Tips to help with peer review

Reviewing articles can be time-consuming, but it can also be a good opportunity to find out what's happening in your field of research. We hope you find this little factsheet helpful—if you have any feedback, including tips to add, please let us know by sending suggestions to Marni: marnia@caan.ca

Before you begin your review …

1) Read over the assessment form provided by the journal. This will give you a sense of the things you will want to pay attention to when reviewing the article(s) you have been assigned.
2) It might also be worth taking a quick look at the journal you are conducting the review for to see what kinds of articles have been published in the past, what level of detail is expected for the articles and so on.
3) Put a plan in place for your review. Maybe you will decide to set aside one afternoon and do the review from start to finish in one sitting. Or, maybe you would like to spread the review out over three or more days, depending on your workload and other commitments. Here is an example of a schedule that could work for you:

    Day 1: read the paper all the way through to get a sense of what the authors are saying and whether you will recommend this paper to be published. This can be a skim read. Don't pick up your pen or pencil, just read. ☺

    Day 2: read the paper again, but this time make notes or comments on the paper.

    Day 3: complete the rating form drawing from your first impression of the paper and the comments that you made on Day 2.

There are lots of ways you can do an article review. The most important thing is to find a process that works for you! Whatever you do, give yourself lots of time—as tempting as it might be to leave things to the last minute.

Some other things to look for

Many journals provide reviewers with evaluation criteria. In general, however, ask yourself if the article meets the following key benchmarks:

- Overall, does the paper make a meaningful contribution to the field of research? For example, does the paper teach us new things and/or give us new information to build on in future research?
- Does the article make sense to you? If it doesn't, chances are that it won't make sense to other readers either.
- Will the research findings be important and interesting to the journal's readers?
- Do the authors write clearly and use plain language? Sometimes, writers use big words or jargon (unnecessarily complicated language used to impress, rather than to inform, your audience), but it's important that our readers are able to easily understand the information that is being shared in our journal.

More tips

- **Think big picture!** We are asking you to review an article because of your expertise, so don't worry too much about editing and focus on the author's overall presentation of their research.
- **Meet your deadline!** We take our turnaround time seriously, so please be upfront about whether you have time to complete the review (which typically requires one to four hours). If you do have to decline, a quick "no" is preferred so we can move on to ask someone else. If something comes up that will prevent you from making your deadline, it's important to communicate that to us too. We understand that life happens and are usually happy to give more time, we just want to be kept in the loop!
- **Be honest and upfront.** If you agree to do peer review, you must treat the materials we send you as confidential documents. We are sharing these papers with you in trust. You cannot share the paper with anyone and you must keep your thoughts about the paper to yourself (unless you are working with a mentor who is helping you with your review).
- **Be constructive and kind.** Remember that your job as a peer reviewer is to help the authors improve and strengthen their paper. Please don't be mean when providing feedback - give authors very clear, constructive notes to work from.