

Guide for reviewers

Introduction

Participating in peer review of scientific publications can be viewed as a responsibility, a burden, and an opportunity all at the same time. Nonetheless, peer review remains a critical component of our profession that helps to ensure the quality, originality, and reliability of scientific findings and claims. Peer review is requested of a colleague with specific interest and expertise in the topic relevant to the manuscript submitted to *Gynecologic Oncology*. Yet despite the importance of this process in upholding rigorous scientific standards and the integrity of the journal, few if any reviewers receive any formal training or instruction in how to provide a quality manuscript review. This document serves to orient and guide individuals asked to provide peer review for *Gynecologic Oncology* in the process and responsibilities of review and reviewer. It is not intended to be a comprehensive document, but rather to demystify the process and maximize the effectiveness of the peer review process. In doing so, the hope is to increase scientific quality and to improve the care of women with or at risk for cancer.

History of peer review

Peer review is a critical component of the process of reporting of scientific findings. It has been the standard process by which manuscripts of adequate quality and relevance are efficiently evaluated and released to the scientific public since the 1940s [REF RENNIE 2003]. While most journals incorporate a process of peer review, there are an increasing number of open access journals that do not require rigorous scientific review prior to publication.

Process of peer review in *Gynecologic Oncology*

The journal utilizes a standard online site (ees.elsevier.com/ygyno), supported by our publisher Elsevier, for the process of both manuscript submission and manuscript peer review. Upon receiving a manuscript submitted for consideration of publication to *Gynecologic Oncology*, the Journal Manager and editorial staff at Elsevier review the submission to assure all required components as outlined in the Guide for Authors are included. The manuscript is then assigned to one of the Editors (either the Editor in Chief or a Deputy (Associate) Editor) who directs and oversees the peer-review process. The Editor then reviews the submission for relevance, content and quality. Those submissions deemed appropriate for consideration of publication are then assigned to at least two peer reviewers. Selection of these reviewers is a key step in the peer review process, as this represents a critical component in ensuring quality of manuscript review and in the overall quality of the Journal. Specifically, the selection of a reviewer with expertise in the topic of the manuscript to be reviewed and without any conflict of interest improves both the timeliness and quality of the review. As such, the designation of an area of interest or expertise by the reviewer (entered at the time of registration into the system (and updated in the *change details* section of the website, in the subsection *areas of expertise*) is critical for this component of the process. Reviews are commonly solicited from members of the *Gynecologic Oncology* editorial board, though the majority of reviews are provided by ad hoc reviewers not on the board.

Once the reviewers are selected by the editor, an email is sent requesting the review; 48 hours is provided to choose to review (or not review) the manuscript. A lack of response to this request leads to the reviewer being uninvited. Statistics on individual reviewers are maintained by the journal office and reviewed by the editors, including the number of reviews requested (and those accepted, uninvited, and refused). These data help in the process of evaluating the overall quality of a reviewer and are used in the selection of future editorial board members.

Once accepted, the reviewer has 14 days to complete the review (details of the components of a review are described in more detail below), which is submitted through the Elsevier EES site. Failure to complete the review during this time period leads to a reminder email. When the editor has a full complement of reviews completed, the editor reviews the comments and recommendations for disposition of the reviewers, and a decision regarding the suitability for publication of the manuscript is made by the editor.

It is the responsibility of the reviewer to provide a recommendation to the editor for the disposition of the manuscript, categorizing it into one of 4 groups. Importantly, the recommendation of the reviewer is advisory to the editor, as it is ultimately the decision of the editor as to the final disposition of the manuscript.

1. Accept without modification
2. Accept with minor modification (manuscript requires modifications to improve its quality)
3. Major modifications required (manuscript is unique, but requires extensive revision and reevaluation prior to potential acceptance)
4. Reject (manuscript is of low quality or low interest to the readership)

The reviewer has two types of comments that can be provided – one to the authors, and one to the editors. It is strongly encouraged that the reviewer utilizes the comments to the editor to provide confidential comments regarding the manuscript under consideration. These comments help assure that the editor understands the true recommendation of the reviewer and provides key assistance to the Editor in determining a manuscript's ultimate disposition. In addition, completing the manuscript rating form is helpful in supporting a reviewer's recommendation for the disposition of a manuscript, and assists the Editor in justifying the final decision.

Historically, *Gynecologic Oncology* has rejected between 65 and 75% of Original Research Reports. This statistic highlights the fact that in the absence of a higher quality manuscript of interest to the readership, a recommendation of Reject is appropriate.

The editor will generate an email with their final decision, and the authors will then have 60 days to revise their manuscript if appropriate. Upon receipt of the replies to the reviewers and the revised paper, the editor may forward it to the reviewers of the original manuscript for re-review and recommendation (employing the same method and timeline as the primary review) or adjudicate the manuscript disposition themselves.

The reviewer is generally notified of the ultimate disposition of the manuscript once it has been decided.

General expectations and opportunities for peer review in *Gynecologic Oncology*

There are a number of general criteria that make for a quality review of a scientific manuscript, and a number of responsibilities that come with being a peer reviewer that further enhances the review process.

1. Timely – Given the time sensitive nature of many scientific manuscripts, the rapid return of a solicited peer review minimizes the timeline between submission and decision (which helps the authors with resubmission if the manuscript is rejected and helps the journal with a shorter time from submission to publication if accepted). Thus, the reviewer plays a very important role in ensuring expeditious dissemination of data. Peer reviews that cannot be completed on time should not be accepted by the reviewer; every effort should be made to complete those accepted within the time allotted for review.
2. Fair – A reviewer has a responsibility to both *Gynecologic Oncology* and the author to provide a review that is thoughtful and complete. While the immediate goal of peer review is provide a decision regarding the suitability for publication in the journal, an additional goal is to provide the author comments that will ultimately improve the science and manuscript and providing it the best chance for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. For manuscripts eventually accepted for publication, quality peer review will ensure that the highest quality science is ultimately published (and will weed out unsound papers). Peer reviews requested in areas outside of the area of expertise of a reviewer should not be accepted; in that case, the review process is facilitated by the reviewer recommending those who could provide a quality review.
3. Collegial – It is rare for any manuscript to be reviewed without comments or criticisms. However, the responsibility of the reviewers is to provide these critiques constructively and objectively, and in a fashion that is collegial and respectful. Consider each manuscript as one that was written by a valued colleague when drafting a peer review. Importantly, review the manuscript as you would like your own manuscript reviewed.
4. Clear – The goal of peer review is to provide an advisory recommendation to the editors as to the suitability of a manuscript for publication in *Gynecologic Oncology*. As such, the responsibility of the reviewer is to provide a clear signal to the editor regarding the appropriateness and priority for publication of a manuscript. The reviewer is expected to provide comments and criticisms to the editor that clearly justifies their recommendation for disposition of the manuscript. It is also critical that the comments to the editor are consistent with those made to the author (such that the comments of the reviewer justify the recommendation regarding the disposition of the manuscript).
5. Comprehensive – A quality review will include a number of considerations, and may be specific to the manuscript being reviewed. In order for a manuscript to be considered for publication, it must be original and significant, providing a contribution to research and importance to field. In general, there should be no

flaws in the specific procedures used in performance of the study, or in the logic used for the interpretation of the data. It is important that the results of the study support its conclusions, and that there are no errors in reference to prior work (or no exclusions of pertinent references). Where appropriate, confirmation of regulatory review (such as institutional review board approval) must be present. A reviewer is expected to comment on the strengths and weaknesses or limitations of the study. The validity of the statistics used (often including a justification of a sample size) to analyze data is necessary, and the data presented in the figures and tables should be reflective of the results presented and adequate to justify the study conclusions. In general, the manuscript length and quality of the writing are important to ensure its quality. Table 1 details other considerations to ensure a quality peer review of a manuscript.

Ethical responsibilities of the reviewer

Given the sensitive nature of peer review, there are ethical responsibilities of the review and review process that are critical to ensure their validity. It is important for reviewers to identify potential conflicts of interest with the authors and the topic of the manuscript. *Gynecologic Oncology* requires that reviewers disclose potential and relevant conflicts of interest related to employment, consultancies, stock ownership, receipt of honoraria, patents, a professional relationship with, or direct competition in the field of the authors. The reviewer has a responsibility to review the conflict of interest forms submitted by the authors, which specifically document any relevant financial relationships.

Given the role of reviewer as an expert in the topic area of the manuscript, a reviewer is requested to report any known situations of duplicate submissions (a manuscript that may be under concurrent review at another journal), fraudulent data, or plagiarism in a manuscript. If identified, these comments should be conveyed to the editor (in the *confidential comments to the editor* section) so they can be addressed as appropriate. Since peer review of a manuscript allows a reviewer to view data that is not yet in the public domain, strict confidentiality is critical to ensure scientific integrity; destruction of documents and files related to peer review is also mandatory once the review is complete.

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) is a group comprised of editors of academic journals and others interested in publication ethics. Members of COPE (which includes Elsevier) were provided with the Ethical Guidelines for Peer Review, describing the basic principles to which reviewers should adhere (Table 2). These guidelines provide a broad ethical context in which the peer review process should be performed.

Table 2: Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Ethical Guidelines for Peer Review (published March 2013): Basic Principles to Which Peer Reviewers Should Adhere

1. Respect the confidentiality of peer review and not reveal any details of a manuscript or its review, during or after the peer-review process, beyond those that are released by the journal

2. Not use information obtained during the peer-review process for their own or any other person's or organization's advantage, or to disadvantage or discredit others
3. Only agree to review manuscripts for which they have the subject expertise required to carry out a proper assessment and which they can assess within a reasonable time-frame
4. Not allow their reviews to be influenced by the origins of a manuscript, by the nationality, religion, political beliefs, gender or other characteristics of the authors, or by commercial considerations
5. Be objective and constructive in their reviews, refraining from being hostile or inflammatory and from making libelous or derogatory personal comments
6. Acknowledge that peer review is largely a reciprocal endeavor and undertake to carry out their fair share of reviewing, in a timely manner
7. Provide personal and professional information that is accurate and a true representation of their expertise when creating or updating journal accounts

Review of the reviewer

The editor evaluates the quality of a review upon its receipt. Utilizing the criteria defining a quality review (timely, fair, collegial, clear, and comprehensive), a reviewer is evaluated and scored (from 0-100) on their review. This statistic, in combination with a separate statistic regarding the timeliness of the review, is helpful in assigning subsequent reviews to a reviewer. Furthermore, reviews that do not achieve a score of 50 are not eligible for reviewer continuing medical education (CME) credits. Reviewers with low scoring or late reviews are not considered highly for subsequent reviews.

Why be a reviewer?

With all of the responsibilities of being a peer reviewer, the number of individuals agreeing to this task is impressive. There are, however, a number of benefits to being a reviewer. Most tangibly, Elsevier offers 3 CME credits per review, since the process of reviewing a manuscript expands a the knowledge of the reviewer. A maximum of 15 CME credits per year are provided, and only reviewers whose review scores are greater than 50 are eligible for this credit. CME credits are granted in conjunction with SGO and it is the reviewers responsibility to claim their credits on the SGO website. In addition, many institutions and practices value the service of peer review when evaluating a candidate for promotion and tenure, and increasingly accrediting bodies value peer review as an external benchmark for provider quality assurance. A reviewer may directly benefit from the peer review process by learning from the work of others prior to publication. Reviewer's insights may also lead to future research ideas, improvements in their own study design and manuscript preparation.

Summary

Peer review is a critically important component in maximizing the quality of scientific publication and improving the practice relevant to the readers of *Gynecologic Oncology*. The reviewer has a unique opportunity to impact this process, which comes with substantial responsibility. Through education of reviewers on the technical aspects, expectations and opportunities of peer review, this process can be improved and the

impact of peer review can be maximized.

Table 1: Considerations for a quality peer review of a manuscript

Structure

Is the article clearly laid out? Are all the key elements present: abstract, introduction, methodology, results, conclusions? Consider each element in turn:

- *Title*: Does it clearly describe the article? This will be used for PubMed searches, so it shouldn't try to be "cute".
- *Abstract*: Does it reflect the content of the article? Are the data consistent with the results reported in the manuscript?
- *Introduction*: Does it describe what the author hoped to achieve accurately, and clearly state the problem being investigated? Normally, the introduction is two or three paragraphs long. It should summarize relevant research to provide context, and explain what findings of others, if any, are being challenged or extended. It should describe the experiment, hypothesis; general experimental design or method.
- *Methodology*: Does the author accurately explain how the data were collected? Is the design suitable for answering the question posed? Is there sufficient information present for you to replicate the research? Does the article identify the procedures followed? Are these ordered in a meaningful way? If the methods are new, are they explained in detail? Was the sampling appropriate? Have the equipment and materials been adequately described? Does the article make it clear what type of data was recorded; has the author been precise in describing measurements?
- *Results*: This is where the author should explain in words, tables and figures what was discovered in the research. It should be clearly laid out and in a logical sequence. You will need to consider if the appropriate analysis been conducted. Are the statistics correct? If you are not comfortable with statistics, advise the editor when you submit your report and recommend review by a statistical editor. Any interpretation should not be included in this section.
- *Conclusion/Discussion*: Are the claims in this section supported by the results, do they seem reasonable? Have the authors indicated how the results relate to expectations and to earlier research? Does the article support or contradict previous theories? Does the conclusion explain how the research has moved the body of scientific knowledge forward?
- *Language*: If an article is poorly written due to grammatical errors, while it may make it more difficult to understand the science, you do not need to correct the English. You may wish to bring it to the attention of the editor, however, and we can refer the authors to an English editing service if you feel the paper may be worth publishing.

Finally, on balance, when considering the whole article, do the figures and tables inform the reader, are they an important part of the story? Do the figures describe the data

accurately? Are they consistent (are the bars in the charts the same width, are the scales on the axis logical)? Are the legends appropriate?

Previous Research

If the article builds upon previous research, does it reference that work appropriately? Are there any important works that have been omitted? Are the references accurate?

Ethical Issues

- *Plagiarism*: If you suspect that an article is a substantial copy of another work, let the editor know, citing the previous work in as much detail as possible.
- *Fraud*: It is very difficult to detect the determined fraud, but if you suspect the results in an article to be untrue, discuss it with the editor in your confidential comments.
- *Other ethical concerns*: Has confidentiality been maintained? If there has been violation of accepted norms of ethical treatment of animal or human subjects, these should also be identified.

Adapted from Elsevier's Reviewers' Information Pack,
<http://europe.nextbook.com/nxteu/elsevier/reviewersinfo2012/index.php#/14>