



EDITOR'S NOTE

Blinding and Peer Review

Promoting a fair and effective peer review process is an important obligation for responsible journal editors and editorial boards. Design decisions are affected by community standards, journal character, and personal preferences, but the fundamentals are important to understand in any case.

An open or nonblinded peer review is one in which authors and reviewers are known to each other. In an egalitarian world this would offer a simple approach to balance the power dynamic between parties. Authors are known for their prior work and affiliations, and reviewers are openly accountable for their comments. The problem, though, is that sensitivities and clearly nonegalitarian realities can shift the power dynamics. Reviewers may be more forgiving of individuals or institutions they respect. They may also be hesitant to make critical comments about the work of friends and colleagues, and even more so about the work of senior community members who could adversely affect their professional status or opportunities. At the same time, authors with greater personal authority could use their positions to unduly influence the negotiation and compromise that is part of the review and revision process. To avoid uncomfortable or imbalanced power situations the solution of blinding was introduced.

Double-blinding has author information withheld from reviewers and reviewer information withheld from authors. It offers the hope of minimizing bias created by author names or affiliations that could affect reviewer opinions and reassures reviewers that their candid comments will not adversely affect their relationships or careers. The awareness of differences in rank would also be obscured or eliminated for authors, encouraging them to accept comments strictly on their merit. The fundamental problem, however, is that true double-blinding often does not work, particularly in small fields. Many details in a manuscript—the topic, equipment used, or scientific methods—can strongly hint at both institution and at least some authors. In the most specialized fields, reviewer statements can also indicate the source. Hints can lead either side to make assumptions—correct or incorrect—and create some of the bias the process was intended to guard against. Anonymity can also encourage some reviewers to be less diplomatic than they might otherwise be, potentially creating an antagonistic atmosphere.

Single-blinding usually protects the anonymity of reviewers while giving them full access to author information. This approach is much easier to manage administratively. Author names, affiliations, methods, and acknowledgments (and sometimes more) do not have to be scrubbed to eliminate identifiers. Reviewers will not be guessing at author identities and, appropriate or not, may choose to calibrate their comments based on knowledge of the authors. The combination of anonymity and knowledge can create a very comfortable situation for many reviewers but an uncomfortable situation for some. The primary problem is that the concentration of power is on the reviewer side. It can be difficult for authors to argue with anonymous reviewers when their identity is fully exposed.

Although there is no perfect path, there are checks and balances that can minimize the adverse effects of any peer review structure. The use of multiple reviewers and thoughtful editorial oversight is critical. Reviewers should feel more restraint knowing that their reviews will stand side by side with others. Reviews that are inappropriately aggressive or soft will be apparent, and the anonymity of reviewers does not extend to editorial staff, so poor performance will not go unnoticed. Good editors carefully consider the breadth and tone of reviews to look for undue bias, inadequate effort, or other forms of compromise. Reviewers can be queried on comments that are unnecessarily aggressive as well as those that are unclear or unhelpful. Inappropriate comments can be removed or editorial comments added. If reviews are wholly inadequate, they can be rejected and additional reviewers engaged. Good editors will flag both excessively hard and excessively soft reviews. Giving authors an easy pass is as much a problem as being unfairly or unhelpfully critical.

Working to the highest level of professionalism should eliminate most of the concerns with any blinding strategy. The best reviewers ignore politics—professional and personal—to give the most helpful evaluations possible. They write reviews with sufficient clarity, objectivity, focus, and respectfulness that their positive intent to help authors improve their work is clear and any need for anonymity eliminated. Some reviewers will even take the step of identifying themselves in comments to

authors to take public responsibility for their comments and reduce any perceived power imbalance.

The best authors consider reviews objectively, looking for issues where flags are raised even if they do not agree with the specific comment or criticism. Even a somewhat off-target comment can identify areas in which strengthening could benefit future readers.

Peer review is a negotiation, and negotiations are most likely to be successful when respectfulness is an integral

part of the program. Every comment and response should be written as though for the public record, whether or not it is. Relentless respectfulness can also withstand occasional slips on either side. It is important to remember that the shared goal is to maximize the value and utility of the final written product.

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