Editorial

Being A Developmental Reviewer: Easier Said Than Done

The norms for reviewing and critiquing research have changed significantly over the past twenty-five years. The once-infamous skirmishes and arguments at professional meetings are now a distant memory. Session chairs and discussants today are now encouraged to be “appreciative” in their critiques instead and even members of the audience seem reluctant to raise significant concerns. Most doctoral students and junior faculty today will be forever spared the indignity of having some reviewer or editor write them that their paper was the worst manuscript they had read on that topic in their careers. In short, almost everyone now has the message not to be overly harsh and negative in reviewing research, and the quality of our emotional lives, if not our intellectual lives, is probably much the better for it.

However, simply not being negative in tone in a review doesn’t make a review developmental. The positive-negative tone dimension of reviewing is not isomorphic with the helpful-unhelpful dimension. I have sympathy with authors who get back three reviews that are so positive in tone that they can’t understand why the paper was rejected; if the paper is so good, why isn’t a revise-and-resubmit being extended? The authors have not had the unpleasant experience of reading a very different, and much harsher, assessment provided to the editor and associate editors.

There are two main ingredients of a developmental review: (1) helping the author understand what is wrong with the present manuscript and (2) helping the author figure out how to fix the present manuscript. Most reviewers do fulfill their responsibilities to point out all the flaws of a paper kindly, but we can all be better at providing authors with constructive and instructive advice about how to fix their papers, too. What I’d like to do briefly below is provide some guidance on how we can make reviews more developmental in substance as well as pleasant in tone.

- Start off the review with an overall assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. What aspects of the paper (theory, method, sample, data analysis, results, writing style) do you find most appealing? What aspects of the paper do you find most troubling? In other words, help the authors see the priorities in what needs to be remedied to make the article publishable.
If you see a flaw you perceive as fatal, certainly point that out to the authors. Then, if possible, try to point out other potential publication outlets where this flaw might not be so injurious. For example, if it’s a potential case study, think about some outlets where it might find a receptive home. If it’s a potential practitioner-oriented article, recommend some journals you think might be interested in a reworked version of the paper. If it’s too narrow in scope or of limited interest to a broad management audience, try to identify some niche journals that might be interested in the authors’ research.

When writing the review, please note to the author when a point is relatively minor or relatively major. For example, finding a typo shouldn’t be counted as an equally serious flaw as missing an entire stream of relevant research.

If you find the title of the paper misleading, provide the authors with one or two possible alternatives and your rationale for why your suggestions are more reasonable.

The most difficult part of being developmental in a review comes in the Theory section. Here are the comments I most frequently see from reviewers: “Just because something hasn’t been done before doesn’t mean it should be done”; “You don’t answer the ‘so what’ question for me”; “The paper doesn’t make any theoretical contribution to the literature.” I don’t necessarily disagree with the sentiments, but going back to the initial point above, these comments don’t help the author see how to fix his/her manuscript going forward.

So, how can we be more developmental in providing feedback on a theory section? Try to give authors some specific ideas to get them going in the right direction. For example, are there some other independent, dependent, or moderating variables that would strengthen the paper? Are there some other theoretical perspectives the authors could use to increase the complexity of their ideas? Are there some specific citations you can provide them to guide them in subsequent literature reviews? Are there some articles (either on this topic or elsewhere in the literature) that you think are good exemplars or role models for research on this topic? As a field, we’ve become somewhat obsessed with raising the standards for what we call “theory,” but we’ve been much slacker in providing guidance to each other in how to build theories that meet our standards. Telling authors “what theory is not” is not the same as helping authors develop useful theories.

If authors err in writing hypotheses, they tend to err in one of three ways: (1) they have too many hypotheses; (2) they have too many compound hypotheses (multiple independent and dependent variables in one hypothesis); and (3) the hypothesis is confusingly written (e.g., the moderation effect is written incorrectly, causality is inappropriately implied, etc.). Here, providing guidance on which hypotheses can be easily deleted and one or two specific examples of rewritten hypotheses is extremely valuable to authors.

Almost every sample can be criticized for not being large enough, not being diverse enough, and not being longitudinal (or longitudinal over a greater length of time). Simply telling authors that they need to collect more data isn’t extremely helpful; most authors would have presented more data if they could have feasibly gotten them. So, the developmental challenge for the reviewer, above and beyond making the observations above, is guiding the author on how to make the best use of the data they already have or asking them to present additional data they are likely to have collected or may have ready access to.
• In many ways, it’s easiest to be developmental in the Method and Results sections because the problems here are often easiest to identify and rectify. Tell the authors explicitly what data you want to see on the sample, what analyses aren’t done that should be done, what analyses should be redone and how, or alternative ways you’d like to see the results presented. Here more than in any other sections of the paper, the reviewer is in the best position to provide the author with some very concrete, specific advice.

• Many authors, particularly those who are relatively junior in our field, struggle with how to write a coherent Discussion section. Too often the Discussion section errrs by repeatedly summarizing results and drawing sweeping generalizations from the findings. As in the Theory section, try to provide the authors with some specific paragraphs or sections which could be deleted without any loss of content, some places where generalizations could be toned down, and some ideas not yet discussed that could be.

• All of us have been guilty of failing to fully conform with formatting guidelines at one time or another—and we all remember how annoyed we have been with editors and reviewers who have been draconian in response. Certainly, point out the formatting details that have to be fixed, but try to refrain from making the attribution that lack of attention to formatting details is a sign of lazy, inconsiderate, or disrespectful behavior on the part of the authors.

• As our field has increasingly encouraged the participation of non-US and non-UK authors, we have to expect that not all authors will be fully fluent in English. I (and other editors) try to reject the worst cases of poor writing without review, but nonetheless sometimes as reviewers we have to work with the level of language facility we are handed. Suggesting to authors that they might benefit from some editing from a colleague who is a native English speaker is a constructive idea. If we are genuinely committed to getting a worldwide set of authors and a worldwide audience, then we have to be committed to working with non-native English speakers more patiently.

• Finally, just as authors are encouraged to rewrite and revise their manuscripts, sometimes reviewers would benefit from careful editing themselves. Can those ten pages of critiques be boiled down a bit? Could the “stream of consciousness technique” of identifying problems be more logically presented? It is sometimes ironic to see reviewers critique authors for sloppy writing when the reviews themselves contain numerous typos and grammatical errors. Proof-reading and some rewriting on our end helps authors accept our reviews as more developmental in tone.

A Concluding Note

Reviewing is an undervalued and unappreciated professional service. In the total picture of our professional careers, it is often our least visible and least measured contribution to the field. Doing reviews in a timely, constructive fashion is much harder than many authors imagine, particularly considering the other professional demands on our time.

Given the impact that our reviews have on the careers of our colleagues, it’s important to periodically remind ourselves of how important what we say and how we say it are to an anonymous author. Part of being a good reviewer is getting reviews done on time; part
of being a good reviewer is being pleasant in tone. I hope the suggestions above provide reviewers with some ideas on how to be more developmental in practice, too. To paraphrase Lou Holtz: Just don’t tell the authors the sea is rocky; tell them how to get the ship to shore.

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