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## On the Role of the Referee

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Having been on both ends of the manuscript refereeing process for half a century, I have come to have definite ideas as to optimizing the role of the referee. I have never seen the publication of any reasonably comprehensive guidelines for referees. I put together a talk on this subject as part of a workshop on "Publishing in Ornithological Journals" at the 1994 joint meeting in Missoula, Montana, of the AOU and the Wilson and Cooper ornithological societies. This commentary is a somewhat expanded version of that talk, incorporating a few comments and suggestions from the 1994 audience. Because a joint relationship exists between the editor and the referee, some of the points made below will apply to the former. I have set up most of the text as a series of questions the potential referee should ask him/herself.

**1. Am I an appropriate choice as referee?** Some editors send manuscripts directly without asking first. (Editors: please don't do this!) If I receive such a manuscript, do I really know enough about the subject to review it? Recently appointed editors often have a limited acquaintanceship among ornithologists, and they are likely to solicit a review from a friend or acquaintance who is not knowledgeable in the field of the paper. If I receive a manuscript without advance warning, do I really know enough about the subject to review it intelligently? If not, I return it to the editor with an explanation, and because I don't consider it to be within my field of expertise, chances are I can't suggest an alternative reviewer.

Needless to say, the arrival of a manuscript without warning also brings up the question as to whether I have the *time* available to do it; editors often (but not always) let the referee know the deadline for returning the manuscript (see item 8 below). In addition, an unexpected manuscript may arrive when I am in the field or on vacation, and the envelope may sit unopened for weeks. If the editor asks first, the potential referee can let the editor know in advance about absences.

**2. Does a conflict of interest interfere with my objectivity?** Threats to objectivity come from opposite directions. For example, is the author a former stu-

dent or professor of mine, or a staff member or research associate at my institution? Contrariwise, is the author somebody I personally dislike enough to color my reaction to the manuscript? (This shouldn't happen, but we are all human.) Is the manuscript a strongly negative evaluation of something I have published previously, when the journal does not permit publication of responses? In any of these cases, return the manuscript—it isn't necessary to say more than that you prefer not to review it, unless you really want to be more specific. Try to suggest an alternative, probably more objective, reviewer.

**3. Does this paper overlap with unpublished research of my own?** If my results are firmly based and refute the author's findings, then in addition to the referee report I have an obligation to open a dialogue directly with the author. If I have substantial data that would augment or verify the author's conclusions, I have in the past handled this in two ways. The author(s) and I can pool our data and produce a new, coauthored manuscript (examples include Short and Parkes 1979 and Cannell et al. 1983). If my data do not form part of a major project about which I feel strongly possessive, I have donated them to the author(s) to incorporate as appropriate to the manuscript in question (e.g. data supplied for Pyle 1997).

**4. How long should the review be?** The same generalization applies here as to book reviews intended for publication. If the review is favorable, little detailed documentation is needed to support my opinion. If the review is unfavorable, then the reasons for this opinion need to be spelled out in detail. If the author has overlooked important literature on the subject, don't just say that, give the references. If the manuscript is wordy or redundant, the report is really helpful only if the reviewer suggests specific places where the manuscript could be shortened without loss of meaning. In short, an author will have difficulty fixing a problem that isn't clearly identified. Looking at this from the other side of the fence, referees and editors occasionally have suggested or mandated changes in wording in some of my manuscripts that did indeed change or obscure the meaning, so be very certain about what can be cut that will actually improve the manuscript. Changes (other than, for example, minor punctua-

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tion) should never be effected without the author having the opportunity to protest.

**5. How much "editing" should the reviewer do?** There is always the temptation to mark up the manuscript, calling attention to typos, awkward sentences, conflicts between text and bibliography citations, etc., all of which fall within the responsibility of the editor and his/her staff. If it doesn't take a lot of time, I mark up the manuscript this way, because it is always possible that I will catch something that the editor might overlook. If there is a *pattern*, say of faulty literature citations and too much to do myself, I would warn the editor to watch for this. Parenthetically, I have been appalled by the condition of some manuscripts that have been submitted to editors and thence to referees, presumably as finished products in the minds of the authors. Such cases have included senior scientists as well as the first efforts of graduate students. One of the most prevalent errors is a citation given in the text that does not appear in the list of citations. And one of the most pernicious inventions of the 20th century is the "Spellcheck," which does not recognize misspellings if they result in acceptable English words. Reliance on "Spellcheck" probably is why I have had several requests to "barrow" specimens!

**6. How can the reviewer help the editor reject a manuscript deserving such treatment?** Especially if you sign a review, the tendency to avoid confrontation can be manifested in generally positive or neutral comments *even if you feel that the manuscript is not worthy of publication*. Wishy-washy reviews do nothing but make the editor's job difficult. As a general rule, a reviewer's comments to the author should not pass judgment on whether the manuscript should be accepted or rejected (some journals state this explicitly in their instruction sheet for reviewers). However, if you recommend rejection in your confidential report to the editor, you must clearly identify the manuscript's problems in your comments to the author.

**7. What about papers by authors for whom English is not the native language?** If the English of the manuscript is really poor, I have suggested to editors that it is neither my responsibility nor theirs to see to it that the manuscript is in acceptable English. I have suggested that the manuscript be returned to the author with a note to the effect that it is the author's responsibility to find somebody to help with the English; many foreign authors already do this, as is discernible from their acknowledgments.

**8. What about promptness in returning manuscripts?** The importance of promptness in returning

a completed review cannot be overemphasized. If a manuscript is received, say, just before the beginning of extensive field work, telephone or e-mail the editor to ask whether postponement of the manuscript evaluation will be a problem. I have, in fact, taken some manuscripts with me in the field when library access is not vital to the evaluation, to be worked on during unfavorable weather, and returned from the nearest post office.

**9. Should I sign my reviews?** I usually do. This practice enables the author to establish a dialogue with the referee if this seems warranted, although I have never had an author respond directly to me about a review (complaints usually go to the editor). The chief exception to signing is a really negative review that I'm afraid might contribute to breaking up a friendship.

**10. What about duplicate submissions?** If you have reviewed a manuscript unfavorably and it was thereby rejected by the editor, and you are one of only a few experts in the field, you may very well receive the manuscript again when the author resubmits to another journal (all too often without following any of the first review's suggestions for improvement). I see no ethical problem in sending the second editor a copy of your original negative review, but I would also suggest additional reviewers if possible.

**Afterword.** Authors should take seriously the suggestions of referees, most of whom have put in a lot of work into the submitted manuscripts with no reward other than trying to maintain the scientific integrity (as well as the readable prose) of the journal. I once had the disheartening experience of refereeing a major manuscript in a field of my expertise, which unfortunately was unsalvageable because it was entirely based on some demonstrably false premises. My detailed critique was almost as long as the manuscript. The next thing I knew, the paper appeared *in-tact* in a nonrefereed journal! Fortunately, the journal was obscure enough so that I have seen no citation of the paper subsequently.

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