in line with journal’s policy?	
Tables/Images	Are all figures, tables, and photos necessary and appropriate?	

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Review article/Review checklist

Kindly respond with YES, NO, or Not Applicable (NA)

Criteria	Comments	Response
General comments	Is the work relevance to the journal field?	
	Is the work original/novel/important?	
	Is the language good, and the work well-written?	
Detailed comments		
Article title	Does the title accurately say what the review is about?	
Abstract	Is the abstract unstructured?	
	Does the abstract effectively summarize the manuscript?	
	Is there any information in the abstract that is not in the main text of the manuscript?	
keywords	Are the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) keywords included?	
	Will the key words help readers to find the article?	
Introduction	Does it explain the background well enough that researchers outside your specialty can understand it?	
	Is the aim of the review clearly described?	
Main text	Is the literature review pertinent to the topic?	
	Is the text includes current information?	
	Is the text divided into apropriate subtitles?	
	Have the authors missed any key references that would be important for a reader to access? Make suggestions for additional, relevant references if necessary in the comment box below.	
Conclusions	Is the conclusion related to the topic?	
	Are their clear recommendations or ”take home” messages?	
References	Are thee references in line with journal’s policy?	
Tables/Images	Are all figures, tables, and photos necessary and appropriate?	

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Case report & case series/Check list

Kindly respond with YES, NO, or Not applicable (NA)

Criteria	Comments	Response
General comments	Is the work relevance to the journal field?	
	Is the work original/novel/important?	
	Is the language good, and the work well-written?	
Detailed comments		
Case report title	Is the title truly describes the core message of the case?	
	Is the title Includes the phrase “a case report.”?	
Abstract	Is the abstract unstructured?	
	Does the abstract incorporates the key core message with necessary detail in a concise manner?	
keywords	Are the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) keywords included?	
Introduction	Does the introduction provides background information and a context of previous research into which this case study fits?	
	Is the importance of the topic Highlighted adequately?	
Case description	Is there an appropriate details of the case, including demography, medical history, physical findings, investigations?	
	Is the intervention mentioned in detail	
	Are the dose, timing, and route of drugs described properly?	
	Is the outcome to the management described clearly?	
Discussion	Is the discussion focused on the novelty and the importance of the case?	
	Is the literature review pertinent to the case?	
	Has the case findings been accurately interpreted to assess how they align with the prior case reports?	
Conclusions	Is the conclusion related to the case?	
	Is it conveying the implications of these findings?	
	Are their clear recommendations or ”take home” messages?	
References	Are thee references in line with journal’s policy?	
Tables/Images	Are all figures, tables, and photos necessary and appropriate?	

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Checklist (miscellaneous)

Overview (Please rate each item by typing letter x in the appropriate box)

Criteria	Poor	Below Average	Average	Good	Very good
The topic of this paper is relevant, timely, and of interest to the audience of this journal.					
This paper is based on rigorous academic standards.					
The content of this paper is technically accurate and sound.					
The abstract is concise and sufficient					
The introduction provides the necessary background information					
The research methodology for the study is appropriate and applied properly.					
The supporting evidence in this paper is strongly reliable and properly validated.					
The results of analysis are correctly interpreted and/or conclusions are sound.					
References are complete and appropriate.					
Tables and figures are appropriate and adequate.					
The paper is easy to read and free from grammatical or spelling errors.					

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