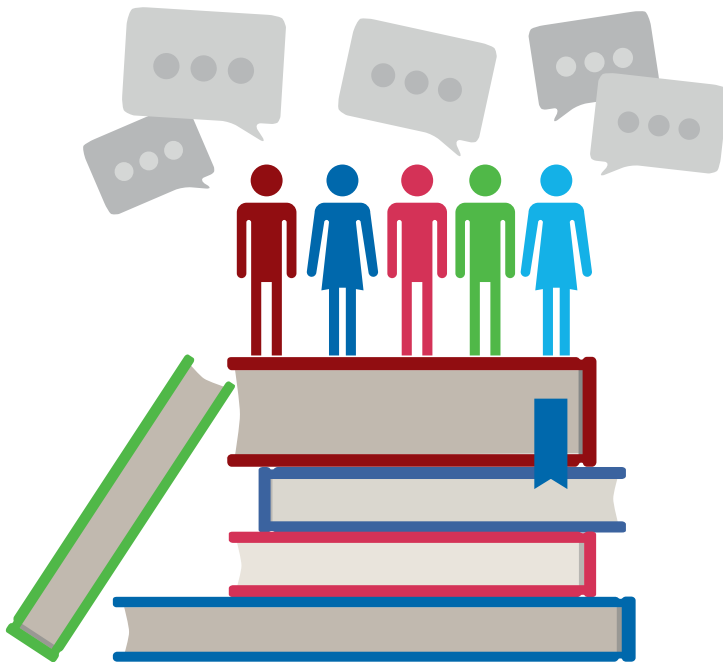


# A Guide to Peer Reviewing Book Proposals



# 1

## Introduction to this guide

Peer review is an integral component of publishing the best quality research. Its purpose is to:

1. Aid in the vetting and selection of research for publication, ensuring that the best work is taken forward
2. Provide suggestions for improving the books that go through review, raising the general quality of published research

The purpose of this guide is to give a practical introduction to conducting effective peer reviews, especially for those who are new to the process. While the information here is generally applicable to all publishers with standard peer review practices, it's important to ensure that you take into account any specific instructions given by the particular editor you are reviewing for.

## 2

## Why peer review?

As well as contributing to the quality of the research corpus in your field, conducting peer reviews can benefit your own career as a researcher. The benefits include:

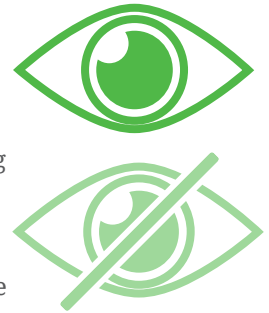
- 1 Learning more about the editorial process. By reviewing a book proposal and liaising with the editor, you will gain first-hand experience of the key considerations that go into the publication decision, as well as commonly recommended revisions.
- 2 Keeping up to date with novel research in your field. Reviewing also gives you a glimpse of emerging research in your discipline, several months before it is to be published.
- 3 Having an opportunity to demonstrate your expertise in a field. It is becoming more common for researchers to include overview details of their review experience as a line on their CV/resumé, as evidence of their expertise in their field.
- 4 Many publishers provide direct incentives to reviewers, such as payments in the form of discounts on books and access to content.

## 3

## Types of peer review

Peer review can be conducted in a range of ways, as listed below. The advantages and disadvantages of each generally stem from attitudes to openness: on the one hand many academics believe that reviews should be visible to all, and on the other hand it can be argued that anonymity protects the reviewer and allows a more objective, candid evaluation.

Single-blind is still the most common form of review for book publishing, but here we have listed alongside it some other forms of review now seen across books and journals, some of which may become more common in the coming years.



1. **Single-blind peer review:** The author does not know the identity of the reviewer, but the reviewers know the identity of the author.  
The vast majority of book reviews are conducted in this manner.
2. **Double-blind peer review:** Neither author nor reviewers know the identity of the other.
3. **Open peer review:** The identities of authors and reviewers are known to one another.
4. **Post-publication peer review:** In some models, particularly for experimental open access journal publishers, manuscripts are reviewed after they have been published. These reviews are often open and published alongside the article in question.

## 4

## Before you review

The following steps have usually taken place before you are asked to review a book:

- ✓ In many cases, and especially for scientific disciplines, **the commissioning editor will have discussed the idea for the book with the author** prior to the proposal being submitted.
- ✓ **Author submits a book proposal (and sometimes sample chapters or a full manuscript)** to the commissioning editor at a publishing house.
- ✓ **The editor performs an initial check of the submitted materials** to ensure that they include the necessary information. In some circumstances they may ask for additional information, such as sample chapters.
- ✓ **The editor discusses the proposal with the author** and in many cases, the proposal is amended to reflect these discussions prior to being sent for peer review.
- ✓ **The editor makes the decision on whether to send the book proposal or manuscript at this point to peer review**, based on its fit for the list and apparent academic quality.
- ✓ **The editor will find appropriate reviewers**, by drawing on their own network.
- ✓ **Invitation to peer review sent out to selected reviewers.**

# 5

## Writing your review

Once you receive the invitation to review, you will usually need to go through the following steps. This process is intended to describe the general basis for creating an effective review, but it can vary according to the particular requirements of the commissioning editor, or according to your own preferences.

### Accepting or rejecting the invitation to review

If you receive an invitation to review, you will need to let the editor know if you are able to complete the review within the requested deadline. Consider the following questions when deciding whether to accept the invitation:



- ? Do I have the appropriate expertise to review this book proposal?** If you are not confident of your ability to assess the proposal's quality, you should feel free to discuss this with the editor. It may be that you are still able to comment on specific aspects of the book proposal, or that it is better to decline the review this time. This discussion will also help editors to target their review invitations more effectively in the future, especially if you clarify your own areas of expertise, and, where possible, provide alternative suggestions for reviewers.
- ? Do I have any conflict of interest regarding this book or its author?** Conflicts of interest include anything that might impede your ability to give an unbiased assessment of the book proposal. By only accepting reviews that you are able to assess fairly, you are preserving the integrity of the peer review process. Do declare any potential conflict to the editor who has invited the review. If you'd like to learn more about conflicts of interest, the COPE guidelines on peer review are a good place to start.
- ? Do I have the time to conduct this review effectively?** Most review invitations will include a deadline for receipt of the review.

If you will be unable to complete the review by this deadline, you should let the editor know.

If you are not able to accept the invitation to review, it is best to send your response as quickly as possible so that the editor is able to find alternative reviewers. Where possible, it is also common practice to suggest alternative reviewers if you are not able to review.

### 1. Read editor requests

Some editors will issue peer review guidelines and specific questions about the book proposal when you accept an invitation to review. They might suggest the key considerations and a recommended structure for your review. If there are guidelines or particular areas to consider, it is important to read them carefully before you start the process, and adapt your review and your considerations to suit the editor's requirements. If you are unsure as to whether there are any particular requirements, the editor will be able to let you know.

### 2. First reading: Overview of proposal and contribution

On your first reading, you should be aiming to form an overall impression and understanding of the book proposal and any supplementary information. You may wish to make some notes on these first impressions, focusing on recent related work in the area, responding to the book's statement of purpose, and thinking about the impact that you feel that the book might have on the general body of research in your discipline.

### 3. Second reading: Detailed reading

Once you have read the book proposal and any supplementary information once and formed a broad impression of it, you should undertake a second, more detailed reading, with the aim of giving a rounded and objective evaluation. You may wish to consider the following aspects of the proposal:

#### 1. Contribution to the discipline

- Does this book make a significant contribution to the discipline at this time?
- Is there a need for a book on the subject at the proposed level?
- Do you think that there would be a clear readership for this book? Has the author adequately explained the target audience for the book?
- Has the author situated this book within the context of its competitors, and have they explained how their book differs?
- Are you aware of any other major competitors for this book, either published or in preparation, which have not been mentioned in the proposal?
- Would you consider using this book for a class you are teaching, or might you recommend it to your graduate students?
- Is this subject area expanding, static or contracting?
- Is the useful life of the book likely to be 3, 5 or 10 years?

## **2. Academic rigour and accuracy**

- Is the methodology or argument proposed for the book academically sound and/or convincing? Is it original?
- Are the appropriate related topics and/or research literature mentioned in the book proposal?
- Are there any obvious gaps in the coverage of the book?
- Is the information (e.g. data, formulae, quotations, references, tables and figures) in the proposal and/or sample chapters accurate and correct?
- Are you familiar with the work and reputation of the author(s)?

## **3. Style and structure**

- Is the proposed structure of the book (and where available, the table of contents) clear and well-organised?
- Is there any extraneous material in the proposed structure



of the book that you feel could be omitted?

- Can the material be covered in the proposed length?
- Is the language in the proposal clear and accurate?
- Is the language in any sample chapters clear and accurate?

Many reviewers find that it is useful to make notes related to each of these areas as they complete the first reading of the proposal. Using these notes, you can then complete your review by substantiating your evaluation with examples from the proposal and/or sample chapters.

## Different kinds of book

- **Textbooks.** The review process for a textbook proposal may be slightly different, and editors will often ask more detailed questions about the book's proposed audience, level and pedagogical features. In most cases, you will be given additional guidance to help you complete your review.
- **Books proposed for a series.** If the book you are reviewing has been proposed to fit into an existing series, you may also be asked to comment on its suitability for the series.

### 4. Writing your review

Once you have read the proposal and supplementary information, and have made notes on both your broad and detailed impressions, you have the raw material for writing your review. Many reviewers choose to summarise their thoughts in the first paragraphs of the review, and then, in the second half of the review, move onto a more detailed substantiation of their recommendations, with suggestions for revisions where needed.

Your review will be guiding the editor when deciding on one of four routes, listed below:

1. **Accept without revision:** On rare occasions, a book will be accepted for publication without any revisions requested.
2. **Accept with revisions:** In most cases, where a book is accepted for publication, amendments will need to be made to the proposal in order to take into account suggestions and feedback from reviewers. Revisions might include:
  - Broadening or narrowing the coverage of the book
  - Including additional topics or references
  - Aiming the book at a more appropriate audience
  - Building on certain areas of the proposal, e.g. the book's significance to the discipline, details of the book's competitors
  - Acknowledging any language problems that are likely to be present in the final manuscript, and putting in place measures to deal with this
3. **Do not accept:** If the proposal is found not to be sound in principle or methodology, or does not make any significant contribution to the field, it may be rejected at this stage by the editor. If you believe that there are major problems with the proposal, it is important to give objective reasons and evidence for this. This will ensure that the editor understands your concerns when they are called upon to make a final decision, and in turn helps the author to develop their future research according to your feedback.

## 6

## Submitting your review

Once you are confident that your review accurately reflects your professional opinion of the book proposal, submit it to the editor by the agreed deadline. At this point, the editor will read and consider your review, and will make a decision on how to progress with the book. The editor will collate the reviewers' recommendations, in most cases anonymising them, and send them to the author, or simply send general feedback based on the review.

## 7

## Additional review rounds and clearance reviews

In some circumstances, you may be called upon to review the proposal again once the author has had chance to make the necessary changes. In this case, it is helpful to compare your initial review against the changed article, to make sure that the changes that you proposed have been made successfully. You may also suggest additional changes, in the manner of a first review. For most books, there will be one or two revision stages, depending on the number and nature of revisions needed.

In other cases, you may be asked to perform a clearance review on a book that you have previously reviewed the proposal for. A clearance review involves reviewing a full or partial manuscript for the purpose of checking that your comments at initial review were sufficiently addressed. It also allows to chance to comment on other areas, such as how well the manuscript achieves the proposed aims.

## 8

## After you review

The final decision will be taken by the editor, who will collate the final comments on the revisions. If the book is accepted for publication, a contract will be drawn up between author and publisher so that publication can begin. In some cases, if the proposal is accepted, you may be sent a copy of the book upon publication.

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