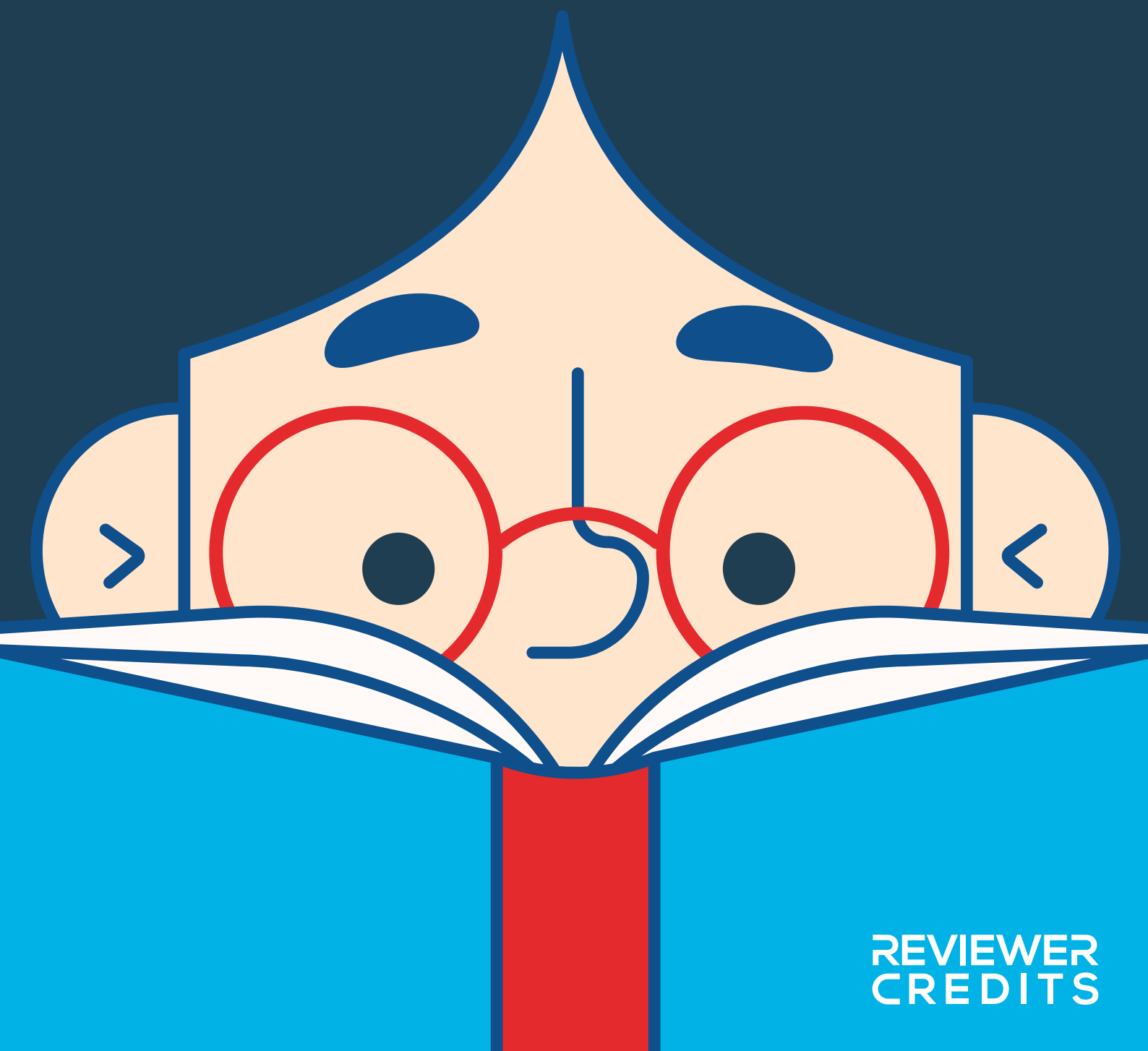# Mastering Journal Peer Review: An Easy-to-Follow Guide for Effective Manuscript Evaluation

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR EVALUATING A PAPER

Read the paper quickly, note initial thoughts, and plan a strategy accordingly.

Write a summary of the purpose, methods / theories, results, importance / novelty because:

The summary serves as an outline for your comments.

If the author has not emphasized his/her points correctly, the summary will highlight the need for author refocus.

The summary helps establish the time necessary to write the full review.

The summary helps identify the areas that will require the most attention.

The summary helps establish the time necessary to write the full review.

Draft notes describing your general impression based on the following questions:

1. Are the findings relevant or novel, or does the process advance the field?

2. Is the research question/hypothesis clear?

3. Are there any potential ethical issues with the premise or methods?

    a. Can potential ethical issues can be addressed?

    b. Do they disqualify the paper?

4. Do the methods answer the research question(s)?

5. Is the overall argument/presentation clear?

6. Is the documentation complete?

    a. Can a reference list be updated or raw data be added in a revision?

    b. Is additional research needed, or is rejection likely?

7. Is the topic consistent with the mission and vision of the journal?

    - No? Consider writing a recommendation to reject using notes prepared from the initial read.

    - Is the manuscript more suitable as another type of article in the same journal?

8. Do the paper and abstract follow typical journal article format?

    - Can the paper or abstract be revised with a reasonable amount of effort?

    - Can the article be resubmitted as a different type of article?

If the identified problems can be corrected, then read each section in depth.

- Ask/answer key questions.

- Make specific notes (identifying paragraph/sentence numbers)/comments.

Read each section in depth and draft notes with relevant questions in mind:

Read the Introduction to evaluate the premises

- Are the premises consistent with the literature/field?

- If a premise is unclear, look to see if the info is misplaced in the Discussion and suggest reorganization.

- If the premise is faulty, consider whether it can be fixed by
  - ✓ rewriting?
 - ✓ adding further background from the literature?

Read the Methods and Results to evaluate validity and reliability

- Do the methods address the research question(s)?

- Are the data presented correctly?
  - ✓ Are descriptions of controls included?
  - ✓ Are the controls appropriate?
  - ✓ Are the data reported in full?
  - ✓ Are the data reported clearly?

- Figures and Tables
  - ✓ Are they necessary?
  - ✓ Are they placed in the appropriate order?
  - ✓ Can they stand alone?
  - ✓ Are they professionally prepared?

- Are the proper statistical analyses applied?

Read the Discussion and evaluate the overall argument and flow of the ideas

- Are the premises clearly established in the Introduction?

- Do the Results support the hypothesis?

- Does the Discussion reveal how the findings fit in the field?
    - ✓ Are comparisons to the literature offered?
    - ✓ What new info is offered or problem resolved?

- Are future research directions clear?

- Are limitations addressed?
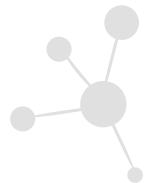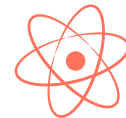
Evaluate whether the Abstract and Title describe the paper

- Is the premise/background stated?

- Is every result related to a method?

- Are the results stated?

- Is the importance to the field indicated?
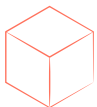
Use your notes to prepare a summary of your review with a decision (for the editor)

- Polish the summary of the purpose, methods, findings, and conclusions of the paper.

- Identify highlights of the paper (at least 3).

- Summarize the problems that led to the decision, for example:
  - ✓ "The premise is not supported by adequate background info."
  - ✓ "Methods are not reported for some of the reported results."

- Make a clear suggestion about accepting, accepting with corrections, revising and resubmitting, or rejecting the paper.
  - ✓ If a revision is suggested, recommend the revisions that must, should, and ideally would be made before acceptance.
  - ✓ If rejecting, reiterate the reason for the decision by highling the fit for the journal, quality of the research, or problems with logic.

    - Focus on content and logic, not grammar or spelling.

    - Focus on the severity of the problem, not the number of problems.

Explain the errors point by point (for the author)

- Describe the specific problems in detail.

- Give examples.

- Suggest general corrections.

- Identify the corrections that must be made for acceptance.

Tips & Tricks

1. Preventing bias:
   - ✓ Are the comments helpful or just critical?
   - ✓ Are you commenting on the paper you were given or the one that you wanted to read?
   - ✓ Consider whether you want to love the paper so much (it is in your field!) that you unintentionally underemphasized a clear error?
   - ✓ Not all bias is bad; you have been asked to review the paper from your unique perspective.

2. Staying focused on the big picture while writing your comments:
   - ✓ Write a summary of the paper and refer to the summary often!
   - ✓ Remember the purpose: promoting the field, encouraging/helping other researchers, and contributing to the editor's decision.
   - ✓ Keep in mind that you are not the sole arbitrator of the decision.

3. Communicating professionally
   - ✓ Refer to problems with the paper, not to the author(s).
   - ✓ Avoid "you" language.
   - ✓ Write in the same tone used when speaking to a valued colleague (because you are speaking to a valued colleague).

4. Describe problems fully and precisely
   - ✓ Start with the problem, not the solution.
   - ✓ For example, "The introduction is incomplete because key citations are not included to support x, y, z.... Citations supporting x, y, z... are needed for the paper to be accepted."
   - ✓ not "Add citations to the introduction."

5. Refer to examples in the paper by highlighting the complete passage that needs to be changed and explicitly identify cases of an example that represents a recurring problem.

6. Use standard subject–verb construction.

7. Keep sentences short: Limit the instances of "and" and "but," and reduce the number of commas.

8. Avoid pronouns.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN COMMENTING ON PAPERS FROM NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

Problem: Vague phrasing: "The Introduction is not logical."

Correction: Identify the specific problem: "The ideas in the Introduction are not presented in a logical order," or "the ideas are not supported with proper citations and therefore the premise is unclear."

Offer a solution: "Consider revising the order of topics in the Introduction to improve the logic" or "Consider adding more field-specific information on topic X to clarify the premises on which the study is based."

Problem: The suggested revision is too precise: "The letters in Figure 1 should be in 12-pt New Roman font."

Correction: "The letters in Figure 1 are too small to read."

Offer a solution: "Consider revising this figure to ensure that the letters are large enough and that they do not overlap the image (table, other text, etc.)."

Problem: Low proficiency in the non-native language

Correction: Ask a native speaker to review your (only) comments for clarity. Use short sentences. Avoid pronouns (this/that). Give examples.

Problem: Suggestions require more time than is allotted for a resubmission

Correction: Be aware of the journal guidelines/timelines and consider whether the paper can be resubmitted with fewer or less extensive changes or whether the paper needs to be rejected.

Offer a solution: "For this paper, please consider adding an experiment/explanation/data" or "Consider suggesting future studies on Topic X that might further support your findings".

The Four Sections of a Review

Paper Summary
- Premise
- Hypothesis / Research Question
- Methods
- Findings
- Relevance

Analysis Summary
- Overall Impression
- 3 Positive Comments
- Problems to Address

Decision
- Accept with Corrections, Revise and Resubmit, or Reject
- Note Any Caveats to the Decision

Point-by-point Suggestions
- Most Critical Errors
- Revisions That Would Improve The Paper
- Minor Issues

Process Summary

Read Paper For Takeaways
- Summarize the paper
- Make general notes about overall impression

Focus On Each Section
- Premise • Validity
- Completeness
- Reliability • Ethics

Incorporate Notes
- Add details from section notes to general notes
- Note highlights and key errors

Write Decision Paragraph
- Summarize positives
- Summarize key negatives
- Render decision

List Suggestions For Authors
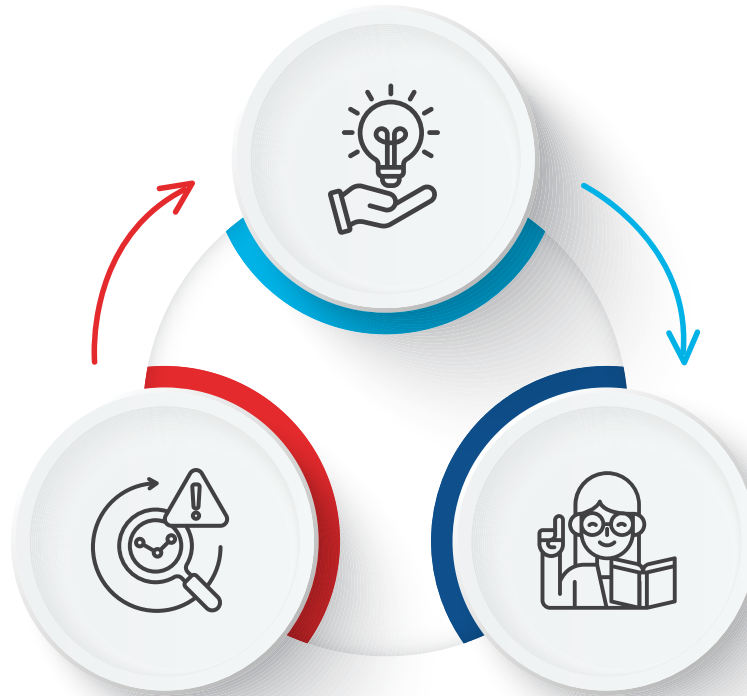- Specify the problem
- Give examples
- Offer general suggestions

Proofread The Final Review
- Ensure professional tone
- Check grammar/spelling

In summary

Offer Solutions

- Make general suggestions
- Do not edit the paper

Identify Problems Precisely

- Give examples
- Identify the problems that must be fixed

Be a Teacher, Not a Critic

- Show professionalism
- Consider the tone

- Identify the problems precisely.

- Make general suggestions for major revisions and more specific suggestions for minor revisions.

- Offer specific examples.

- Do not refer to author failures but to errors/omissions in the paper.

- Ultimately, approach the task as a teacher and mentor, not a critic.

- Be kind.

Pen and Persona: The Literary Journey of
Nancy Vesta, MS

This e-book is based on a Reviewer Credits presentation hosted by Gareth Dyke with guest Nancy Vesta, MS. With three decades of academic editing and publishing experience, Nancy has coordinated the peer review process, helped communicate editor decisions to authors, and edited author responses to reviewers. For more tips on academic writing, effective editing, and the peer review process, please visit **Vesta Scholar Solutions** and follow Nancy on **LinkedIn**.

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