
COMMENTARY

The Ten Commandments of Reviewing: The Promise of a Kinder, Gentler Discipline!

Mohan J. Dutta

*Department of Communication
Purdue University*

How should a scholar approach the task of reviewing articles assigned to him or her? What is the broader philosophical orientation to reviewing one should take? What are the specific things one should keep in mind when reviewing articles? When looking for guidelines to use when reviewing articles, I found myself at a loss. This essay reflects on my experiences as both an author and a reviewer to suggest philosophical orientations and strategies for reviewing. I hope that the 10 recommendations outlined here provide an entry point for further dialogue about best practices in reviewing.

Reviewing was a particularly challenging task for me when I was first approached by Teri Thompson, the editor of *Health Communication* to review a piece. In her ever-encouraging way, Teri promised me that she felt I would do a good job as a reviewer. But, I wondered, how do I write a review? How best to approach it? Am I competent enough to write a review? Do I have the necessary tools to conduct a review? I approached the task with trepidation, not exactly sure what would be the best way to review, what would be the best way to provide feedback, what would be the best way to balance criticism with praise, and so on. I wondered if I was qualified even to write a review, would I be able to adequately evaluate the manuscript. Responding to my gut response as an academic, I first conducted a literature search in the databases at the Purdue library to see if I would be able to find anything worthwhile on writing a review, and did not really come up with anything that would provide me guidance about how to embark on this journey of becoming a reviewer. I suppose most of us transition into this role, not really realizing when the transition happened. And here I was, at the crossroads, attempting to figure out how to proceed, what steps to follow, and what lessons to remember.

Therefore, in writing my first review, I went back to the reviews I had received as an author during my early academic career. What did I particularly like about these reviews? What did I not like about them? Turning inward, I felt, was the way I learned about the peer review process and how to be a peer reviewer. The reviews I received taught me the ways in which I could perhaps go about reviewing an article, and the things I could avoid in writing these reviews. In the following sections, I share these lessons with the hope that they will help the reviewer who is new to the task of reviewing, and as a reminder to those who have been engaging in the task of reviewing over the years. I approach this article as a reflexive exercise, reflecting upon my experiences of being an author and reviewer and sharing the lessons I have learned in the process. Whereas some of these lessons are more oriented toward the broader philosophy of reviewing, others are oriented toward specific suggestions regarding the review process. These suggestions, I hope, are only a starting point for further dialogue and offer an opening for additional discussion in the field about best practices of reviewing. Ultimately, I hope that we can come up with a set of best practices that will be useful to reviewers, especially when they are beginning their careers as reviewers.

1. APPROACH REVIEWING AS A COLLABORATIVE TASK

I have noticed that, for some reviewers, reviewing is a war zone. It is a full-fledged battle in which all the powerful weapons need to be taken out in order to strip down the author's self-concept. It is as if the reviewer and the author are set up in two opposing camps, each leading the offensive. In this framework, the reviewer approaches his or her job as one of tearing down the author, of being that professor on preliminary examinations who intimidates and threatens you with

Correspondence should be addressed to Mohan J. Dutta, Department of Communication, Purdue University, 100 North University Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907. E-mail: mdutta@purdue.edu

his or her powerful strategies. Such reviewers will often launch direct attacks on the author based on the manuscript, often commenting on his or her abilities and lack thereof.

In yet other instances, reviewers have served as teachers, guiding the author toward light, showing the path, demonstrating through modeling how to engage in scholarship. Reviews from this second set have always been more helpful to me than the first set because they serve as collaborative coparticipants rather than opponents on the battlefield. I have not felt torn down by the second approach to reviewing, whereas the first approach has mostly produced defensiveness.

Our task as reviewers is not only to evaluate, but also to act as allies for our community of scholars, as collaborators who can encourage each other to continuously discover new ideas, hone our existing ideas, and strive toward excellence. For the next generation of scholars, we ought to model this kinder, gentler way of participating as collaborators rather than embracing the war zone metaphor. This can sometimes be difficult because from the early days of graduate school we have been taught to take an article apart, to critique it, to find the gaps in the piece, whereas we have hardly been encouraged to look for the positives, the strengths, and the possible contributions that might be made by the article. Consciously moving away from the war zone metaphor allows us to note the strengths, take note of the weaknesses, and then perhaps participate in dialogue regarding the ways of addressing the weaknesses whether in a revision and resubmission, or in a completely new project that might need to be undertaken (in cases where you are recommending a rejection). Note that the collaborative effort focuses on building rather than on taking something down, the traditional agenda of the war effort.

2. PUT ASIDE YOUR EGO

Reviewing can easily become an exercise in power (perhaps, we need a future study that examines the ways in which reviewers respond to the task and how they exercise it). This power can sometimes be blinding, and the reviewer can get carried away with the job of being critical of the manuscript, thinking of it as a way of exercising one's ego. Such reviewers are like that intimidating professor on your committee who must go through his or her list of 45 questions and suggestions (many of which are nitpicky) to demonstrate to you that he or she knows more than you. Although one of the purposes of the peer-review process is indeed to offer an evaluation of the manuscript, it is also important to move past one's sense of self-importance in evaluating the manuscript. After all, I am not asked to conduct a review to demonstrate how smart I really am, but rather to provide a thoughtful commentary on a submitted manuscript. For instance, it is okay if the author has not cited your work even though they are seem-

ingly working in your narrow area of expertise. Guide them toward this literature rather than being overly upset because the author did not cite you! For me, I have found it to be helpful to approach the task of reviewing with humility, using it as much as a learning experience for me as it is for the author. In many instances, I have gained knowledge from the manuscript that I did not have before.

3. BE REFLEXIVE

One of the things I aspire to do when writing reviews is to be reflexive about my own positionality, asking myself the questions: Who am I? What are my scholarly biases? What are my personal biases? What are my ideological biases? How do these biases come into play when I am engaging in the review process? Do I have any gut responses to the manuscript? Where do these gut responses come from? What have I learned about myself from this review process? After all, remember that how you evaluate an article is as much a product of your response to the text as it is a product of the author's writing of it. You are not removed from the process of reviewing as an objective outsider with a detached lens. Your lens is very much a product of the ideological biases you bring to the act of reviewing.

I have found this reflexivity to be particularly helpful with respect to my heuristic responses to certain theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Being reflexive allows us to engage in a thoroughly informed and cyclical process of reviewing that is informed by an iterative process, continuously asking us to explore the underlying processes and tensions in the review process. Being reflexive also means coming back to the review a few times so that we can read the manuscript, read our responses, retool the responses, and further polish our evaluations and recommendations. I usually wait to reread a review before sending it out to the editor. This allows me to reflexively engage with my positionality in reviewing my review.

4. UNDERSTANDING THE PARADIGMS

As a scholar who works with multiple methods (both qualitative and quantitative), I often become frustrated by those reviewers who approach a qualitative analysis of a media text with the suggestion that a content analysis needs to be conducted, or an experimental design with the recommendation for thick description (although this has rarely happened to me!). Although we typically accept that a study located in one paradigm ought not to be reviewed from another paradigmatic perspective, many of us continue to engage in this folly when evaluating the publishability of a manuscript. What such recommendations frequently demonstrate is the reviewer's lack of understanding of the paradigm within which

the study was designed, conducted, and reported, rather than the author's failure to incorporate a certain method. For purposes of publication, a study needs to be understood and approached from its own paradigm rather than being judged from an alternative paradigm.

5. UNDERSTAND THE LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Every research project has its limitations. Although it might be important to point these out, it is also relevant to understand them and to assess these limitations in the backdrop of the contributions of the study. In other words, you should conduct a limitations-to-contributions evaluation. For instance, an experiment conducted on the basis of student samples might indeed be criticized for not having reached out to the broader population. However, the student sample might not really be a major problem when considering the study objectives, the manipulations and random assignments in the study. However, the use of a student sample might indeed be a problem for a study that claims to examine the communicative styles of physicians. In other words, the extent to which the limitations of a study get in the way of its contributions depends upon the purpose of the study, the claims it makes, the tools it uses, and so on.

6. DON'T FEEL THAT YOU NEED TO DEMONSTRATE HOW MUCH YOU KNOW

This perhaps sounds like an oxymoron because we are assigned the very task of reviewing based on our expertise over a subject area. The best reviews I have received have often been understated, subtly yet helpfully pointing me toward the issues I need to address in the manuscript, and more broadly, in my program of work. They have taught me invaluable lessons of scholarship and of how to engage in research without overtly flashing all the knowledge the reviewers held in stock.

Some of the least helpful reviews, however, have felt like power shows of the reviewer's knowledge, and have hardly provided meaningful directions regarding where I might want to take my scholarship. In such instances, it has appeared as if the reviewer used this as an opportunity to demonstrate how much he or she knew about the subject matter. Reviewing is an act of teaching, and teaching perhaps is best accomplished when it guides the pupil toward the path of self-discovery through continual engagement. It is worthwhile to note that I am not suggesting we take the task of reviewing as a task of patting each other on the back; rather I suggest approaching it as a collaborative learning exercise in which we facilitate the author's learning.

7. BE SPECIFIC IN YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific recommendations serve the author well by giving him or her guidance about steps to take to fix the problems. For instance, consider responses such as "the study needs to do a better job in the literature review section." Now this response does not really tell the author much about what exactly to fix. Consider the response, "the study needs to incorporate the literature on personality correlates of healthy behaviors, paying particular attention to the literature on the health correlates of self-monitoring." The reviewer's instruction might get even more specific by referring to particular studies that the author might want to read in order to redo the literature review. Take yet another instance in which the author is asked to reorganize the literature review. The recommendation "the literature review section needs to be properly reorganized" is vague compared to the recommendation, "begin with the section on personality correlates of healthy behaviors, followed by the section on self-monitoring and healthy behaviors."

8. PROVIDE FEEDBACK IN A TIMELY MANNER

Imagine the fate of an assistant professor who is going up for tenure this year and does not have the decision on a manuscript submitted to a top field journal 2 years ago. The article holds promise but will not really be included in his or her list because the editor has been waiting for that one review that was assigned to you. How quickly you respond to the review often has tremendous impact on the careers of other scholars, especially younger colleagues who depend on these reviews for their promotion and tenure cases. We have important impact on the fates of our colleagues, and, therefore, it is essential that we approach the task of reviewing with sincerity and with commitment. Not turning in a review on time is not only a reflection of poor commitment, but also perhaps a reflection of the lack of empathy for other scholars who depend upon you. Of course, there are instances in which personal situations delay the ability to review a manuscript and provide feedback on it. Under such situations, it is perhaps good to communicate with the editor and let him or her know of the potential delay.

9. ENCOURAGE!

Yes, indeed, Dr. Burgoon (1995), we do want a kinder, gentler discipline in which encouragement, not sharp criticism, becomes the normative ideal! Little words of encouragement can be refreshingly stimulating. They can provide guidance, rejuvenate our spirits as scholars, and encourage us to take up

new projects. They can gently point us toward our mistakes, and then rebuild our research agendas by suggesting ways in which we can improve what we do, the directions we can take, and the new ideas we can pursue. The best reviews I have received have been challenging yet encouraging, patting me on the back and encouraging me to go the extra 500 miles in order to make the best possible case. Sometimes the most challenging messages can be delivered in such an encouraging tone that the authors feel charged to take on the problem, address it, and rework their piece based on your suggestions. Being kinder and gentler does not mean you forgo your evaluative stance—quite the contrary. You can provide your thoughtful evaluation about the research presented in the manuscript in a kinder, gentler fashion that is encouraging rather than discouraging. Real debates may be presented in ways that are kind, gentle, and supportive.

Think of reviewing as a positive opportunity for touching the life of another scholar. Every act of reviewing can be such an opportunity, opening up new possibilities for others with whom we work, and creating new possibilities for participation in the production of knowledge. Such an attitude of encouragement also boosts the spirit of the reviewer, putting him or her in touch with the spirit of compassion and community to which we all belong as citizens.

10. DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU

Over the past 6 years, I have received a range of reviews starting from some reviewers telling me that my work would not pass the muster of the preliminary defense committee of graduate school to others telling me that my work holds a great deal of promise and is refreshing, or is one of the highly promising lines of work in health communication. Some days, after having received a review, I have had to gather all my energy to focus on something else before I could come back to the review. Yet other days, I have felt on top of the world, having felt validated by the kind words of reviewers.

The moral of these experiences seems pretty straightforward—we all are affected by the reviews we receive. These reviews can sometimes make us or break us. Therefore, it is vital that, as reviewers, we write reviews that we would like to receive. In summary, when writing your reviews, pay attention to the type of review you would like to receive. Read it from the author's perspective before turning it in!

Ultimately, reviewing can be a great joy. Not only does it offer an opportunity to engage in dialogue with respect to what comprises knowledge in the discipline of communication, but it also provides a learning opportunity to familiarize oneself with the latest research in the field. The task of reviewing, if properly done, is not only intellectually fulfilling, it is also emotionally fulfilling because you feel a sense of having shared something with another scholar. As coparticipants in the process of knowledge production, reviewers contribute to what is published in the field and what is ultimately accepted as knowledge. It is a task in which we all engage as scholars, and it is also a commitment to the field. Therefore, it is vital that we not only engage in this task, but perform it with utmost commitment and sincerity! Here's an excerpt from the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's poem that inspires us for collaborating toward a dialogical space for publishing our work:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls ... (Tagore, 1920, p. 35)

REFERENCES

- Burgoon, M. (1995). A kinder, gentler discipline: Feeling good about being mediocre. In B. R. Burleson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 18* (pp. 464–479). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tagore, R. (1920). Where the mind is without fear. In *Gitanjali* (pp. 34–36). New York: Macmillan.

Copyright of Health Communication is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.