**An approach to the manuscript peer review process**

There is no overall accepted format. These are my personal recommendations.

Journals differ. Check the journal website to see if there is anything posted about format for reviews.

As an Editor, I want to know whether the:

* question is important and topic has general interest to readers of the specific journal
* material is original and timely
* study methods are appropriate
* data are valid
* conclusions are reasonable and supported by the data
* writing, tables and figures are clear
* manuscript is a good fit for the journal with regard to both content and priority

Almost all journals have a section in the review titled “Confidential Comments for the Editors” followed by a section titled “Comments to the Authors”. The confidential comments are not shown to the authors. I favor the following organization:

1. Confidential Comments for the Editors

In this section, I think you should briefly summarize the research question, design, predictor, outcome, analysis approach and main findings (no more than a couple of sentences). This tells me that you have read and understood the manuscript. Then I like to have your overall take on major positive AND negative issues based on the bullets above. You might include other major concerns such as “weak discussion”, “potential conflicts of interest”, “poor writing”, etc. Think about this as your take home message for the editors. This section is also where you should disclose any conflicts of interest. Significant conflicts may disqualify you as a reviewer, and you should let the journal know this ASAP. This section generally ends with the reviewer’s recommendation regarding publication (accept, accept is suitably revised, revise and reconsider, reject).

2. Comments to the Authors

When doing my own reviews, I generally copy what I wrote for the confidential comments for the editors to start this section but edit out anything that you might not want to say to the authors directly or soften the language if needed.

Then you should get into more specific comments on the article. There are generally two ways to organize this: 1) major comments followed by minor comments, or 2) comments by section of the article (Abstract, Intro, etc.). I personally like the major/minor organization, but sometimes it’s easier to address issues section by section. Here, I generally try to expand on/provide more details concerning the issues that I raised in the summary paragraph to the editors and authors. Be professional and respectful. Remember that your ultimate goal is to discuss what the authors would need to do in order to qualify for publication. The point is not to nitpick every piece of the manuscript. Your focus should be on providing constructive and critical feedback that the authors can use to improve their study. Don’t neglect to address the tables and figures, which are often crucial to presenting/understanding the manuscript.

There is a tendency to state what is wrong (which is fine), but not to say clearly what you want the authors to do to fix the problem (assuming it’s fixable). Being as clear as possible about what you want the authors to do to fix the manuscript helps the editor more easily determine if the authors have been responsive to your comments when the manuscript is revised.

Number each item so that your points are easy to follow. This will also make it easier for the authors to respond to each point. Refer to specific lines, pages, sections, or figure and table numbers when possible, so the authors (and editors) know exactly what you’re talking about.

It's fine to be personal in the comments to the Editor, but you should try to be objective in your comments to the authors. So instead of saying "I think…" Just state the facts as you see them.

If you know the literature, or have the time and interest to review the article references and related literature, and mention anything pertinent in the review.

In general, your comments should be proportional to the value of the manuscript and the need for revision. If you think the paper presents data on an important research question, but needs to change or clarify certain elements, your comments should be specific and thorough. But reviewing a manuscript can take a lot of time, and you don’t need to waste yours. If you think a manuscript is bad, can’t be fixed and should be rejected, you don't need to spend a lot of time on specific comments by section.

Write clearly and avoid typos, grammatical errors and acronyms (even those used in the manuscript) unless they are obvious. Re-read your review before you hit the submit button!

Follow the golden rule: Write the type of review you’d want to receive if *you* were the author. Even if you decide not to identify yourself in the review, you should write comments that you would be comfortable signing your name to.

There is almost always a box on the formal review for you to say if you would be willing to write a commentary. If you do a good/the best review, the editor may ask you to write a commentary. This is an excellent way to get some publications and recognition, esp. at the beginning of your career. So, use a low threshold for volunteering to write a commentary.

Peer reviewers are required to maintain confidentiality about the manuscripts they review. Reviewers can ask a colleague for help with the review but must acknowledge this. Young investigators should ask their mentors to include them on manuscript reviews if appropriate. This is a good way to introduce a mentee to the review process and often leads to listing the mentee a reviewer for that specific journal.

*Don’t* recommend additional analyses or unnecessary additional information if it’s out of scope for the study or for the journal. Don’t use the review to promote your own research or hypotheses.

*Submit your review on time. If you need an extension, tell the journal so that they know what to expect. If you need a lot of extra time, the journal might need to contact other reviewers or notify the author about the delay.*

Here are a few references. The value of these is variable, but there isn’t a whole lot written about peer review.

JACC Vol. 42, No. 7, 2003. doi:10.1016/S0735-1097(03)01181-1

J Gen Intern Med. 2006 Mar; 21(3): 281–284. doi: 10.1111/j.1525-1497.2006.00354.x

https://plos.org/resource/how-to-write-a-peer-review/

https://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-reviewers