

## In the Bookstores...

**Good Peer Review Practice Explained**

Irene Hames. *Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals. Guidelines for Good Practice.* Oxford: Blackwell, ALPSP, 2007. ISBN 978-1-4051-3159-9 (Paperback). GBP 19.99, EUR approx. 28.70. 293 pages.

Irene Hames, Managing Editor of *The Plant Journal*, is a well known expert in peer review and editorial office management. In this book she has organized her store of knowledge and experience into an authoritative guide for journal editors and peer reviewers which is also worth reading by authors and those of us who work with them. If you are responsible for publishing peer-reviewed material or managing a peer review system this book will equip you with up-to-date knowledge on best practice. Although the book is intended for gatekeepers, the insights Hames gives us into how they view the peer review process and what they expect from authors and their manuscripts can help medical writers work more successfully with authors.

The book is divided into nine chapters followed by four appendixes and a carefully rendered index. The brief introductory chapter discusses the aims of peer review and some of its underlying assumptions. Subsequent chapters cover just about any event or circumstance an editor might encounter, and provide good advice on how to deal with the many challenges of running a journal to high professional and ethical standards. The facets of manuscript review that are analysed include initial submission and checks for completeness and suitability, the review process itself and the decision-making process. The chapter that provides guidance on the transition from paper to online submission and review is one of the most useful in the book for editorial office managers, whereas some might find that the following short chapter on how to motivate reviewers reads more like a guide on how to spoil them. Nevertheless one can't argue with Hames' advice to appreciate them, train them and reward them, because they are a journal's most precious resource.

The two final chapters discuss the obligations and responsibilities of authors, editors, reviewers and editorial staff, and misconduct in scientific research and publishing. The appendixes provide a list of golden rules and a good practice checklist, a generous sampling of current manuscript submission documents from various journals, a list of useful websites and a brief review of some current alternative approaches to peer review. Most of the examples used throughout the book come from biomedical journals, so

that makes *Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals* especially useful to health science journal gatekeepers and medical writers.

In the current research environment misconduct, plagiarism and other types of cheating seem to be on the rise, so it's logical for editors to want to learn what warning signs to look out for. Hames points out these signs, and while they no doubt reflect her actual experience I wonder if her many examples of things to be suspicious of tend to reinforce the 'us versus them' attitude that sometimes makes peer review a struggle between gatekeepers and authors rather than a dialogue between equals. Editors' and reviewers' errors (which in my experience also seem to be on the rise) and occasional abuse are practically ignored, as though they were not as serious a problem for scientific publication as authors' errors or chicanery.

Of interest to those of us who work with international authors is Hames' brief mention of manuscripts with language problems (pages 38-39). She recommends sending manuscripts for review only if careful evaluation shows that "the text can be relatively easily understood and the results interpreted without great difficulty." This is a good general rule as long as editors are aware that reviewers will not all have the same skills in reading English that might sound 'foreign,' and some reviewers will be more tolerant of language problems than others. Hames warns that expecting reviewers to read manuscripts in which the standard of language is very poor "is unfair and my frustrate or anger them." She also points out that reviewers who have to struggle to read a manuscript may become biased against the content as a result, and that this might prevent potentially interesting work from getting published. If followed, her advice on how to handle this situation in a manner that is sensitive and fair to both reviewers and international authors might help remove some of the obstacles to publication faced by non-native users of English.

The move to an online submission system can lead to an increase in manuscripts from international authors, yet the book does not mention translators, author's editors or medical writers despite the growing demand for the services we offer. Perhaps most gatekeepers, unaware of how these science communication professionals help authors negotiate with gatekeepers, still consider our role as incidental to the process of peer review. Hames' book, although intended to be used by gatekeepers, gives those of us involved in manuscript preparation many valuable insights that will help make it easier to use peer review as a tool to improve manuscripts.

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