

Why/How to write a review?

In our last edition, we asked editors from the Earth System Governance network about what to think of when submitting an article to an academic journal. Academic writing is not just about submitting your own work to journals. Every article needs to be peer reviewed, and somebody has got to do the reviewing! So here are our editors tips on why and how to write a good review when you are invited to do so. We'd like to thank Harro van Asselt from RECIEL, Sikina Jinnah from Environmental Politics, and Matt Hoffman from Global Environmental Politics for providing their valuable insights on this.

Three good reasons for writing a review:

1. **Contribute to the scientific endeavour.** The entire scientific enterprise is built on people reviewing and critiquing each other's work, and being a part of that process is integral to maintaining standards and accountability for research output. Getting your work published will require that other scholars take the time and effort required to participate in peer review. Returning that favour (in a diffuse sense) is a key obligation for all academics. If you want to publish your work, then contributing to the field by reviewing the work of others should be seen as a professional responsibility.
2. **Learn from the process.** Peer reviewing can help develop your critical skills, allowing you to improve your ability to critique others' argumentation, structure, style, etc. - and as such learn for yourself what are good and not-so-good practices. It also can give you an idea of the quality of papers that are submitted to certain types of journals. This will help you identify what kind of journals are right for your own work, and perhaps also inspire confidence. Reviewing can also give you a first-hand view of new papers making important contributions to your field. It provides you with insight into where research in your field is going and exposes you (hopefully) to diverse approaches, research designs, empirical information. Overall, while reviewing costs time and effort, it is also an important learning experience.
3. **Put yourself on the radar.** Writing strong reviews for journals you hope to publish in puts you on editors' radar screens in a positive light, while writing sloppy or cursory reviews for journals you hope to publish in puts you on editors' radar screens in a negative light. It is thus worth putting some effort into your feedback and critique of other scholars' work.

Here are some guidelines for writing a review:

1. **Be kind.** Disagreeing with the argument of a paper or coming to the conclusion that it is not good enough for publication is not justification for anger or meanness. Provide the kind of comments you would find useful as an author if you were receiving them.
2. **Explain your criticism clearly.** You may not like certain aspects of a paper, and state so, but try and back up and clearly explain what you mean. Just saying "The methodology is not sound" does not really help the editor or the author. Explaining why the specific methodology is not right for the questions asked helps both the editor and the author think about what should have been done. Likewise, if you say that "the argument does not make sense", try and provide examples, and explain what is wrong about it.
3. **Cover all aspects of a paper.** A good review tries to cover various aspects of a paper, including its contribution to the literature/originality, methodology, structure and coherence, level of argumentation and accuracy, and style. Of course, not everything

need to be covered in detail, but as an editor it is very useful to find out in what areas a paper is strong or weak.

4. **Be constructive.** Many times it is easy to criticize a paper; but to suggest how a paper should be written is the really hard part. This not only helps the author(s), but it also forces you to think along, improving your critical thinking skills. Editors and authors want to know why you think the manuscript is good or flawed, not just your judgment on its quality. Even manuscripts that you recommend rejection deserve suggestions for improvement, or in the least clear reasons why the manuscript is flawed.
5. **Avoid hyperbole.** Reviews that are either very positive or very negative are not necessarily the most useful. Of course, a paper can really be that good or that bad, but try and keep it to the point.
6. **Point to omitted literature, but don't engage in self-promotion.** While it may well be that the author(s) have missed your work, and you should feel free to point out your recent paper in journal X or book Y, try and avoid disclosing your identity, and mix your own work in with other important works that have been omitted.