Minimizing the Mystery and Misery of Peer Review:  
Tips From the JGIM Editors

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Objectives:
1. To describe the steps involved in navigating a paper from submission to publication in a peer-reviewed journal;
2. To explain what peer reviewers and editors look for when they evaluate manuscripts; and
3. To demonstrate how to respond to editors’ letters when they request revisions.

Summary:
Investigators and educators must publish their work to have an impact beyond their own institutions, but most peer-reviewed journals accept only a minority of submitted manuscripts. For many authors, the peer review process is mysterious and induces much misery. To minimize the mystery and misery, we will cover what happens to a manuscript that is submitted to a journal, including how reviewers are recruited, how editorial decisions are made, and how revisions are handled. Participants will talk with editors about manuscripts that have gone through the peer review process, focusing on reviewers’ comments, editors’ letters, and responses to editors’ letters. Participants may bring a copy of the comments and letter(s) about one of their own manuscripts that has been through the peer review process.
Small Groups

Group 1
Wang on “Recent quantity & adequacy of care for common mental disorders in U.S. population”

Group 2
Laws on “Taking antiretroviral therapy for HIV infection: learning from patients’ stories”

Group 3
Nelson on “Teaching contributions of general internists – a national survey”

Group 4
Schillinger on “Effects of primary care coordination on public hospital patients”

Group 5
Elnicki on “Telephone medicine: a perspective for internists”
The Peer Review Process
Key Points

- What is the purpose of peer review?
  - To enhance the quality of published papers
  - To help editors make decisions about publication of submitted papers

- How do editors use reviewers’ comments?
  - To identify strengths and weaknesses of a paper
  - To obtain suggestions for addressing methodologic weaknesses
  - To obtain suggestions for improving the clarity of a paper
  - To put a paper in the context of prior work
  - To guide decisions about acceptance or rejection

- What are key features of a high quality review of a manuscript? (see JAMA 1998;280:231)
  - Discuss the importance of the study question
  - Discuss the originality of the paper
  - Clearly identify strengths and weaknesses of methods
  - Make specific useful comments on the writing, organization, tables and figures
  - Make constructive comments
  - Substantiate comments with appropriate examples from the paper
  - Comment on author’s interpretation of results

- How do experienced reviewers organize their approach to the review of a manuscript?
  - Read the abstract and identify purpose of article
  - Determine whether any of the Users’ Guides to the Literature apply to this type of article (see JAMA series for details)
  - Read the paper through once
  - Jot down notes and comments as reading
  - Review notes and identify major issues, including key Users’ Guides
  - Complete reviewer’s forms
  - Keep a copy of comments

- How should reviewers communicate their comments?
  - Write comments to author, starting with major comments, then adding specific comments by page and paragraph/line
  - Prepare confidential comments to editor, if any, that would not be appropriate to give to authors
  - Include ratings of paper and recommendation for publication
  - Return marked-up manuscript or destroy it
Editor’s letter

- Very few, if any, manuscripts are accepted as is
- Almost all that get published require at least one revision
- Editors use different terminology for distinguishing a request for revision from a rejection
- Editors should be specific about which comments are most important to address
- Editors do not always agree with reviewers

Author’s response

- Attempt to understand each reviewer’s comment before dismissing it
- Pay particular attention to the editor’s comments
- Try to respond to every comment by making an appropriate change in the text of the manuscript
- Prepare a cover letter that explains how you responded to each comment, pointing out where the text was changed
- Don’t be afraid to explain when you disagree with an editor or reviewer, if you feel strongly about it
Annotated Bibliography

   This article describes an instrument for assessing the quality of a review. It reports that review quality increased with time spent on a review, up to 3 hours.

   This book is a useful reference for those interested in learning more about how to publish and present clinical studies.

   This study found that editor ratings of individual reviewers were moderately reliable and correlated with reviewer ability to report manuscript flaws.

   This article recommends a very logical approach to organizing the discussion section of a paper.

   The article includes a checklist of items to consider when writing a paper about an educational intervention.

   This study demonstrated that most manuscripts had substantial room for improvement and that peer review and editing could improve reports in ways that are important to readers.

   The article gives guidance on how to identify and appraise a report about an educational program.

8. Hartman EE. Medical writing: What editors look for and how to improve your manuscripts. Workshop presentation at the National SGIM Meeting; 1999 Apr 30; San Francisco, CA.
   Anyone interested in writing more clearly and succinctly should take this workshop.

   This may be the gold standard reference on writing for publication in medical journals.

    This article summarizes what most editors expect authors to do when preparing a manuscript for submission to a medical journal.

    The CONSORT Statement provides specific recommendations on how to report the results of randomized controlled trials.
   Data in abstracts frequently were inconsistent with or absent from the article’s main text.
   This outline may help educators organize articles about curriculum development efforts.
   The authors disagree with the above article by Docherty and argue that it is desirable to have some speculative language in the discussion section.
   This is a collection of classic examples of how not to display data.
   This offers practical advice on how to make the process of writing easier.
   This article introduces a logical and efficient approach to reading medical journal articles that can be applied to many different types of articles, as detailed in the subsequent articles in the series (see below for key articles).
18. Guyatt GH, Sackett DL, Cook DJ; for the Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group. Users’ guides to the medical literature. II. How to use an article about therapy or prevention. A. Are the results of the study valid? JAMA. 1993; 270: 2598-2601.
19. Guyatt GH, Sackett DL, Cook DJ; for the Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group. Users’ guides to the medical literature. II. How to use an article about therapy or prevention. B. What were the results and will they help me in caring for my patients? JAMA. 1994; 271: 59-63.


