



Uni-edit English Writing Tip 012

Why should I nominate peer reviewers?

Difficulty: Easy

One of our customers asked us about a specific request from their target journal to nominate peer reviewers for their manuscript when submitting it to a journal.

My target journal asked me to nominate a list of peer reviewers they could ask to review my paper. This seems unusual to me. Shouldn't the journal choose my peer reviewers, so the review is objective? It seems to me I could choose only friendly reviewers to ensure a positive review, regardless of the scientific merit of my study.

Our customer is referring to the practice of some journals of requesting submitting authors to provide a list of recommended peer reviewers in their cover letter. Some journals do not explicitly ask for such a list, but will consider one if the author provides one.

Our customer's concerns seem valid at first glance. Shouldn't the publication decision be based on a paper's scientific merit alone, rather than on who the author knows? However, the rationale for this practice is not favoritism at all, and its practical consequences help to improve the quality of your paper and ensure a fair publication decision.

Why nominate peer reviewers?

The goal of this practice is not to give authors preferential treatment, but rather to ensure they are given fair treatment. The main reason is that compared with a journal's Editors, who must assign peer reviewers to a wide range of papers across various subfields, the author of a paper probably knows better which experts are most qualified to evaluate research in their specific subfield.

This is why this practice is especially common in generalist journals: the narrower a journal's scope, the more likely its Editorial Board is to already be in contact with the leading experts in the subfield (these experts might even serve on the Editorial Board!)

Remember, your list is just a recommendation: reviewers can decline to review, and the Editorial Board can decline to ask them. In this way, the journal can avoid obvious cases where they would

suspect favoritism or negative bias. In addition, peer review is blinded: you will likely never know the name/identity of any of your peer reviewers.

Step 1. Choose 7-10 preferred reviewers.

Choose 7-10 published authors or notable experts in your specific subfield. The closer their research topics are to yours, the more strongly you should consider listing their names. These can be authors you know, or authors you've never met; speakers at conferences, or industry experts. It is not essential to contact a person before recommending them as a reviewer, but doing so may make them more likely to agree if and when they get the official request.

You might ask, why should I nominate 7-10 reviewers, if my paper is only going to be reviewed by 2 or 3? Again, your list is just a recommendation: not everyone you suggest will be asked, and not everyone asked will agree to the request.

It's fine to choose researchers you know and have collaborated with before. Do not, however, choose reviewers with a conflict of interest. This obviously includes researchers from your institution or from your co-authors' institutions. A less obvious example is someone with a patent on a technology, process, chemical compound, etc., that you are testing.

Step 2. Choose authors you cite, or authors the journal knows of already.

Authors you cite have a clear interest in ensuring your paper correctly describes your research topic, and that it correctly states the scope and conclusions of their research where you cite it. Moreover, it spreads knowledge of your work to the people most likely to read it and cite it, opening up new research collaborations with you. If you don't personally know many researchers in your subfield, now is the chance to make those connections!

For this strategy, it is best to choose authors whose work is directly relevant to your own, rather than just those authors you cite when providing general background information. Focus on those you refer to a lot, or whose findings are instrumental to your own work.

If you're new to the field, or feel that authors you cite would not fairly review your paper (for example, maybe you're critical of their findings), another good option is to read through the last few years of your target journal, and select recently published authors or co-authors in similar subfields. The Editorial Board will already be familiar with the authors, and the authors may be happy to serve as a peer reviewer for the same journal that published them.

Step 3. Choose reviewers who can review your paper critically and constructively.

Think more broadly about your goal for your paper. Do you merely want to publish the paper, to add a title to your list of publications on your resume or personal website? Or do you want your paper to reflect strong research, whose results will be respected and cited by a broad range of readers?

The truth is, no single researcher or laboratory has the only understanding of a research topic: by incorporating the opinions of your peers, your research is more likely to reflect the truth behind a research topic, and to ‘stand the test of time’: i.e., to have relevance in the field even ten years from now. In that regard, if your research topic has broad, international interest, choosing reviewers from a variety of countries will help you to revise your paper to have global appeal.

However, you might have experience with bias from particular associate editors or subject-matter-expert reviewers in a journal before. Associate editors may be most concerned about journal fit and scope, while subject-matter-expert reviewers may be competing for funding, or have personal agendas. If you feel the bias is unfair, you can also designate non-preferred reviewers in another list. In this case, be sure to explain why! (See Rule 5 below.)

Step 4. Choose some junior researchers.

The most famous and well-regarded researchers in your field are usually very busy. Senior researchers receive more peer-review requests than they have time to handle, and may unconsciously rush through a peer review in order to give priority to other projects. In addition, recommending only well-known researchers can reflect poorly on your familiarity with the field, suggesting you have only a generalist knowledge of it.

Junior researchers, on the other hand, are less likely to receive more requests than they can handle, making them more likely to accept yours. In addition, they will probably devote extra time to critically examining your research, because they have more time, because they want to learn more about the field, and because they want to build a good reputation with the target journal for having strong peer-review skills.

Step 5. Provide a justification and contact information for each reviewer.

Providing a justification gives the Editorial Board context for your choices: as they research each candidate, they will compare your reason with the facts and background of each person to make their decision. Justifications need not be long: one or two sentences usually suffices. Types of justifications include:

- Field relevance: “Recommended because we heavily cite his research lab’s work on CRISPR gene editing in the zebrafish.”

- Technical expertise: “Recommended because she developed the specific microbial cultivation technique we used in this paper.”
- Familiarity with research: “Recommended because we have collaborated closely in past research on the same topic.”

If you decide to list any non-preferred reviewers (i.e., reviewers you expect to be negatively biased), this requires a justification too. E.g., “We request the Editorial Board not to assign Reviewer #2 from our previously submitted paper (Submission No. 1234, 5 Mar 2014), due to unconstructive commentary and seeming unfamiliarity with our methodology in that review.”

As for contact information, an email address and institution for each reviewer is usually sufficient; this information can be obtained from their institution’s website.

Post Publication and Posterity

One final note: following publication, some journals also publish peer review reports with the original paper. They believe it gives credit to the reviewers for the hard work they have done and also it can contribute to the greater transparency of the peer review process. This is good news for you, the author: preferred reviewers who will write constructive and comprehensive reports will engage your readership, helping them to understand your study’s place in the literature and giving them (and you!) new directions for further research.

END OF TIP