

## A Good Review

Authors, reviewers, and editors alike wish to see good reviews for ASME manuscript submissions. So what is a good review of a manuscript?

Some years ago, I was working on an admittedly difficult topic with one of my graduate students. He had completed a good part of his thesis, and we had submitted a manuscript on the work to a relevant journal. In due time, we got back a rejection of the paper accompanied by two reviews. One recommended acceptance with some significant revisions. The other started thus: *“This topic is too difficult for you. Unless you have worked for at least twenty years in this field, you cannot expect to make an original contribution. The authors are too naïve to think that...”* and on it went. My student was devastated. I was upset. I called the editor, whom I knew, and basically the response I got was—*“Look, this reviewer is a very senior person in the community and I cannot cross him. I should not have sent the paper to him, but now it’s done and I have to reject your paper. I am really sorry.”*

I am sure most authors with long publication experience have a similar story to tell. Imagine though if this was your very first manuscript submission. What could you really learn from this review? What could be its impact on your future career decisions? How much would it help you improve your work? Mind you, I do not think a good review is the one that accepts a mediocre paper, just to encourage authors to stay in the business; or one that accepts an inadequate paper because a senior co-author has a good track record. Here is what I see as a few elements of a good review:

A good review helps the members of the scientific community achieve standards higher than what they might be able to do without expert feedback.

A good review helps the authors learn something new or consider something they had not thought about.

A good review helps to improve the communication of the material and alerts the authors on statements that may be misleading, misunderstood or plain wrong.

A good review is done in good faith; it addresses the contents of the manuscript at hand not the state, status or character of the authors.

A good review is not about the expertise or cleverness of the reviewer, it is about the quality of the proffered manuscript—and, really, nothing else.

A good structure of a review may be like this: In a first paragraph, give a quick summary of the paper’s content and its high and low points. State your recommendation and the main reason(s) for making it. Summarize what will improve the paper. In subsequent paragraphs, go over each of the key points in more detail, stating what are the difficulties and how you think they should be addressed. Refer to pages and lines as much as possible, so your review can be as concrete and clear as possible. Numbering your points is helpful, so the authors can offer their point-by-point rebuttal in an eventual revision. In a final section you may include specific corrections on language or typographical errors, usually only if these are few. After you are done, read over what you have written asking yourself: Is this clear? Fair? How would I feel if I got this review for my paper?

In many ways, a good review is—ok, not quite a labor of love, but certainly—a labor of genuine concern and regard for our fellow researchers. This is why good reviews are the backbone of a good journal. A cursory review with a few lines saying, basically, this is good or this is bad because I tell you so, is a bad review. At JMD, these reviews have little value and carry little weight in editorial decisions. Happily, most of the JMD reviewers observe very good review practices. I am frequently impressed by the thoroughness and care of the reviews I see. A thoughtful rejection is always better than a cursory acceptance.

So, next time you get a nice review with a couple of lines of comments, make sure you go over your paper very, very carefully before submitting your final manuscript. Once out, there is no taking it back.

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