



# Supportive peer review: Why and how to constructively review a paper

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## Introduction: Call for supportive peer review

This week the editor of the *Canadian Journal of Kidney Health and Disease (CJKHD)* and 27 co-authors have published an editorial ‘Can peer review be kinder? Supportive peer review: a recommitment to kindness and a call to action.’ They have identified the need for a process of ‘supportive review’, by which they mean that reviewers should treat authors as they would wish to be treated themselves [1]. The primary concern is that some reviewers may discourage authors by a lack of empathy in their review comments. This is harmful for the individuals concerned and for the scientific community in general. We would encourage IPNA members to read this interesting article.

## The review process

Different journals have different editorial processes. Well-financed ones are able to have an editorial team that assesses all submitted papers to determine whether the paper should be rejected or sent out for review. Feedback is provided, even for those that are not sent for peer review before rejection. In many other journals, a deputy editor reviews each submitted manuscript to decide if it should be peer reviewed such that all decisions to reject without review are discussed by the team within a few days. Those that go out for review are similarly assessed when reviews are back. The quality of the reviews can be checked by the

team and personal editorial feedback given to the authors. These might be considered the optimal processes.

*Pediatric Nephrology* is a small journal which cannot be supported using the funding mechanisms available to larger journals. Furthermore, we prefer to maintain publication without page charges, considering it to be the best option to enable input from a diverse authorship. Our process for a paper after it has been received is that the Editors-in-Chief make a judgement as to whether it may be suitable for *Pediatric Nephrology*. Usually this means that it follows the guidance we have previously published: in particular, that it is of international interest, original, timely and ethically acceptable [2]. Invited reviews are assessed by the requesting associate editors.

Once a paper has passed this first level of scrutiny, it is sent out to be reviewed by recognised experts in the area. The journal has a well-known and experienced body of excellent reviewers who are fair, reliable and knowledgeable. They have usually themselves published in *Pediatric Nephrology*. Any conflict of interest must be declared so that their decision can be seen to be unbiased. Reviewers use their knowledge to ensure that the paper is of the high scientific standard that is appropriate for the journal. Authors are fortunate to be able to benefit from their skills, which provide comments and advice and an opportunity to improve the paper. Reciprocally, there are benefits to reviewers too: they are able to read new work that is relevant to their field. Regular reviewers may be offered a place on the editorial board.

Not all reviewers accept all their invitations. As well as conflicts of interest, they may not have enough time. Manuscript reviews should not be rushed. Most reviewers spend up to 3 hours reviewing a paper. It would be unusual to undertake a complete review after one read – in fact, at least two, if not three read-throughs are usually needed to thoroughly understand what the study is about, and whether the authors accomplished what they set out to do [3]. There may need to be background reading. The review is then submitted to the journal, with separate comments to the editors regarding suitability for

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**Table 1** How can an author give their paper the best possible chance of success?

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1. Follow instructions for authors
  2. Follow ‘How to write a paper for publication’ [2]
  3. Ensure ethical permission is complete
  4. Ensure patient photos are anonymised and consent obtained
  5. No plagiarism (including re-use of the author’s previous work)
  6. Follow consensus guidance on how to report specific study types and submit the appropriate checklist with the manuscript
- CONSORT: Clinical trials\*  
 STROBE: Observational cohort studies\*  
 PRISMA: Systematic reviews\*  
 SQUIRE: Quality improvement studies\*
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\*(Available at: [www.equator-network.org](http://www.equator-network.org))

**Table 2** Questions to ask while reviewing**Title:**

Is it an accurate reflection of the study?

**Abstract:**

Does it give you a reasonable summary of what was done?

If a quantitative study, does it contain data?

Does it follow the correct format?

**Introduction:**

Usually should be short, 2-3 paragraphs

Does it adequately justify why the study was done?

Is the rationale for the study clearly stated?

Is the hypothesis clearly stated?

**Methods:**

Was the clinical trial/systematic review protocol registered?

Did the authors follow accepted procedures/use appropriate equipment?

Are the statistics appropriate/adequate?

Was there appropriate IRB/ethics committee review?

If human subjects were involved, was informed consent obtained?

**Results:**

Are the data adequately presented?

Do the numbers in the tables add up and do they match what is in the text?

Is there unnecessary duplication between the text and tables/figures?

Are the tables and figures adequate and/or needed?

**Discussion:**

Is the opening paragraph appropriate?

Is there adequate discussion of the relevant literature in the light of their results?

Is there inappropriate speculation?

Are the limitations acknowledged?

Is there room to cut extraneous material?

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publication, and to the authors on items that need their attention should a revision be invited.

Once reviews are returned, the Editor-in-Chief assesses them after rereading the paper and makes a decision to accept, send back for modifications to improve the paper, or to reject. This is the stage where any ‘unsupportive’ comments can be removed by the editorial team before returning the review to the authors. It would not always be the case that all recommendations from reviewers have to be followed, if the authors can provide a good rebuttal. If the decision is to send back for modification, then suggestions on how to improve the paper are made. After changes by the authors, the paper is reviewed again by the Editor-in-Chief when either a decision can be made or the paper is returned again to the reviewers.

All authors are impatient to hear of the decision about their paper. *Pediatric Nephrology* has a good turnaround time of 15 days to first review, 100 to acceptance and 130 days to appearance online. This is a demonstration of the commitment of our reviewers and editorial team.

## How can an author give their paper the best possible chance of success?

There are some principles that need to be followed in order to reduce the number of comments that authors receive from their reviewers. These are outlined in Table 1.

As an international journal, we are aware of the difficulties that may be created by writing in a language other than one’s native tongue. However, to ensure that reviewers can properly assess the content, if possible an English speaker should check the paper before submission.

## The purpose of peer review

The purpose of peer review is to ensure that papers meet the criteria of the journal and at publication are of the highest scientific standard. Major strengths and weaknesses are identified. Reviewers make a recommendation to the editor regarding acceptance, revision or rejection. Comments to authors are divided into major issues, which can be design and other general points that impact the suitability for acceptance; and minor comments which are more specific issues that if addressed, would improve the manuscript.

**Table 3** Reviewing a revised manuscript

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Were the authors responsive to your suggestions?
Are the revisions acceptable?
Did the authors explain why a suggestion was not acted upon?
It may be necessary to request the same revision if something important was not addressed.
Do not address the comments of other reviewers
Do not add new comments that you did not think of with the first review*

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\*There are occasions where an exception to this might be acceptable; for example, if the paper has been dramatically altered in the revision process and is now essentially almost a “new” paper

## What makes a good review?

A good review is one that identifies the major strengths and weaknesses of the study; suggests changes to improve the science of the study or the presentation of the results; and provides helpful comments to the Editor, which may be given separately from the review to the authors. Each section should be commented on in turn as shown in Table 2. The paper will go back to the reviewers after the authors have made their changes. It is important that reviewers are prepared to rereview the paper to assess whether the authors have responded appropriately to their suggestions. To make their reassessment post review as straightforward as possible, it is courtesy to the reviewers that the authors indicate clearly in the text and in their responses, the changes they have made in a point by point fashion. Table 3 lists points to consider when reviewing a revised manuscript.

**Table 4** Supportive peer review: the dos and don'ts

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Do:
Be polite/respectful
Be helpful/constructive
Be as thorough as possible
Support your points with literature citations if appropriate
Meet the deadline
Don't:
Be insulting/ disrespectful/rude
Make personal comments about the authors
Tell the authors your final recommendation
Submit really brief reviews
Point out every spelling and grammatical mistake

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## Supportive peer review: the do's and don'ts

The theme of the *CJKHD* editorial [1] is that of supportive peer review. Many journals, including *Pediatric Nephrology*, have signed on to endorse this concept. Our suggested list of ‘Dos and donts’ to ensure that reviews are supportive are listed in Table 4

## Closing thoughts

Being a good reviewer is a skill that is of benefit to the individual that undertakes it; to the authors; and to the scientific community. Ideally the review process should be constructive and should improve the quality of the final published work. Reviewers have an obligation to be on time, thorough, polite, helpful and unbiased, and to review the papers of others as they would wish to have their own papers reviewed.

## References

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## Resources

CJASN podcasts on peer review: <https://cjasn.asnjournals.org/page/trainees/CJASNTraineePeerReview>. Accessed 16 February 2022  
 UW Medicine Thrivecast Episode 14: <https://faculty.uwmedicine.org/thrivecast-podcast/>. Accessed 16 February 2022  
 Pediatrics Reviewer Guidelines: <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/page/reviewer-guidelines>. Accessed 16 February 2022  
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