

## Manuscript Review as Scholarly Work

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Manuscripts submitted to *JRME* are reviewed. Why?

The tempting answer at first glance is to make a decision about whether the piece should be published. That answer is too simple. Peer review of scholarly papers serves a much more important purpose. Reviews are a way for the field to monitor its progress and refine its products, and strong reviews are themselves scholarly work. In this editorial, we reflect on the effects the hundreds of reviews we have received over the past 2 years have had both on decisions made and on the journeys of good manuscripts to published articles.

### PURPOSE

Reviews inform the editor's decision not as "votes" but as sources of insight and perspective. A manuscript that advances the field's thinking interweaves constructs, theory, and methods—each of which is an area that needs to be well articulated and integrated into a coherent whole. Each reviewer is selected to bring a lens of expertise in at least one of these areas. Each review typically provides the editor with a unique view of the manuscript, foregrounding some aspects and likely overlooking others. Collectively, the set of reviews touches all the main aspects of the work, examines how well the manuscript integrates these aspects, and provides a snapshot of the field's reaction to the manuscript.

As Silver (2003) observed, in addition to their evaluative function, reviews serve a crucial—often more important—educative purpose. We claim that reviews are not merely informative but are catalysts for ideas, understandings, and new avenues that refine current scholarship and contribute to the evolving research programs of authors and fellow reviewers. Reviews help authors and others not only to understand the decision on a particular manuscript but also to think more deeply about their work and its contribution to the field. A good review helps an author to refine the presentation of a study, to better situate the work in extant literature, and to focus a research program. It provides others who read it with a depth of perspective that is concurrently focused and broad. In a perhaps underacknowledged way, a strong review has the potential to move the field forward.

### PARTS OF A REVIEW

Each of the parts of a typical review plays an important role in the message delivered through the review. The recommendation (e.g., reject; reject, but

encourage revision and resubmission; accept with revision; accept as is) is a component of every review. The subsequent text of a strong review is consistent with that recommendation, providing a clear and persuasive rationale for the chosen recommendation and illustrating main points with concise references to examples.

Some reviewers choose to begin a review with a summary of the manuscript. A brief summary can be useful as a sign that the main points of the author(s) were clear, but a lengthy summary can be distracting.

An explanation of the paper's strengths and flaws, consistent with the recommendation and respectful of the goals of the paper, is an important feature of a strong review. A discussion of strengths of the paper, given its apparent goals, identifies promising directions for the research—directions that can guide future research, regardless of the editor's decision on publication of the paper. Fatal flaws—unfixable aspects of the study's conception or conduct—should be identified and should lead to a recommendation to reject the manuscript. At times, it is difficult to determine whether flaws in the study or its presentation are fixable, and reviewers sometimes indicate so in their reviews. Clarity in the message about the extent to which flaws are potentially fixable is helpful.

Many of us find it easier to discuss in depth a manuscript's difficulties than to note its strengths or to provide suggestions about how to improve the paper. Suggested improvements do not need to be specifications of things to do or write but can be identification of the criteria that such changes should meet. Positive and productive comments might suggest how existing data could be used for a related purpose, such as another research paper or a paper for another venue. Particular strengths that might be identified include an unusual but promising methodological path, the way in which a particular problem is conceptualized, or the introduction of a new construct. Such comments are not only positive messages to authors. They are indicators of new directions for the field.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A STRONG REVIEW

A strong review focuses on the manuscript at hand—not on a manuscript for a study that the author did not conduct but that the reviewer would like to have seen. It is instructive and not merely evaluative—it makes those who read it think. The focus is on important ideas and aspects of the study, not on the details of the paper such as a line-by-line account of grammar or format particulars—things that will be addressed in detail during copyediting after a paper is accepted for publication. Suggestions and concerns, provided with rationales, empower the author to make decisions in the revision process or in subsequent work and broaden the understanding of all who read the review.

A review should draw on the reviewer's strengths, experience, and expertise. Some reviewers might provide suggestions about twists on methodology, whereas others might offer suggestions about particular references that could inform the study and its positioning in a broader body of literature. Given that each manuscript has a set of reviewers with varying lenses, the strong review does not necessarily

include everything on which the reviewer might comment but does target those areas pertinent to the manuscript on which the reviewer can comment in most depth. The compilation of these insights across reviewers provides signals of how areas of the field might be blended to generate new tools and new perspectives on problems.

Scholarly reviews also attend to how well the pieces of the study fit together. They consider, for example, how well a theoretical or conceptual framework underpins the research questions, guides the data collection and analysis, and enriches the discussion of the results of a study. This global view of a manuscript draws attention to the need for a paper to convey a message grounded in the current understandings of the field and the richness of the thinking of the authoring team about the problem posed and the insights gained.

Reviewers are selected for their awareness of the field, albeit from different lenses. Comments not on whether but on how a manuscript contributes to the field provide a broader perspective and often bring attention to how different elements of a study and its report can advance different areas of the field. For example, one reviewer might underscore a methodological accomplishment and another might see how the framing of the problem could be adapted to another situation.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

By this time in our work on the *JRME* editorial team, we have had the privilege of reading over 400 scholarly reports, syntheses, and other works that have been submitted to *JRME*. We also have had the privilege of seeing myriad examples of how the thoughtful work of reviewers cause authors, other reviewers, and us to think more deeply about new venues, constructs, perspectives, techniques, and problems. Excellence in the educative purpose of reviews moves the service reviewers provide to a level of scholarly work that affects both what is found in the pages of this journal and what has a legacy in the ongoing work of dozens of scholars.

### REFERENCE

- Silver, E. A. (2003). Reflections on reviews and reviewers. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 34, 380–372.