

# Responsibilities of a Good Reviewer: Lessons Learned From Kindergarten

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As my experience in serving both as a researcher and a reviewer has grown, so, too, has my understanding of the responsibilities of various constituents to one another in the manuscript review process.

## THE AUTHOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES

Clearly, the burden of responsibility for a manuscript and its ultimate publishability rests with the authors. To facilitate publication likelihood, several marketing scholars have penned extraordinarily useful guidelines for conceptualizing and executing research ideas, writing manuscripts, and crafting reviewer responses (e.g., Stewart 2002; Summers 2001; Varadarajan 1996).

## THE REVIEWER'S RESPONSIBILITIES

It also goes without saying that a good reviewer has a responsibility to the *discipline*—ensuring that work published in high-quality outlets is competently executed and worthy of readers' attention. Most reviewers would also agree that the reviewer has a responsibility to the *editor*, making sure he or she does not embarrass the editor by publishing an article unworthy of the readers' attention.

Less obvious, however, is the responsibility of the reviewer to the *authors* (for exceptions, see Holbrook 1986; Lynch 1998). As reviewers, we are responsible for serving the editor and discipline while helping and not *demoralizing our colleagues*. Unfortunately, evidence of demoralization can be seen on multiple fronts, from casual conversations with colleagues; heated debates in editorial board meetings; and, ironically, publications on the difficulty of getting published (e.g., Holbrook 1986).

## BEING RESPONSIBLE TO AUTHORS

Author Robert Fulghum (1993) wrote that all he really needed to know he learned in kindergarten. Some of these thoughts are summarized below (although I have liberally added a few of my own). Interestingly, these simple ideas we learned in kindergarten provide some very basic guidelines about how we can be more responsible to authors—avoiding demoralization without sacrificing rigor.

*Play fair.* Just as kids need to learn to play fair, so do reviewers. As an author, perhaps nothing is more demoralizing than a review that advocates rejection of an article because the article's results fly in the face of the reviewer's own work or, more generally, the prevailing paradigm. Authors often hedge this possibility by asking that editors refrain from sending their article to various people likely to be unsympathetic to their results. Playing fair as a reviewer means remembering that the goal of the review process is to *advance the science and practice of marketing, not preserve the status quo*.

*When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.* Kids feel infinitely more secure in facing the world when they know that others are there to help them avoid danger. Authors are no different. Demoralizing reviews contain a laundry list of problems—the research lacks contribution, is poorly conceptualized, is methodologically flawed, inappropriately analyzed, and overstates conclusions. Surely, it is important to know the ways in which an article is flawed. But *more important* is to point out how authors can take what is good and build on it and take what is flawed and rework it. If the article is poorly conceptualized, is there some better way in which it might be conceptualized or positioned? If a contribution is lacking, what is needed to make a contribution? If confounds are present, are they reasonable in that they can explain the pattern of data? In short, *be constructive*. Hold their hand, stick with them, and help them get across the street.

*Don't hit people.* It is tough for kids to tame their aggressive instincts, but they do and are ultimately socialized to finding better ways of expressing what is on their minds. Some reviewers need to tame their aggressive instincts too—focusing on communicating the point at hand without hurting people. I once received a review that began with “It is inconceivable to me that the authors could do x, y, and z.” (x, y, and z were not, in the reviewers’ view, good things). Ouch! That hurt. Isn’t there a better way of saying what you mean without being mean? Numerous books on communication advocate the use of “I” statements over “you” statements. For example, rather than saying, “you made me feel bad,” one should instead say, “When you said this, I felt bad.” The message behind both is the same (I feel bad), but one case involves blame (the cause is you) and volition (you wanted to make me feel bad), while the other does not. Think about how much better authors would feel if reviewers used statements like, “I’m not sure I understand the logic behind the hypotheses” instead of “the authors have done an incredibly poor job developing the logic behind the hypotheses.” Both statements convey the problem at hand. However, while the former conveys a positive and motivating message (we as authors need to spell out this logic more clearly), the latter expresses a negative and evaluative one (how can these authors write such drivel?).

*Share everything.* For kids, sharing can be tough. Sometimes it is apparently tough for reviewers too. Demoralizing reviews tell authors that they need to “add literature” or use a “different design” or “more appropriate statistics” without clarifying what exactly is needed. These vague statements border on laziness on one hand or competitiveness on the other (i.e., knowledge is power). However, one is asked to serve as a reviewer because of one’s expertise. Using expertise and sharing knowledge of theories, methods, papers, and ideas result in not only a less demoralized author but also a better and more rigorously executed research idea.

*Look before you leap.* When I was 4 and on my way to preschool one day, I learned a valuable lesson about looking before leaping when I—wearing my new yellow jumper—landed on my bottom while running through a patch of mud. Some reviewers demoralize by leaping before they look. These are reviewers who provide pat criticisms without thinking about whether they are relevant. An example includes “X is confounded with Y.” Perhaps so, but can Y explain the pattern of data? Or, “The sample

size is small.” Yes, but wouldn’t that make it harder for me to find a reliable effect? If you leap before you look, you may find yourself falling into a patch of mud and feeling foolish.

*Come in when the bell rings.* As kids, we learned that we would face a visit to the principal, or worse, detention if we failed to come in when the bell rang. Some reviewers are habitually late—staying out well after the bell has rung. Clearly waiting months and months for reviews is demoralizing and anxiety provoking for authors. While we all understand how difficult it is to balance the many demands on our time, it is important to realize that by agreeing to review for a journal, we have signed an *implicit contract* saying that we will turn the article around in the appropriate amount of time. If we are so pressed that this contract cannot be maintained, we should withdraw from the review process when first asked.

*Don't take things that aren't yours.* Kids find other kids’ toys very tempting. They are new and so cool kids want to keep them for themselves. Analogously, reviewers may find authors’ ideas very tempting. They are new (why didn’t I think of that) and cool too. But, just as kids feel demoralized at having their toys taken, so, too, do authors feel demoralized when they believe that others have taken their ideas. Reviewers must respect *authors’ ownership of ideas*, not use them for personal gain.

It is tough being a reviewer to be sure. But it is tougher being an author. It is this reviewer’s belief that we can avoid demoralizing our colleagues and move our discipline forward by coupling our sense of rigor with a few simple rules of kindness learned in kindergarten.

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