



Tips for Annals Reviewers

Thank you very much for agreeing to be a reviewer for AAMS. For both new and experienced reviewers, we give you below some guidelines for writing helpful and supportive reviews from our conjoint perspectives as both editors and authors. The overriding purpose is to be clear and, thereby, to remove any chance for misunderstanding, guessing, and wrong interpretation by either the author or the editor. Naturally, either the author or the editor, or both, may sometimes disagree with you, but your points need to be clear.

(1) Be specific and give examples.

General remarks such as 'not a significant contribution', 'clinically unimportant', and 'poorly analysed' are not useful. The author is forced to guess what parts of their manuscript need to be improved, and the editor will need to make a review from scratch to fill in the void. Such an outcome creates unwanted ill feeling, because it defeats the purpose of an independent review, and it may suggest (whether fairly or not) that your basis for criticism is emotive rather than objective.

(2) Suggest corrective actions if possible.

It is sensible to propose workable solutions only, most of which pertain to the clarification of provided data and of the author's interpretation thereof. You may ask for more information on crucially important issues, which the author can address by tapping an ongoing study, or by including data omitted earlier. It is not helpful to propose that an author should obtain significantly more data after a clinical context or research funding has expired. Doubling the amount of data from a retrospective study, for instance, cannot remove bias or confounding, and may not significantly improve the quality of information. If you think that a wrong statistical approach has been used in data analysis, seek support from a medical statistician (unless you are that qualified person). We would appreciate your end product even more.

(3) Cover the major domains.

Is the paper a useful original contribution? Is the paper appropriate for the Annals readership? Are the methods of study and analysis valid and clear? Are the tables and figures clear and a good use of space? Are the writing and presentation clear and concise? Is the literature review current, and does it place the study in appropriate context? Are the interpretations of the study results (i.e. the discussion) insightful? Is the conclusion valid, and to what extent can it be generalized beyond the study population?

4) Prioritise your concerns.

It helps both author and editor to know what are the major issues that must be addressed, and which ones are minor and not crucial to the survival of a paper.

5) State judiciously the 'tipping points' for an article

All systematic research is a continuous exploration. In scholarship, every issue is subject to ongoing debate. Therefore, there must be a reasonable point, the 'publication point', at which an author can offer the study results for peer review and publication. Obviously the 'publication point' in part depends on the type of article. A review paper can be fairly, but never fully, comprehensive. An original research paper needs substantive factual information, whereas a case report is concise and carries only one message. As a reviewer, you should exercise reasonable, rather than exhaustive, doubt. Be critical and skeptical, and also try to be fair.

Also tell us the tipping points, which together convince you that an article should be published. Conversely, if you consider that a study was poorly designed, executed, analysed or interpreted (or any combination of these), then identify clearly the tipping points against publication. We usually pass on your (anonymised) comments to the author, in particular if they are constructive.

If you therefore conclude that the article is beyond salvage, please say so in your confidential comments to the editor (see below).

5) Especially for new reviewers, do not be shy.

Please act as the expert. You were chosen because you have some expertise, either as a reader of the literature, or a contributor to this or related literature, or both. Do not hold back. Good, accurate criticism should always be given to the author. If you feel that a part of the paper is outside your expertise, then please suggest whose additional expertise can help us decide what to do.

Similarly, be frank when making confidential comments to the editor. This section allows you to make comments that the author does not see, and to say whether the manuscript is ultimately worth publishing.

6) Convey a consistent message to both the author and the editor.

It is always confusing, and sometimes hurtful, to an author to have a reviewer be positive in his or her comments to the author, and yet harsh to the editor (rejecting the manuscript). That is not being kind at all. Also, if you give overall positive comments to the author without stating significant concerns, and then advise the editor to reject the article, you will have created a communication problem that the editorial board has to fix.

7) Be respectful of the author or authors.

Scholarship is difficult, and criticism is not pleasant to receive. Some authors may have little experience in handling 'rejection shock'. Be judiciously critical: that is why we invited your contribution. Please write your comments in the tone that you would yourself wish to receive them.

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Editor in chief

On behalf of the Editorial Board

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