

Letter from the Editor

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The role and responsibilities of reviewers

One of my favorite cartoons about peer review imagines the publication process as an “American Gladiator” type of challenge (Lilliana, 2017). The hapless author dangles from a rope over a moat filled with reviewers depicted as sea creatures. The author is supposed to traverse the moat to reach a platform on the other side of the frame that represents “publication.” For the purposes of this letter, I would like to focus on the reviewer-fish in the cartoon. Reviewer 1 is shown as a fish bobbing up toward the author, supposedly reflecting mild interest and appreciation of the author’s work. Reviewer 2 is asleep below the water, while Reviewer 3 is shown as a gigantic, toothy eel about to take a bite of the author’s backside. The author intones “Well, that didn’t seem too bad [...]” clearly missing Reviewer 3’s biting commentary. These three aquatic reviewers represent very different perspectives on the role and responsibility of journal reviewers. Should we be the bobbing fish, the sleeping fish or the biting eel when reviewing cases?

The role of peer review in case publishing

The Case Journal like most case journals uses a double-blind review process. This means that the identities of the authors and the reviewers are both concealed. Two reviewers are assigned to review each case submission and are asked to submit their reviews within four weeks. Most cases typically require more than one round of reviews before an acceptance decision can be made. Ideally, the same reviewers stick with a case throughout the review cycle to ensure that the authors are given consistent direction and feedback to improve the case and instructor’s manual. In rare situations, a third reviewer is sometimes brought in if there is a disagreement between the two initial reviewers. The third reviewer is often chosen to offer additional subject matter or theoretical expertise that helps the editor make decisions about the case.

Double-blind peer review is preferred by many journals because it offers an objective and fair review process while reducing the possibility for various kinds of bias. Because the reviewer does not know the identities of the authors or their institutions, the reviewer’s focus is on the quality of the case and instructor’s manual itself, thus eliminating any conscious or unconscious biases.

Peer review provides a quality assurance process for improving the quality of published cases and instructor’s manuals. The review process contributes to quality in two ways: first, in serving as a hurdle that encourages authors to be self-critical of their work before submission; and second, through the feedback and revision cycle inherent in the review process (Ware, 2011). For *TCJ*, the review process ensures that the case is complete, well-researched and well-written and will effectively deliver the learning objectives for the target audience. Furthermore, the instructor’s manual has been evaluated to ensure that it provides adequate support in terms of teaching strategies, theoretical background and analysis so that adopting instructors can teach the case as successfully as the authors (see Exhibit 1 to see the actual questions assessed by *TCJ* reviewers).

Why become a reviewer?

Reviewing is an unpaid voluntary task that is rarely counted toward professional advancement. Why should anyone take a “swim” in the reviewing pool? An international survey of more than 3,000 academics reported that most reviewers offered an altruistic explanation with 91 percent selecting “to play your part as a member of the academic community” as their reason for reviewing (Ware, 2008). Reciprocity provided another reason to review as most reviewers are also authors in the same journal. Reviewers are willing to review because they appreciate the benefits they receive through the publication of their own cases in *TCJ*. Unfortunately, not all authors share this same sense of reciprocity, creating a “tragedy of the commons” problem by taking advantage of peer review but not contributing to the reviewer pool.



Back to the reviewer fishes and reviewer responsibilities

Let us get back to the fishes swimming in the reviewer pool. Should you be the bobbing fish, the sleeping fish or the toothy eel? It seems obvious that no author wants to receive comments from someone who is out to bite them. Eel reviewers are not in the spirit of The CASE Association's (n.d.) mission which says:

Our mission is to foster high-quality case research, writing, instruction, and publication and to promote appreciation of cases as respected intellectual contributions. We nurture case scholars at every stage of their careers by providing a supportive network of engaged colleagues. We are responsive to the needs of developing case writers through formal and informal mentoring via association activities and The CASE Journal. We are:

- Inclusive rather than exclusive
- Committed to peer review
- Collaborative
- Enthusiastic
- Intellectually curious
- Developmental rather than critical.

The relevant pieces of the mission for *TCJ* and our review process are the commitment to high-quality case research, the nurturing of case scholars, inclusiveness and the developmental rather than a critical focus. We expect our reviewers to embrace these values in conducting their reviews. Snarky eel reviewers are flagged in the *TCJ* Scholar One system and are not invited to review again. These reviewers often put their self-interests ahead of any author development or nurturing. Eel reviewers would do well to remember that critical comments can sometimes be perceived by authors more negatively than was intended. It is wise to have a colleague read a negative review before hitting the "submit" button. Do not be an eel!

TCJ also does not want sleeping fish reviewers (Reviewer 2 in the cartoon). The sleeping fish reviewer is neither engaged in constructive feedback to improve the case nor in providing stinging criticism. This type of reviewer is nominally present but has not actively engaged in the review process. The sleeping fish reviewer may answer the questions on the review form with one-word answers – "Yes" or "No," providing little direction for author revisions. What should an author do if the reviewer answers "Is this case interesting?" with the single word – "No"? The opposite review is also a problem – if everything is good or "Yes," what improvements should the author make? A review that does not provide any type of specific feedback may as well have been written by a sleeping fish. The final recommendation of "Accept" or "Reject" carries little weight in the review process without commentary to support or enumerate concerns. Authors frequently draw the conclusion that the sleeping fish reviewer can be ignored in the revisions only to find out too late that the sleeping fish becomes an eel in the next review cycle. Do not be a sleeping fish!

Do be a bobbing fish! Take an interest in the case and do your best to provide constructive feedback to assist the authors to improve the case and instructor's manual. Complement the authors when possible as positive feedback makes criticism easier to bear. Remember that *TCJ* is a developmental journal and be generous with specific constructive feedback that will assist the author in improving the case and/or the instructor's manual. Do not write that "parts of the case are unclear" – provide specific page and line numbers of the unclear sections and give guidance as to how the writing can be clarified. Use your subject matter expertise to provide suggestions for improving the theoretical linkages section of the IM – what theories or analytical frameworks could be used to better achieve the case learning objectives? What readings might provide adopting instructors with the necessary background for effective facilitation of case discussion? How might you lead the discussion of this case in your classes – provide your teaching tips in the review? Be generous with your contributions to improve the case and IM. For *TCJ*, reviewers should remember that we (authors, reviewers and editors) are all part of the same case writing community. We do not "win" by knocking down (or biting) the others. We achieve victory by developing an anonymous but synergistic partnership that gets the authors to an "Accept" decision – they survive the moat and land safely on the "publication" platform.

Other things to remember when reviewing for *TCJ*:

- Authors are usually seeking a fast turnaround on reviews. Please respond quickly to invitations to review and complete your review within the agreed upon timeline. Remember what it was like to try to get that one last publication before submitting your tenure packet – timeliness can be critical to authors.
- Let the editor know if you are too busy to complete the review on time. Everyone is too busy, and requests for reviews often come at the most inopportune times. If it is a request for a first review, please immediately decline the review if you cannot possibly fit it in. Do not wait weeks until you get a reminder from the editor to let us know that you cannot do the review. If it is a second or third review of a case, please stick with the case despite your busy schedule. Help the author get over to the publication platform without the misdirection of a new reviewer with a different perspective on the case.

In conclusion, peer review is critically important in developing high-quality *TCJ* cases. The journal is blessed to have so many reviewers that are committed to the values espoused by The CASE Association mission. The CASE Association is a “supportive network of engaged colleagues.” As reviewers, we do well to remember our essential role and responsibilities for getting authors across the review moat and safely on the publication platform.

References

- Lilliana, V. (2017), “My first peer review”, available at: <https://siop-online.org/blog/my-first-peer-review/> (accessed January 29, 2019).
- The CASE Association (n.d.), “Mission”, available at: www.caseweb.org/about-case/mission/ (accessed January 31, 2019).
- Ware, M. (2008), “Peer review: benefits, perceptions and alternatives”, *Publishing Research Consortium Summary Papers*, p. 4.
- Ware, M. (2011), “Peer review: recent experience and future directions”, *New Review of Information Networking*, Vol. 16, pp. 23-53.

Exhibit 1. Reviewer form for the case journal

Manuscript details: manuscript ID, keywords, manuscript title, date assigned, date review returned, editor-in-chief.

1. Case content:
 - Is this case interesting? Please explain.
 - Are graphs, charts and tables adequately displayed?
 - Does the case present a situation, problem or issue that is worthy of publication?
2. Instructor’s manual:
 - Does the instructors’ manual include all elements: synopsis, description of the fields for which the case is intended, level of student, learning objectives, relevant texts, research methodology, discussion questions and answers, teaching strategy, theory as appropriate, and epilogue if known?
 - Are the learning objectives of the case clearly set forth? Can the case be used to meet those objectives?
 - Does the instructors’ manual relate case issues to current theory, practice or literature in the fields intended for case use?
3. Overall evaluation/quality:
 - Does the case/IM or paper contain new and significant information or take a fresh perspective on existing information adequate to justify publication?

- Does the case/IM or paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.? Are spelling, grammar and punctuation correct?
 - Does the case/IM or paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the current relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored? Are secondary sources adequately sourced?
 - Can the case be used to meet the stated objectives? Will it be an effective case? Does the case/IM or paper bridge the gap between theory and practice? How can the case/IM or paper be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in teaching, to influence public policy? In research (contributing to the body of knowledge)?
4. Recommendation:
- accept;
 - minor revision;
 - major revision; and
 - reject.
5. Would you be willing to review a revision of this manuscript? (Yes/No).
6. Comments:
- Confidential comments to the editor-in-chief.
 - Comments to the author: in addition to the above, please indicate suggested changes/ revisions/improvements and general comments here.
7. Attach a file.