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ADVICE

The 3 Types of Peer Reviewers



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By Mike Duncan | JUNE 19, 2018

For me, the hardest part of the road to eventual publication is not the research or writing, both of which I enjoy. It's dealing with the peer reviewers.

Like most academics, I have a lot of journal articles in development at any given time. Right now, I have three in review, two close to submission, one in the middle of a revise-and-resubmit, and two partially drafted. One of the close-to-submission ones was rejected a few years

ago so harshly (and incompetently, from my perspective) that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry afterward.

As a midcareer associate professor with 10 peer-reviewed publications, you'd think I'd have the publication process all figured out by now. Well, I don't. Dealing with journals and peer reviewers is, by far, the least rewarding and most difficult part of my job.

I categorize peer reviewers into three types:

- Type 1: Many peer reviewers — a third of the total, I'd say — are a credit to the profession. They read closely and deeply, understand both the argument and the content, communicate well that they do so, and offer helpful, specific feedback. I come away from reading their reviews with a sense of deep gratitude, whether or not they've recommended that my article be published.
- Type 2: The middle third of peer reviewers are dismal entities. They cannot be bothered to read my entire article and often misinterpret the parts they do read. Their criticisms are couched in generalities and are impossible to resolve as there is no clear path to follow. Their "review" — which is never more than two or three paragraphs long — makes me feel like a hit-and-run victim left bleeding in the street. At least, they could give me their insurance information. But they don't. They just motor on past.
- Type 3: The last third are the worst of the worst. Sometimes their review is little more than a single, damning sentence; other times it is a slow, careful, multipage rending limb from limb. Either way, they seem to enjoy the power they have over the careers of other academic writers a little too much. Even if they're entirely wrong about an article, they think they are always right, and anyway, they know their will is law.

Peer review should nurture further development, not shut it down. The objective should be to help develop original ideas and concepts into interesting, engageable forms.

What's particularly frustrating about getting a review written by a Type 2 or 3 reviewer is that you

can usually write a clear refutation that exposes the weaknesses and mistakes of their critique — but there is no point in doing so. In my field (rhetoric and composition), few if any editors will override such a negative peer review. Given a split decision, they either favor the negative review (usually) or send it to a third reviewer (rarely).

Which is why, after all these years, I still feel like I'm rolling the dice whenever I submit a journal article, with the odds against me. I can't speak for other fields, only my own. So why are there so many more Type 2 and 3 peer reviewers than the Type 1 variety? Are Ph.D. programs producing slovenly and/or cruel professors by the dozens to populate the editorial boards of the journals in my discipline?

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Well, maybe. But the more likely answer is that reviewers are human beings with weaknesses. Every academic has blind spots. I know I do, even though I don't always know what they are (that's why they're called blind spots). Couple those blind spots with a vague sense that you know "good" research when you see it, and the results are those breezy Type 2 reviews.

As for the Type 3 reviewers who actively crush scholarship for kicks, there is no easy explanation. Some powerful academics enjoy maligning the less powerful. The rest of us really need to be actively screening out such cruelty-based personalities in the hiring process.

I experienced a Type 3 bully some years ago after I submitted a book manuscript. One of the reviews was a four-page, single-spaced screed by an academic who rejected the contents in harsh terms while admitting no special expertise or knowledge in my subject. A second peer review, by a scholar who did know my topic, enthusiastically recommended publication. Guess who carried the day? At the time I was so disillusioned by the process that I abandoned the manuscript to focus on other pieces that I felt would get a more reasonable hearing. Only recently have I taken it up again, reminded by colleagues of the other positive review.

Different, unpopular ideas already have a tough time getting heard without a loaded deck in peer review. The more edgy the thesis, the more Type 3 reviews seem to come out of the woodwork, driven by personal agendas and enmity rather than impartial scholarship and openness to new ideas.

Peer review should nurture further development, not shut it down. The objective should be to help develop original ideas and concepts into interesting, engageable forms, not to dissuade the author from ever writing again through juvenile hazing or to shut down avenues of research that we personally disagree with.

There has been one positive outcome from my experience with Type 2 and 3 reviewers. It has motivated me to follow a simple commandment: Be a Type 1 reviewer. I try to perform a serious, real service to the discipline when I write reviews. I remind myself that the journal editor is not the only audience for my review. After the editor, there is another real person waiting to read it — the author. Academic authors are capable but nervous. We hunger for direct, actionable feedback, regardless of the publication decision. That is what I seek to provide in my own reviews.

I see two ways to discourage Type 2 and Type 3 reviews:

- First is something that writers can do: Stop submitting to certain journals if you encounter a Type 2 or 3 peer reviewer until the editorship changes. That is what I do, and it's probably the most direct way to change the culture. And it is a culture — of laziness, unprofessionalism, and above all, cowardice. The next time you are asked to write a review, take it seriously, and if you can't, do your discipline a favor and decline the privilege. Journals have a tough time finding reviewers, sure, but a delayed Type 1 review is way better than the other two types at any speed.
- Second, I've decided to start signing my own reviews and thus take responsibility for them. As a rule, I don't say anything about another academic's work that I wouldn't say to their face, so why hide behind double-blind review?

In retrospect, I should have been doing that years ago, as I had a great model. During my first publication, one of the reviewers wrote a detailed, insightful review and shared his name: Joseph M. Williams, who literally [wrote the book](#) on writing style. When I write reviews, I remember the one he wrote for me, and strive to emulate his professionalism.

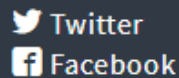
I believe that the worst of peer review, as I have experienced it, can be improved. But it's going to have to happen one reviewer at a time. I might as well be next.

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