**On Civil Critique: Reviewing for JAIS**

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*I recently received a savage review of an article I co- wrote and submitted to a journal that referred to the submitted article as sounding like it was written by a “charlatan attorney” and that referred to parts of the article as “absurd” and as “gibberish.” It compared the argumentation to that in “freshman-level term papers,” and recommended that the author, who is “seriously out of his/her element with this topic … refrain from venturing into areas that exceed his/her professional competence.”*

*–*Robert J. Sternberg[[1]](#footnote-1)

Many scholars, ourselves among them, can relate to the opening quote. While many, if not most, reviews are politely composed with helpful suggestions, the reviews we tend to remember are the ones that hurt us, that seem to attack us, that feel as though they discredit not just the specific work but our professional competency. Rarely, one hopes, will that have been the reviewer’s intention, but their words can be painful to bear. They also set a norm for the language of reviews that others may follow. Worse, they may discourage us from even trying to improve our own work.

Yet most reviewers have received no training and little instruction. Nor will they get much, if any, credit from their institutions for reviewing and are themselves under huge pressure. Reviewing is something they are therefore doing as a service to the field and they are understandably unhappy when they find themselves reviewing a paper that they feel was prematurely submitted. With many of our major journals and large conferences experiencing annual growth in submissions, moreover, the demand for reviews is ever increasing. And with journal reviews, this may mean committing to several rounds of review on the same paper. So, how are reviewers to cope with the pressure of performing many reviews while at the same time providing high-quality reviews? In this editorial, we attempt to address this question. We provide our thoughts on what constitutes a review of high quality, offer suggestions for managing multiple rounds of review, and make recommendations for coping with the pressures of review requests.

1. **On the Constitution of a High-Quality Review**

Based upon our experiences as authors, reviewers, associate editors, and senior editors over many years and across many journals, we have broken down the components of a review into the areas of content, structure, tone, style, timing, and length.

* 1. **Content**

A high-quality review consists of developmental assessments and comments that tease out the major issues inhibiting a paper from reaching its potential and offer suggestions on how to address the issues. A high- quality review provides three forms of content: a description of the key issues/problems the reviewer perceives to be inhibiting the paper’s potential contribution, an explanation for why the particular issues/problems are important ones, and some recommendations on how to address the issues/problems. Clearly, some of the issues may be so significant as to result in a recommendation of the paper’s rejection, but a high-quality review will not just peremptorily state a “fatal flaw” but will provide an explanation for why the issue is significant and offer actionable recommendations, even if they involve submitting to another journal.

In a high-quality review, these three forms of content are typically covered for each major area of a paper— the phenomenon, the literature background/theory, the method, the analysis, and the contribution. Oftentimes, it is not an issue within a particular area of a paper that is inhibiting a paper, but rather consistency across areas. For example, perhaps authors have raised a research question that is well- justified in the introduction but then they actually answered a different question with their data, or perhaps authors have introduced and explained quite thoroughly a theory they plan to use as a lens but then the application of the theory to the data raises more questions than it answers. A high-quality review seeks to identify, explain, and recommend within and across the major areas of a paper with a view toward helping authors reach the highest potential possible for the paper, regardless of whether the paper will ultimately be published in the journal under consideration or not. Such reviews provide clear diagnoses with sufficient detail, including examples and references, to help authors see their own paper from a different perspective. Finally, it can be useful for reviewers to communicate their background in the review. There may be a situation where the reviewer’s perspective and the authors’ perspective are theoretically or methodologically distant on account of very different research backgrounds. Communicating the reviewer’s background may allow authors to make better sense of the review comments and give authors the opportunity to make the case for their position in a revision.

* 1. **Structure**

The way a review is structured can go a long way toward helping authors make sense of the review and helping the entire review team keep track of revisions across multiple rounds of review. For a *JAIS* review, we suggest organizing the review around five major areas of distinction—the phenomenon, the framing, the theory, the method, and the composition.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In terms of the phenomenon, does the paper convince the reviewer of the theoretical and/or practical importance of the phenomenon under study? Does the paper provide a clear statement of objective or research question(s)? If the phenomenon is mature, does the paper carve a well-justified niche? Does the paper go beyond gap-spotting to effectively justify the phenomenon?

In terms of framing, does the paper provide an insightful explanation of related research? Does the paper draw from the most appropriate streams of literature? Does the paper go beyond just describing past related literature to reflecting upon the literature and offering unique insights that then form the basis for the current study? Through the synthesis of prior literature, have the authors been able to put forward a novel conceptual space that distinguishes the study?

In terms of theory, is the role of theory in the paper clear—is the paper developing a new theory, developing and testing a theory, using theory to explain a phenomenon, extending the boundaries of an existing theory, merging several theories to create a new explanation of a phenomenon, or providing some other application of theory? There are many ways to employ theory in a paper with no set right and wrong. What is important is that the reader is able to discern how theory is being applied in the paper under question and is able to perceive some new insights from the application of the theory to the phenomenon in question.

For empirical papers, does the paper have strong data? Are the sources of data convincing and appropriate for the phenomenon under study, is the data collection and analysis rigorous and appropriately conducted? Do the findings provide a substantial contribution to the body of knowledge?

In terms of composition, is the paper easy to understand? Does the paper flow well and keep the reader engaged? Are there things that can be improved in the composition to help boost the paper’s contribution? Is there a consistent narrative with a suitable culmination?

Sometimes reviewers simply go page by page through a paper and note any particular problems in a long list. This makes it hard for authors to gain a holistic perspective of the review and to realize the most critical points of concern. We suggest that reviewers structure the review according to the five issues presented above—the phenomenon, framing, theory, method, and composition—and recommend that they focus on the major issues, leaving minor issues for the end of the review. This will help both the authors and the review team itself identify commonalities and differences between reviews. If applied over several rounds of review, it can also help to highlight the improvements that revisions are making.

Finally, it can be useful for reviewers to communicate their background in the review. There may be a situation where the reviewer’s perspective and the authors’ perspective are theoretically or methodologically distant on account of very different research backgrounds. Communicating the reviewer’s background can help the senior editor better synthesize the reviews, allow the authors to make better sense of the review comments, and give the authors the opportunity to make the case for their position in a revision.

* 1. **Tone**

It’s not just what one says, and how one structures it, but how one says it, that has a tremendous effect on authors. A review should be written as though one is offering counsel to a colleague and not as though one is acting as a jurist in a trial. It can be helpful when preparing a review to put oneself in the shoes of the authors and reflect on how one might feel were one on the receiving end of the comments being written. Authors are disciplinary colleagues, some with less experience writing papers, others with more, but almost all with the same aspiration to contribute to the advancement of the field. Unnecessary high-handedness will just hurt and offend without helping the authors improve their work, current or future.

Thinking about how one’s words may be read by another does not mean that one cannot offer criticism, but this can be easier to take (and be more likely to be addressed) if it is presented respectfully and in a conversational manner. Simple changes in wording can soften remarks while still getting the message across. Presenting one’s comments as personal opinions, e.g., “my reading of this point would suggest …,” rather than as unarguable truths, e.g., “this is inadequate,” can help ensure that the review’s content does not get lost in an aggressive tone.

When reviewing a paper, if one identifies what one considers to be errors of fact or interpretation, it is best to challenge these with reference to authoritative sources rather than relying on one’s own blanket assertions. This can not only inform the authors but also allow them to understand where the comments are coming from and even, perhaps, to challenge the comments in a response or clarify the evidence behind their statements in revision.

Statements that are dismissive (e.g., “the authors clearly know nothing about…”), presumptive (e.g., “I was dismayed to find that no thought was given to…”), rude (e.g., “this is very poorly constructed”) or hyperbolic (“the weakest analysis I have ever seen”) are inappropriate. Instead, the same negative sentiments can be expressed with consideration for the authors, such as “I was unable to ascertain the authors’ familiarity with the body of research on xyz, and I do believe this research would help the reader better grasp the manuscript’s contribution.” Even if the paper does not meet the standards one expects, the authors will have spent considerable time conducting the research and writing the paper, so their work deserves to be treated with civility. The cloak of anonymity that reviewers typically receive is sometimes an excuse for behavior that they would not engage in were their identities known. In general, the best policy is to take the same tone one would take were one’s identity known.

* 1. **Timing**

At *JAIS*, requests to review typically come with a 30- day deadline. Authors will be waiting to find out the decision on their paper and journal reputations can be affected by the timeliness of the review process, so failing to meet deadlines does matter. Therefore, we expect reviewers to do their best to adhere to the deadline. Upon receiving the review invite, if you know that you cannot complete the review before the deadline, it is best to ask the senior editor if an extension is permissible rather than turning the review down for lack of time. Senior editors are often able to schedule their own work on the senior editor report in advance if they are made aware of when to expect the review’s return.

Sometimes, even when one has intended to submit the review on time, the completion of the review may be delayed at the last minute by unavoidable circumstances. In such cases, the reviewer should inform the senior/associate editor as soon as possible. At that stage, it is very difficult for the senior editor to find another reviewer and a minor extension of the deadline is often the best way to avoid an extended wait time for authors. However, in certain cases, the reviewer may simply be unable to deliver the review, in which case a new reviewer will be sought and the authors will experience a longer than average review time. That said, we encourage reviewers to try to keep extensions to a minimum, as senior editors will usually want to have reports from all reviewers before making their decision and, in many cases, might be only using two reviewers. A delay in one review will therefore hold up the whole review cycle.

At the same time, however, it is better for the authors and the journal that papers receive considered and careful reviews, so a short delay may be better than a rushed and cursory review. Ultimately, the review process is not an assembly line that can be perfectly optimized and predicted in advance. All parties involved—authors, reviewers, associate and senior editors—need to operate under the assumption that everyone is doing their best.

* 1. **Length**

There is no “right” length to a review, but if the recommendations in this editorial regarding the breadth and depth of coverage expected in a good review are taken seriously, then it is hard to see how this could be provided in less than two pages. We have often found that reviews in the 2-3 page range cover the right amount of content without becoming overbearing. Very long reviews (5 plus pages—some come in even at 8 pages or more), however, tend to be as unsatisfactory as very short (1 page) reviews. In the former case, the problem is often grandstanding (the reviewers showing off their erudition) and/or nitpicking (highly detailed comments on minor issues, perhaps at the expense of more holistic assessment, or a long list of numbered “problems”).

For authors, very long reviews can be dispiriting and intimidating. Multiply this by the 2-3 reviews that they receive, and the result can be paralyzing. Such reviews feel more like a barrier to keep people from publishing than an attempt to nurture potential. By the same token, very short reviews can be discouraging: a short review recommending a “minor revision” might not provide sufficient justification such that another review of the same paper with a thorough explanation as to why the paper should be rejected will then likely determine the paper’s fate. A short review recommending rejection will likely not provide enough justification for the rejection, and only result in added work for the senior editor and frustration for the authors. The aim of a review is not to show off how much you know or to identify every single thing that is wrong with the paper, nor is it to simply make a recommendation in as few words as possible; the goal is to help the editor make a decision on whether the paper has potential to be published and to guide the authors on how their work can be improved.

1. **Managing Multiple Rounds of Review**

Not all reviews we are asked to do are first looks at a paper. While the above items—structure, tone, style, timing, and length—are still important elements of a good review of a revised manuscript, reviews of a revised manuscript have an additional consideration: consistency. Manuscripts that make it to subsequent rounds have the expectation of an even further development-focused tone. If a paper does not have the potential to make it to successful publication, it should be recommended for rejection during the first round so that authors may efficiently develop an alternative plan for the paper’s ultimate destination. Occasionally, reviewers feel they need more information before making a decision on whether or not a paper has a reasonable chance if properly revised. In such cases, the reviewers will do well to indicate this concern in the “confidential comments” portion of the review so that the senior editor can take this into consideration when making the decision.

When an invitation to revise and resubmit is made, there should be a common expectation among the review team (not just from the senior editor) that the paper has the potential to be accepted for publication in due course. This does not mean that papers cannot be rejected at a later stage, but this should be because the authors were either unwilling or unable to address the points raised by the review team adequately, not because the review team has a change of heart in subsequent rounds.

When reviewing a revised manuscript, one often enters the review with the expectation that the manuscript should be moving in a direction consistent with the majority (if not all) of the directions provided in the previous round. Many times, this is a challenging task for authors trying to meet the expectations of the entire review team. Although review teams have an obligation to be consistent with their prior reviews, they should also be prepared to prioritize or even reevaluate their prior comments as the review process progresses. What does this mean in practice for a reviewer, especially given that one reviewer’s comments may be inconsistent, even contradictory, to another reviewer’s comments? We suggest that reviewers should carefully consider the authors’ response document, noting how they have responded to comments from all members of the review team. Although this adds to the reviewers’ work, it can help to gain an appreciation of the range of recommendations that the authors have been trying to address and enable a more holistic assessment of their success in doing so. While authors are expected to address in good faith the comments raised by the reviewers, reviewers also need to keep in mind that they are reviewers, not co-authors, and, ultimately, the revisions might not look exactly like the reviewer envisioned but nevertheless may be well justified by the authors and consistent with the authors’ desired contribution.

At this point, reviewers should consider themselves less lone reviewers and rather part of a review team. Naturally, it is the obligation of the senior editor to provide guidance on how inconsistency across reviews might be addressed and, in its absence, authors may reasonably seek clarification from the senior editor. Reviewers can also contribute to this process, however, by being mindful of the comments of other members of the team when preparing their reports.

In later review rounds, it is helpful if reviewers acknowledge what issues (if any) were fully addressed by the revision in addition to what issues (if any) were not appropriately addressed. In the latter case, reviewers may refer to their own comments as well as those of other reviewers. For example, if a reviewer from the previous review packet asked the author(s) to include several new statistical tests whose results are inconsistent, another reviewer with requisite expertise could offer an interpretation or a second opinion about the need for such tests. If a reviewer in the previous round asked for new theory to be introduced but the revisions seem to have resulted in additional confusion, a reviewer (not necessarily the same one who made the original comment) might offer suggestions in the current round on how to improve the explanation and application of the theory. The reviewer needs to approach this, however, in a way that acknowledges what the authors were asked to do; as such, subsequent comments should seek to be consistent with earlier ones, even if those comments were from another reviewer. A recent example experienced by one of the authors of this editorial illustrates the problems that can arise when this is not followed:

*Round 1: “I would suggest adding a separate section on MST and other frequently discussed theories in the CMC literature”* (Reviewer A)

*Round 2: “What I do not understand after reading the paper is why I need theories of affordance and MST”* (Reviewer B)

Reviewer B’s comment in Round 2 may be perfectly valid but is unhelpful because it ignores the previous request and response. It would have been better if the reviewer had acknowledged that the CMC theories were added in response to an earlier comment but still expressed an opinion regarding the effectiveness of this change for advancing the arguments of the manuscript. The failure of a reviewer to be consistent across rounds can lead authors to struggle through extra rounds of review while trying to decipher conflicting reviewer comments—even when the senior editor has tried to include a synthesis of reviewer feedback and a clear direction forward in the SE report.

Finally, reviewers may wonder if new concerns can be raised in subsequent rounds. The answer is yes: the previous packet is not a contract with the authors. However, the reviewer should clearly acknowledge the new concern as a new issue and explain why it has just now been raised. For instance, did the authors’ revisions introduce a new concern that was not evident in the previous round? Or did the reviewer fail to notice a problem in the previous round? Out of consideration to the authors and the review team, reviewers should be clear when an issue presented is a new one and explain why it is being introduced at this juncture in the review process.

1. **Coping with Many Review Requests**

As is often the case, when one does a good job, the reward is more work. Reviewing is similar. When someone is doing excellent work as a reviewer, they often start to be asked to write more and more reviews. While these review requests should be seen as a compliment from the community about the quality of one’s work, it is important to strike a balance between doing one’s own research and providing feedback on the research of others. Finding that balance will require knowing when to say “yes” to a review request and knowing when to say “no.”

When considering a review request, it is important to remember what is owed. A professional courtesy rule of thumb to follow is this: for every paper one submits (and that goes to review, e.g., is not desk rejected) two reviews are owed to the journal. Remember, those submissions will require minimally two reviews from other members of the field; as such, IS researchers need to be prepared to balance the scale by contributing two reviews for other manuscripts. This rule should be followed for every submission made, including journal submissions and conference submissions.

Sometimes, though, one must decline to review. In some cases, reviewers are able to guess the identity of the authors and realize that they have a conflict of interest with the author. In such cases, the review must be declined. Even if the author is not a co-author with one of the paper authors, just knowing the authors of a paper can sometimes make a reviewer feel unable to deliver an unbiased review. In general, any time a reviewer feels unable to critique a paper dispassionately, the review must be declined. Another case where an invitation to review might be declined is when a potential reviewer feels a lack of requisite expertise to provide an informed assessment of the paper. Rarely is it necessary for a reviewer to have extensive knowledge of the topic, the theory, and the method; indeed, a strong submission should do such a solid job describing the topic and theory that the reviewer need not have expertise in these areas. But, in general, it is desirable for reviewers to be familiar enough with at least one of these three areas; otherwise, it would be best to decline the review, or at least to indicate to the senior editor the lack of familiarity with these central aspects of the paper. There are also times when one should feel comfortable declining a review because of the large number of papers already reviewed for the journal in recent months (e.g., more than the rule of thumb mentioned above of two reviews for each paper submitted to the journal). Here it is helpful to explain the reason to the senior editor.

If one must decline a review request, it is important to do so in a collegial way. First, declining a review should happen as quickly as possible, such that the editor can move on to another reviewer in a timely fashion. Long delays in review cycles can result, for example, when a reviewer initially accepts a review but waits to actually read the abstract until the review deadline is approaching, only to discover a conflict of interest with an author, leading to the need to withdraw as a reviewer. Second, when declining an invitation, it is very helpful to recommend 2-3 others as potential reviewers with the needed expertise. This may seem presumptuous, but the invitation was sent to an individual whom the editor believed knew the subject matter; that same person likely has good insights into others with similar expertise.

Finally, there is the question as to whether it is appropriate to decline a request to review a revision of a manuscript that the reviewer previously reviewed from the same journal or to decline a request to review a manuscript that the reviewer previously rejected from a different journal. In terms of the first situation, it is a very frustrating experience for authors to have different reviewers introduced in different rounds of review. For this reason, it is preferable to agree to review the revisions on manuscripts that one has previously reviewed even if one recommended a rejection. If a reviewer recommended rejecting the manuscript in the first round, but the senior editor offered the authors a chance to revise the manuscript, we suggest that the reviewer agree to review the revision and go into the revision with an open mind. If the reviewer has recommended rejection in consecutive rounds of review, then there is unlikely to be value in reviewing the manuscript again and, in this case, it is understandable for the reviewer to decline a third request to review the same paper. The second situation—where the reviewer reviewed the same paper for a previous journal—is something that happens quite frequently. In this case, the reviewer should communicate the past history with the senior editor, who will then decide whether it is advisable for the reviewer to review the paper again, depending on such factors as how many reviewers there will be and whether other reviewers have also reviewed the paper before.

In closing, we would like to express our deep appreciation to the many individuals who have reviewed for *JAIS*. Appendix A shows the lifetime Hall of Fame reviewers for *JAIS* (those who have reviewed 25 or more times over the years). In the past year alone, 420 unique reviewers (Appendix B) have completed 723 reviews. Of the 1011 invitations to review, only 177 were declined. Such dedication on the part of the AIS community is integral to the continued growth and success of *JAIS*.

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1. Robert Sternberg is a past president for the American Psychological Association. He holds a PhD and 13 honorary doctorates from universities in the USA, South America, Asia, and Europe. The quote is taken from “Presidential Column: On Civility in Reviewing”, January 1, 2002. https:/[/www](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/on-civility-).[psychologicalscience.org/observer/on-civility-](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/on-civility-) in-reviewing [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Leidner, D. E. (2020). “What’s in a Contribution?,” *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *21*(1), 238-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)