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EDITORIAL

Open Letter to JGLR Reviewers

In a recent *Journal of Great Lakes Research* issue (*J. Great Lakes Res.* 20(3):495-496) the Editor, Thomas Murphy, wrote an open letter to *Journal* authors. He reminded authors of several responsibilities that they have once the reviews of their manuscript have been completed. Implicit in the editorial were certain responsibilities and professional attitudes of the reviewers themselves. As the new Chair of IAGLR's Publications Committee, I feel compelled to remind reviewers how important they are to the success of the *Journal* and how they can be of most benefit to the *Journal* in this service. I hope to accomplish this objective with an open letter to JGLR reviewers.

The *Journal of Great Lakes Research* has just completed publication of its twentieth volume—relatively speaking a young journal. In anticipation of this twentieth anniversary, my predecessor, Keith Bedford, conducted an evaluation of the *Journal* in comparison with its peers (*J. Great Lakes Res.* 20(1):317-326); he concluded that the *Journal* is of high professional caliber and has a favorable ranking among its peer journals despite its smaller size and multidisciplinary focus. Surely most of the credit for this success must go to the quality of the research being reported and to the authors who prepare the papers. But I personally believe that the review process is next in importance for the publication of a high quality journal. Without truly conscientious and rigorous reviewing of manuscripts, authors will not perceive a journal as a prestigious place to publish their research. Perhaps part of the perception of the quality of *Environmental Science and Technology* or *Limnology and Oceanography* is due to the close scrutiny that manuscripts receive during the review and editorial process of these journals. As a long-time Associate Editor of JGLR, I feel that we also have a very good review process, but there is always room for improvement. It is my hope that this open letter will inspire reviewers to be more meticulous and to work harder at finding ways to improve the quality of a manuscript.

Before getting specific about how you as a reviewer might improve the quality of your reviews, I

want to acknowledge that, in addition to drawing from my own experiences as an author and a reviewer, my comments rely heavily on a very excellent 1992 article in *BioScience* (Waser *et al.* 1992) that

was recently reprinted in the May, 1994 *SETAC News*. It stimulated my thinking about the subject.

Overall, the reviewer needs to have an attitude that reviewing manuscripts is an integral part of his or her profession; he or she should feel an obligation to help make the manuscript as good as possible. In terms of this

obligation, I see the overall duty of the reviewer as three-fold:

1. There is a need to make a decision whether the manuscript should be accepted or rejected and this decision needs to be justified in some detail.
2. If the decision is to reject a manuscript, then the reviewer has a responsibility to point out the fatal flaws that led to this decision.
3. No matter how good a manuscript is, there is always room for improvement, and it is the responsibility of the reviewer to make suggestions that will improve the paper.

In carrying out the above duties, reviewers should ask themselves a series of questions, much like those on the *Journal* Manuscript Review Form. Those questions are not there simply to obtain a "yes" or "no" answer but rather to remind the reviewer of the issues to be considered and to assist them in framing their written comments. While there are fifteen fairly specific questions on our form, it all boils down to three general considerations:

1. **Is the paper technically sound and scientifically valid?** Are experimental data and theoretical approaches valid and is their interpretation valid? Are the conclusions substantiated by the material presented in the paper?
2. **Does the paper convey its message in a clear, concise, and easily understood manner?** Are the objectives or hypotheses clearly stated, and can the material be comprehended by the average reader?

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3. Does the paper advance knowledge and/or promote a better understanding of existing concepts in subject matter that is relevant to the interests of the *Journal*? Keep in mind that this end can be accomplished either through the presentation and interpretation of new data or through the synthesis and analysis of existing data.

In addition to these general reminders to our reviewers, I would like to offer a list of hints for writing a constructive review:

1. Remember that the authors are your *peers*; treat them as such. It should be a common goal of both the author and reviewer to present important research in the best manner possible.
2. Point out the good information and insights in a manuscript as well as the bad points. If you do so, it will be more likely that your review is well-received by both the author and the editor.
3. Avoid being confrontational in your review. Your comments will be much more effective if you offer constructive criticism rather than sarcastic comments, and avoid engaging in personal or derisive attacks on the author or his/her motives.
4. Assume, at least to begin with, that the author knows his or her study system better than you do. If you do question some interpretation or analysis of the system, do so in an unassuming way that is not condescending. Do not be afraid to say, "I may be wrong, but..."
5. Do not assume that all authors have conducted their research with unlimited resources and in the absence of any constraints. Try to understand that there may be reasons other than ignorance for not using the best research design or analysis methods. Suggest a better approach if you know one, but do not necessarily insist on it before the paper is published.
6. Read the manuscript more than once. Think about your reactions and comments before submitting your review. It is possible that your perspective may change with a second or third reading of the manuscript.
7. Make sure that you have a global perspective in your review as well as paying attention to specifics. Cutting down or planting a few trees will not change the forest.
8. Do not let the manuscript suffer from lack of readability or understandability because the author used jargon or did not define terms unknown to the general reader. These things should be pointed out by a reviewer.

9. Demand scientific integrity in the manuscript. Make sure that all ideas and information that are not common knowledge are appropriately referenced. The idea is to build on previous studies, so the manuscript in question must put its findings in the context of previous research.
10. Make sure to support all of your comments and recommendations. A review that merely checks "yes" or "no" on the Evaluation Form is of very little value to the Editor or to the authors.
11. Resist being threatened by competition or opposing opinions. You have been asked to review a manuscript because you are a recognized expert in the area; you should welcome the opportunity to be a part of advancing the knowledge and stimulating further research in that area.
12. My final, but certainly not my lowest priority, suggestion is to be **prompt** in your response to a request for review. A key concern of authors when considering a journal for their work is the turn-around time of manuscripts. If you know you will be unable to review a manuscript because of time or lack of knowledge in the subject area, please return the manuscript promptly to the Editor and suggest alternate reviewers if known. Also, inform the Editor if you have been unavoidably delayed in completing your review once you started.

Remember, writing a high quality review helps the author, helps the *Journal* and its readership, and helps the reviewer. Don't take it lightly!

Finally, I would like to end this open letter with an assignment for each of you. First, re-read this letter before you begin reviewing each new manuscript. Second, we on the Publication Committee are most anxious to make our publications as good as possible. Therefore, if you have any suggestions for improving the review process of the *Journal* or any other phase of its publication, please forward them to me or to the Editor. It is your journal; take pride in it!

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Writing an effective manuscript review. *Bio-science* 46:621-3.