

Guidelines for Reviewers

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This document is intended to give an overview of the peer review process for academic journals and the specific requirements of reviewers for *Strengthening Health Systems*. Given that the journal is targeting a diverse authorship which includes – in addition to academics – policy makers, development partners and implementing organisations, who may not have previous experience of peer review, the guidelines provide detailed information on how to review a paper and the expectations of the journal. Key sections for all reviewers to take particular note of include: journal priorities, the length and format of reviews, and the conditions of becoming a reviewer for the journal.

An introduction to the peer review process Why do journals require reviews?

Peer review for academic journals is the process through which editors are supported to make publication decisions about submitted manuscripts through use of expert advice from individuals that have relevant technical knowledge. Obtaining views from others in similar fields about the suitability for publication for a particular manuscript gives the editor a degree of confidence – in addition to his or her own expertise - that the paper is acceptable for dissemination among the scientific community. The comments of peer reviewers are usually intended to be communicated directly to authors, so should always be constructive, rather than just critical, and are an important part of the manuscript revision process.

Peer review is also the only mechanism journals have for assessing the credibility and veracity of submitted papers, and identifying possible cases of fraud. Peer reviewers are expected to have in-depth knowledge of the field of study of the selected paper, understanding of the techniques or approaches used, or familiarity with other published literature on the same themes. However, it is not a perfect process, and it is still possible for papers to be found to be flawed at a later date even after receiving acceptable reviewers' reports.

Why be a reviewer?

Reviewing for academic journals is generally not remunerated, so reviewers take on the role solely for the academic credibility it confers and the opportunity to be involved in the process of publication of new research. SHS reviewers will be thanked publically at the beginning of every new volume (January) by having their names printed in the journal.

General guidelines for reviewers

Responding to invitations to review: If you receive an invitation to review from an editor, it is important to consider whether you have enough time to do the task within a reasonable timeframe (usually 1-2 weeks); whether you have sufficient knowledge to assess the paper properly; and whether you are in a position to give a totally independent review before responding to the request. If your schedule is too busy, you are not familiar with the field, or you have some potential conflict such as working for a competing organisation, then it is sensible to decline the invitation rather than ignore issues that could present problems further down the line.

Disclosures of interests: Personal or professional connections to the authors should not affect your role as a reviewer but it is important to disclose such connections to the editor so they can make an informed decision about communicating comments to the authors. As with authorship of manuscripts, potential conflicts may include: affiliations, relationships, financial arrangements, or beliefs that may be perceived to affect how the reviewer will view the intervention/policy/programme design/technique or tool under discussion in the manuscript.

Suspected misconduct, fraud, or plagiarism: One of the chief functions of a reviewer is to highlight possible cases of misconduct, fraud or plagiarism and communicate concerns to the editor, who will then pursue the issue according to journal policy. Please include as much detail as possible to justify your suspicion, particularly if you suspect data to be untrue. If you suspect plagiarism, please include the similar work in your communication to the editor. Other ethical concerns involve use of personal data without appropriate consent, conduct of a study in a developing

To be added to the reviewer list please contact:
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Reviews to be submitted online at:
www.shsjournal.org



country that would not meet ethical norms in other places, or use of routinely collected surveillance data or health information without permission.

Confidentiality: Before a manuscript has been published, it must be treated as strictly confidential. If you accept to review a paper, please do not discuss the contents with friends or colleagues, and do not reveal your role as reviewer until such time as the paper is formally published. If you would like to jointly review the paper with a colleague to combine your knowledge, please let the editor know in advance.

Reviewing for SHS

Reviewers for SHS have a particularly important role because of the journal's commitment to encouraging non-academic authors to document their work and experiences. The emphasis of reviewers' comments is therefore very much on supporting inexperienced authors to improve their papers and applying rational standards for use of operational data, statistical analyses, and reporting of experiential knowledge. Detailed guidance is below.

The peer-review process

SHS uses a single-blind peer review process whereby a paper's authors are revealed to the reviewers but the identity of reviewers is hidden from authors. The rationale for this approach is to ensure that reviewers feel free to comment on the content of submissions without concerns that there will be some professional consequences for them should they criticise a particular group or author.

The journal generally requires reviews from three technical or context specialists and a statistician for each paper. Reviewers are selected from the journal's contacts, and from searches of bibliographic databases for the most relevant experts in the field. Efforts will be made to identify at least one person who is familiar with the country or context of the work described to ensure that opinions are obtained on the appropriateness for the situation as well as the technical details.

The editors are under no obligation to accept the judgements of a reviewer, or to send all comments to authors in cases where the editors feel the reviewers' comments are contrary to the aims of the journal. Additional referees may be sought if the editor considers there is a need.

Occasionally, a reviewer may be asked to look at the revised version of a paper for which they had provided substantial comments on the original version.

How long does the review process take?

The intention is to provide the quickest service possible to authors, so reviewers are asked to provide comments within one week of being sent the paper. A thorough

review of a paper within the specialist's area of interest should take around 2.5 hours, with a little extra time necessary for packing and editing comments. The entire process of peer review and revision of the paper has a target timeline of 6 weeks to 2 months.

Format of a review

Standard reviews should be 1.5 to 2 pages in length. They should begin with a couple of lines describing the type of article and its main message, and then some general comments summarising the reviewers' opinion of the paper as a whole. If necessary, the reviewer can include comments that are solely for the eyes of the editor, and not to be communicated to the authors. These should be clearly marked.

Specific comments about the substance of the manuscript should be divided into major and minor remarks. Major remarks include suggestions for adding or deleting sections, undertaking additional data collection or analyses, restructuring the paper, or highlighting methodological or conceptual weaknesses that should be addressed. Minor comments refer to language and text, changes to the figures or tables, format and structure, references, and declarations of interests.

The review should conclude with a recommendation: accept, accept with minor revision, major revision, or reject.

Referees are not expected to correct or copyedit manuscripts. Language correction is not part of the peer review process. All articles that are reviewed will receive reviewers' reports, even if the decision is to reject the paper.

The aim is to support authors to improve their manuscripts so all comments should be as constructive as possible and if criticisms are made they should be accompanied by suggestions for how to address them.

What should reviewers look for?

Broadly, reviewers should approach a paper with the following issues in mind:

- Interest to a wide audience, particularly in development
- Potentially wide applicability
- Methodological soundness of the paper
- Soundness of the design of the programme under study and evaluation techniques
- Clear and cogent reasoning
- Consideration of all possible influencing factors
- Special consideration of potential ethical issues in use of data or program design
- Whether there is potential for a more formal research study (if so, why hasn't it been done)
- Useful lessons learnt for an international audience and/or clearly identified gaps for future work or study.

If you would like to join SHS's roster of reviewers, please send you name, contact details and keywords describing your areas of expertise and country experience to the Editor: hannah.kikaya@hmpg.co.za