

Rwanda Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences

Peer Reviewers' guidelines: Rwanda Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences (RJMHS)

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Introduction

Peer review is the process used to evaluate the quality of a manuscript before publication. Independent researchers in the relevant field assess submitted manuscripts to check their validity and robustness. Their feedback guides editors in making publication decisions.

The RJMHS operates a double blind review process. All contributions are sent to a minimum of two independent expert reviewers to assess the scientific quality of the paper based on three main criteria:

- scientific robustness: is the research methodology sound and valid, and does the data support the conclusions?
- originality: does the research duplicate work that has already been published?
- clarity: is the manuscript clear and coherent enough for publication?

Editors make their decisions based on the reviewers' reports and may consult with members of the editorial board if necessary. The period from receiving a submission and sending a review response to the author is one month. The Editor is responsible for the final decision regarding acceptance or rejection of articles.

All manuscripts submitted to this *RJMHS*, are assessed in line with our editorial policies and the journal's peer review process. Reviewers and editors are required to declare competing interests and can be excluded from the peer review process if a competing interest exists.

Reviewing for *RJMHS* involves adhering to the journal's strict open peer review policy. You must evaluate the scientific validity rather than the perceived impact, focusing on rigorous methodology, proper data analysis, and ethical reporting.

Responsibility of peer reviewers

Rwanda Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences outlines the responsibilities of peer reviewers. These are available at <https://rjmhs.ur.ac.rw/spip.php?page=author-guidelines>. They explain the purpose of peer review, promptness, confidentiality, objectivity, and acknowledgement of sources.

1. Purpose of peer review

The peer review process is a crucial component in helping the editor and/or editorial board reach editorial or publishing decisions and may also serve the author in improving the quality of the submission.

2. Promptness

A potential reviewer should withdraw from the review process if they feel unqualified to assess the contribution or cannot provide an assessment in a timely manner as defined by the editor.

3. Confidentiality

Manuscripts for review must be considered confidential documents. Information concerning the manuscripts should not be discussed with others without the approval of the editor.

4. Objectivity

Reviewers should strive to be objective in their assessments. Reviewers' comments should be clearly expressed and supported by data or arguments. Personal criticism of the author(s) is not appropriate.

5. Acknowledgement of sources

Reviewers should identify relevant published work that has not been cited by the authors. Any statement that an observation, derivation, or argument had been previously reported should be accompanied by the relevant citation. A reviewer should also call to the editor's attention any substantial similarity or overlap between the manuscript under consideration and any other published paper of which they have personal knowledge.

Guidance for peer review process

1. Initial Assessment & Ethical Considerations

Before agreeing to review, ensure you fulfil these baseline requirements:

- **Scope & Expertise:** Verify that the topic aligns with the scope of RJMHS, including but not [limited to medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, nursing, public health, nutrition, health management and policy, and other health sciences.](#)
- **Conflicts of Interest:** Declare any direct competing interests (e.g., professional, financial, or personal) to the editor immediately.
- **Time Commitment:** Ensure you can provide a thorough report by the journal's deadline.

2. Structuring Your Review Report

Your evaluation should be organised into specific, actionable sections to help the editor and authors.

- **Summary and Overall Impression:** Start with a brief 1-2 sentence summary of the study's objective, followed by your high-level assessment of its strengths and primary limitations.
- **Major Issues:** Outline critical flaws requiring significant revisions (e.g., flawed study design, inappropriate statistical analyses, or unsupported conclusions).
- **Minor Issues:** List smaller, discretionary changes such as clarifying specific paragraphs, correcting typographical errors, or formatting issues.

3. Key Evaluation Criteria

When reading through the manuscript, specifically check for:

- **Methodology & Statistics:** Is the study design clearly described? Are the statistical tests appropriate for the data?
- **Ethical Approval:** Confirm that human/animal studies explicitly list the ethics committee of approval, informed consent, and relevant declarations.

- **Data Availability:** Check that the authors provide a statement detailing where the data can be accessed.
- **Sex and Gender Considerations:** Ensure the authors describe how sex and/or gender are accounted for in the study design and data analysis.

4. Tone and Confidentiality

Because *RJMHS* practices transparent peer review, keep your feedback constructive, objective, and specific. If you have confidential concerns (e.g., suspected plagiarism or severe ethical violations), include these in the private "Comments for the Editor" section of the submission system

- **Step 1: Initial read-through of the paper**

The first time you read the paper, read it through from start to finish, trying to get a feel for the study as a whole and considering whether it is clear and comprehensible enough for you to be able to evaluate it properly. Assess the clarity of the language, the structure of the paper and the logical flow of the narrative. For the [preparation of the manuscript, authors are requested to prepare the manuscript according to the guidelines of the Rwanda Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences. Further information on health research reporting can be found on the website of EQUATOR network at : <http://www.equator-network.org/>.](http://www.equator-network.org/)

The key question to answer in this first run through is: **Is the study intelligible?** Keep in mind, however, that if the study is not accessible and clearly laid out and if the language or structure need work, you should report this to the editor, but you won't usually be expected to copy-edit the article yourself. Pass on any suggestions that you might have on how to improve accessibility, but remember that your main concern is the content of the study.

Here is a checklist of questions you should ensure you answer as you read through the paper for the first time:

- Is there a clear and important research question?
- Is the question properly answered by the study?
- Are all the claims supported by data?
- Is the novelty level of the study appropriate for the journal?
- Who would be interested in reading this study?
- Is the study design appropriate?
- Are there any fundamental flaws in the study design?
- Does the paper have strong technical rigour?

You might find it useful to make notes on these areas once you have read through the paper. The notes will become part of your peer review report.

- **Step 2: Take a little time**

After you have completed your first read-through, it can often be useful to put the paper to one side for a couple of days before returning to perform a more thorough review.

- **Step 3: Detailed read-through – content analysis**

Read through the paper again, analysing the content thoroughly. Make notes in a separate document and remember to note down page and line numbers from the manuscript so that you can easily refer back to specific parts of the paper. (Note that you may need to create the line numbers yourself.)

At this point you will be assessing the robustness of the study and the results, including whether the methodology and analysis were appropriate and whether the results support the conclusions. This feedback will make up the ‘major comments’ section in your peer review report.

- **Step 4: Detailed read-through – readability analysis**

On your final run-through of the paper, check the logical flow and structure. Could it be made clearer? Does the writing detract from the science in any way? Are the figures logically presented? This feedback will become the ‘minor comments’ section in your peer review report.

- **Step 5: Putting it all together**

The final part of your referee report will be writing a short summary of the paper and an overview of your thoughts on whether the paper is suitable for publication. This section does not need to be long and it can be the first part of the report the editor and authors read. As a final stage before writing everything up, you should therefore make some notes to help you put together your conclusions.

The review

The title

Clarity and brevity are important in a title; the detail can be covered in the body of the study. It’s best to avoid titles that sacrifice transparency for catchiness.

Useful questions to ask about the title of a paper include:

- Is the title descriptive of the report?
- Does it draw the interest of the reader?
- Does it focus on the main and most novel findings?
- Does it contain any unnecessary hype?

The abstract

The abstract provides a concise overview of the study: why it was undertaken, the methods used, a summary of the findings, and an indication of any implications. It shouldn’t focus solely on the findings, and should always be academic in tone.

A strong abstract will effectively summarise the paper and aim to answer five key questions about the study:

- Why did the authors carry out the study? (“The reason for A is unknown” or “We can’t solve practical problem B...”)

- What did the authors do? (“We measured/calculated/analysed X...”)
- How did the authors achieve this? (“We used method Y...”)
- What did the authors find out? (“We found out that X is...”)
- What does it all mean? (“This suggests that X is caused by...”, or “This provides a solution for B...”).

As a reviewer, you should be checking whether the answers to these questions are set out clearly at this point.

Further details on the structure of the abstract are available at: <https://rjmhs.ur.ac.rw/spip.php?page=author-guidelines>

The introduction

The introduction should be well referenced, and focus on relevant recent research rather than attempt an exhaustive analysis of the field.

Key questions to ask about the introduction of a paper include:

- Does it give enough information for the journal’s readership to understand the context? (The audience for a specialist journal is likely to need less contextual information than that of a journal with a broader readership)
- Does it accurately describe the up-to-date research on the topic with properly-referenced statements and does it identify the limitations, controversies or knowledge gaps of those studies?
- Does it clearly explain why the study was necessary?
- Do the references cited adequately reflect the current state of the field? Is the reference citation balanced and fair (limited self-citation and citation of all relevant seminal studies)?

Further details on the structure of the introduction part are available at: <https://rjmhs.ur.ac.rw/spip.php?page=author-guidelines>. You may also need to review the guidelines available at <http://www.equator-network.org/>.

The Methods

Your assessment of the methods section will indicate to the editor whether the study is methodologically sound and help the authors improve their article if it’s not. Select the items that follow to learn more.

Assessing the study design and methodology

One of the key issues to consider when reviewing the methods section of an article is whether the study design and methodology used were appropriate to reach the aims set out in the introduction. You should also assess whether the authors have included all the necessary information on samples and methods that would allow other researchers to replicate the experiments.

Remember, it's not about how you would have performed this study, or if you think there might be a 'better' way of doing it but whether the techniques used were robust and scientifically sound. You can suggest alternative methods if you think that additional experiments would strengthen the conclusions.

If you feel that the study design or methodology is flawed, explain which study design you believe would be more appropriate and why. If you don't fully understand the methodology, you should flag this to the editor in the review report.

Assessing the techniques used

When assessing whether the techniques have been employed properly, the following questions are useful:

- Is the methodology described in sufficient detail?
- Are there proper controls?
- Are there defined outcomes?
- Did they use validated instruments and/or techniques?
- Were experimental conditions acceptable?
- Are materials identified?
- Are the statistics sound and are any errors and uncertainties properly reported?
- Does the study allow for reproducibility?
- Was the study conducted objectively and without bias?
- Was the study conducted under ethical guidelines? [A statement of the ethical issues including protection of human subjects and informed consent should be included \(please see : <http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/index.html>\)](http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/index.html).

Further guidance on writing the methods section can be found at <https://rjmhs.ur.ac.rw/spip.php?page=author-guidelines>.

Results and discussion

Assessing the results

Whether results are surprising or not, the most important thing from a peer review perspective is that the claims made fit with the data provided they shouldn't have been manipulated to fit with the author's, or the field's, preferred thesis.

Select the items that follow to find out more about the points you should be assessing when reviewing the results.

Are the results presented clearly and accessibly?

This includes both text and figures. Do the results or figures come across as having been manipulated? Remember, you are not expected to verify authenticity but if you have any concerns, you should let the editor know. Are the figures of publishable quality and

understandable as standalone display items? Are the data presented clearly and accurately in figures and tables?

Are the results of sufficient quality?

Have the investigators carried out enough repetitions? Do figures have high-quality pictures?

Do the results support the main conclusions?

Do the data presented in the results support the claims made in the article? Your assessment of this point is critical for the editor. Do the data seem reasonable considering the study design and experiments performed? If not, can you understand why? Do the authors discuss this discrepancy in their results or discussion? Does the description of the data in the text correspond to the figures? Do the authors describe data that is not present in the figures or fail to describe all the data presented in the display items in the text?

Assessing the discussion

The discussion should answer the research problem posed, based on the findings uncovered. Other relevant studies should be discussed and sourced; references to ideas not previously introduced should be avoided.

When reviewing the discussion, consider these questions:

- Is the conclusion consistent with the aims of the study?
- Does the conclusion answer the research question?
- Is the conclusion supported by the presented findings or are there alternative explanations for the results?
- Do the authors clearly explain the implications of the study for the field and its potential future applications? Do the authors discuss their results in the context of published studies?

The tone of the peer review report

‘Adjust the tone’ – accessible version

The following section presents three pieces of problematic feedback, followed by our thoughts on the issues with the feedback and how it could usefully be revised.

Example 1

“Rewrite the conclusion although it won’t do you much good!”
This feedback isn’t couched in academic language, and is very dismissive.

Example 2

“The findings aren’t clearly set out. At least half of it needs to be rewritten.”

This feedback doesn’t include enough detail; it is unclear which elements are referred to.

Example 3

“Shoulders should have been kept to the wheel; what a wonderful way to end a paper.”

This feedback uses colloquialisms and sarcasm, which may cause confusion.

Further thoughts on how to give useful feedback

Feedback should always be fair and balanced.

You should always use academic wording, for example referring to ‘the paper/the work’ rather than ‘you’. Don’t ridicule the authors, or be aggressive.

Aim to explain your points clearly and succinctly, and to spell out any suggestions. Take care to avoid ambiguity.

Finally, avoid colloquialisms and sarcasm. They are open to misinterpretation, especially by authors whose first language may not be English.

The structure of your report

Some journals have their own report structure that they expect peer reviewers to follow, so it is best to check any guidelines and instructions sent by the editor. However, in cases where it is not stipulated, here is a suggestion of how to structure your report. Select each of the items to find out more.

1–2 paragraph summary

- What were the study’s objectives?
- What were the key findings and how do they advance the state of the art?
- Does the paper demonstrate technical rigour?

Major comments

Here you should include any significant concerns that were identified during your detailed analysis. Examples of major comments include:

- Problems with the study design
- Incorrect analyses
- Insufficient data
- Improper referencing
- Wrong interpretation of results
- Unaddressed limitations of the paper.

Minor comments

Here you should include any smaller points you noted during your detailed analysis. Examples of minor comments include:

- Improvements to language for clarity
- Minor additional analyses
- Minor errors or suggested changes in figures.

Reject comments

Here you should typically choose to suggest a rejection under the following circumstances:

- Fatal errors in methodology, experimental design, or statistical analysis that cannot be fixed with simple revisions.
- The research does not add significant new knowledge, insight, or value to the field.
- The manuscript's subject matter does not align with the journal's focus or target audience.
- Unaddressed ethical concerns, severe plagiarism, or data fabrication/manipulation.
- The arguments, structure, or data presentation are too weak or confusing to support the conclusions.

Conclusion

Provide a short conclusion, setting out your main opinion of the paper and if required by the journal whether or not you feel that it will be suitable for publication.

Remember, you do not have to follow this suggested structure completely. Some structure is good, but be sure to have enough space for your own ideas and opinions. However, all comments that you provide should refer to line and page numbers from the manuscript and be as clear and specific as possible.