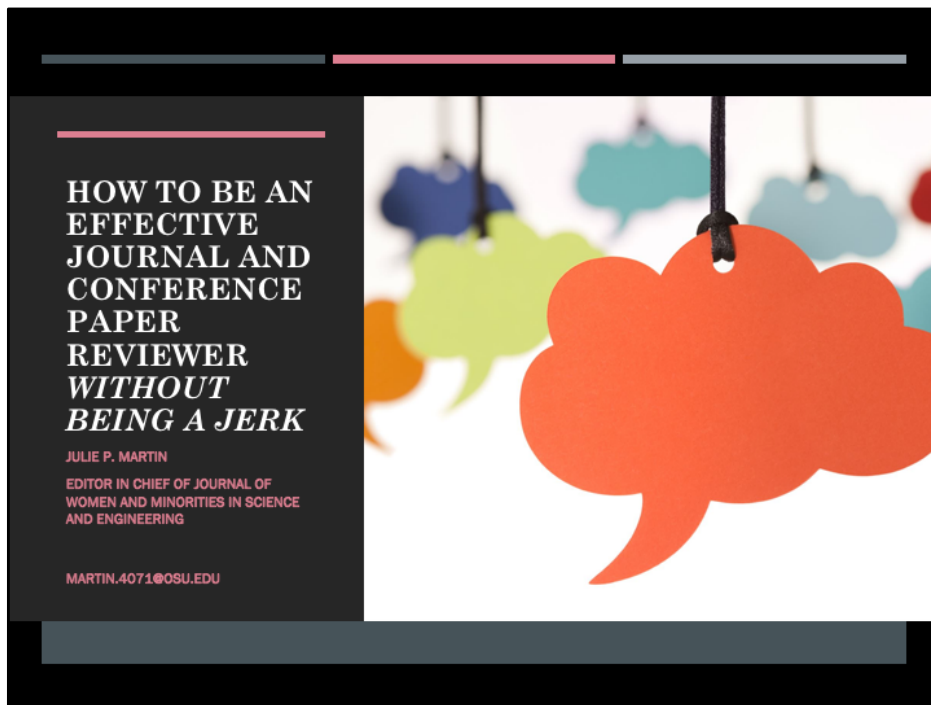# How to be an effective journal and conference paper reviewer without being a jerk

Dr. Julie P Martin, Clemson University

Julie P. Martin is the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering. She is an associate professor of engineering education at The Ohio State University, a past president of WEPAN, and a Fellow of ASEE.

Reviewers and editors are essential to the publishing process, and yet no one ever tells us how to write a constructive review. Reviewers typically have two roles: to provide authors with feedback to improve their paper, and to assist conference program chairs or journal editors in making decisions about what is accepted for publication.
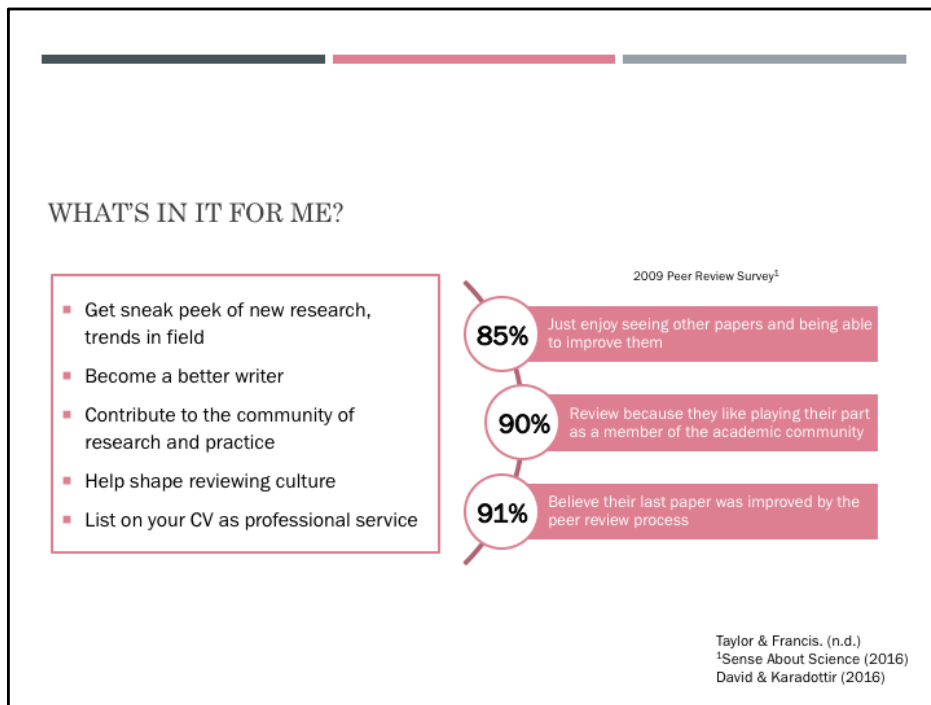
I recently took over as editor for JWM. My vision for JWM is….
This vision is not just for my journal, but also for academic publishing as a whole.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

- Get sneak peek of new research, trends in field
- Become a better writer
- Contribute to the community of research and practice
- Help shape reviewing culture
- List on your CV as professional service

2009 Peer Review Survey[1]

85% Just enjoy seeing other papers and being able to improve them

90% Review because they like playing their part as a member of the academic community

91% Believe their last paper was improved by the peer review process

Taylor & Francis. (n.d.)
[1]Sense About Science (2016)
David & Karadottir (2016)

There are multiple reasons why you might choose to review for a journal like JWM or conference like CONECD.
A 2009 study of peer review conducted by Sense About Science with funding from Elsevier found that reviewers gave the following 3 reasons for wanting to review (85% said Just enjoy seeing other papers and being able to improve them
90% responded that they Review because they like playing their part as a member of the academic community and 91% said that they believe their last paper was improved by the peer review process.

Why do you review? (ask audience)

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ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF REVIEWERS

- Confidentiality
- Constructive critique
- Competence
- Impartiality and integrity
- Disclosure of conflict of interest
- Timeliness and responsiveness

Trudgett et. al. (2012)

One thing that is really important for reviewers to keep in mind is their ethical responsibility, which includes
Confidentiality
Constructive critique
Competence
Impartiality and integrity
Disclosure of conflict of interest
Timeliness and responsiveness

We're going to concentrate on constructive critique today

SHOULD I ACCEPT THE INVITATION?

- Do I have expertise related to one or more aspects of the paper?
- Can I meet the deadline (or do I need to negotiate a new one)?
- Am I in a place right now to be constructive and unbiased?
- Have I submitted a paper/presentation to the journal/conference recently?

These are some questions you might consider when deciding to accept an invitation to review.

If you have submitted a paper or presentation to the journal or conference, it's expected that you will "pay it forward" by reviewing someone else's paper/presentation.

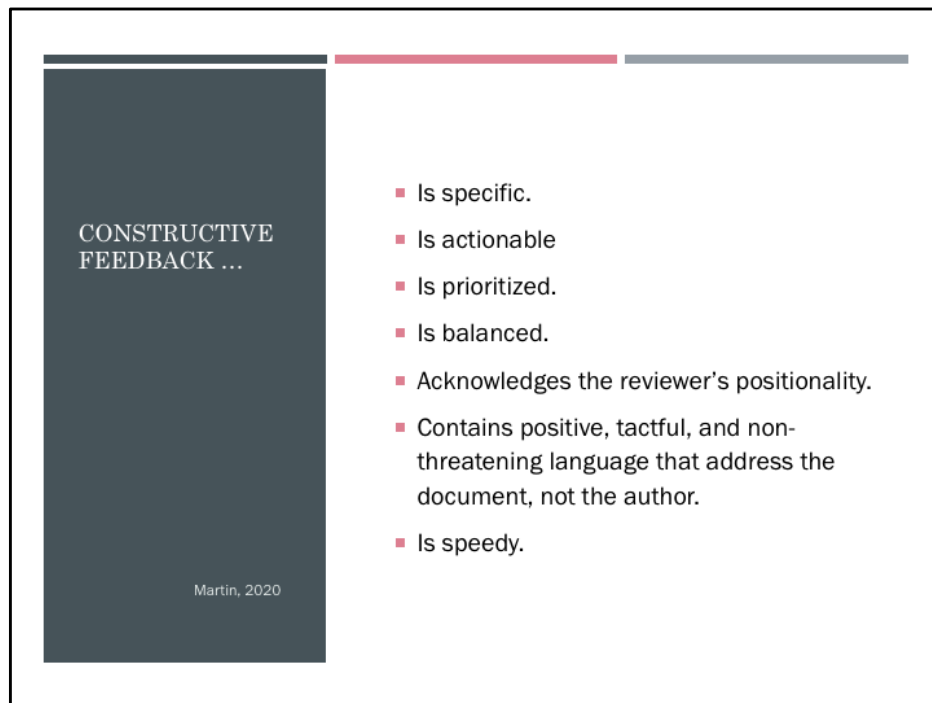WHAT ARE MY ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES AS A REVIEWER?

Authors   Editors

- Raise any ethical concerns
- Assesses the work's originality, scientific merit,& interest to audience
- Provide timely feedback that is:
  - unbiased and confidential
  - aimed towards improving the work, critiques supported by evidence
  - not personal

Trudgett et. al. (2012)

Reviewers really have dual roles– as reviewers our responsibility is to the authors and the editor (or program chair)

CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK …

- Is specific.
- Is actionable
- Is prioritized.
- Is balanced.
- Acknowledges the reviewer's positionality.
- Contains positive, tactful, and non-threatening language that address the document, not the author.
- Is speedy.

Martin, 2020

Is specific. Constructive feedback uses examples from the manuscript where possible to help the author and editor understand what you mean.

Is actionable. Criticisms of the manuscript are followed by suggestions for improvement.

Is prioritized. It is easy for an author (or editor) to get overwhelmed by the volume of feedback in a review. Prioritized feedback labels major and minor concerns. It is organized in a way that allows the reader to easily understand which points to prioritize in a revision, either according to sections of the paper or thematically. Prioritized feedback makes clear what concerns are global (across the article as a whole) and which concerns are local to a specific section (such as in the research design).

Is balanced. Constructive feedback describes the document's strengths as well as areas for improvement. It is important for the reviewer to demonstrate enthusiasm to editor through the language chosen, since it tells the editor which elements should continue through a revision.

Acknowledges the reviewer's positionality. Not only does understanding that a reviewer is someone who does X or knows about Y demonstrate that the reviewer knows what they are talking about, but also understanding a reviewer's positionality helps the author and editor place the reviewer's comments in context. In situations

where mixed reviews are received, it helps the editor prioritize and make decisions about which critiques require a response from the author.

Contains positive, tactful, and non-threatening language that address the document, not the author. By focusing on the manuscript and not the author, constructive feedback avoids personal criticisms.

Is speedy. We all need feedback. Our careers are dependent on it. The great work we are doing cannot be shared and be used by others if it is not published in a timely manner.

QUESTIONS TO ASK OURSELVES AS REVIEWERS:

- Does this manuscript represent a genuine effort?
- Does it contain an interesting finding, or contribution, to STEM education?
- Would publishing this finding/contribution strengthen the reputation of the journal or the field of engineering education research?

Sochacka, 2019

One way that you might think how to start your review is to ask yourself these 3 questions. If the answer is yes to all 3. it's likely that you want to convey your enthusiasm for the work and offered specific and addressable suggestions to the authors

Nicki Sochacka talks about there being a common exception to this approach. What if the answer is yes but the problem, theory (if used), methodology/methods, and findings do not align and, therefore, the "interesting finding" is not defensible? Nicki says, "These are the manuscripts that I (sometimes quite painfully) reject. In these cases, I try to be as explicit as possible about why I am choosing to reject the manuscript, and I lay out alternative approaches that could help the authors achieve their goals. "

If the answer to one of these is no, then you can recommend rejection.

OUTLINE OF A REVIEW

"Don't tell the authors what paper they should have written; tell them how to improve the paper they have written" (Stoop, 2018)

- Your positionality statement
- Summary of the paper from your perspective
- What you like about the paper (including its strengths, contribution, measures of quality)
- Specific and addressable criticisms
  - Organize by major concerns, minor concerns (OR)
  - Organize by section of the paper (OR)
  - Organize thematically
- Other comments/ suggestions (state that these not critical/optional)
- Detailed copy edit suggestions [only for revise/accept]
- *Journal/conference specific questions
- Recommendation
- Closing
- [Confidential comments to editor]

David & Karadorrir, 2016
Sochacka, 2019
Stoop, 2018
Wiley, n.d.

Your positionality statement is important for authors and editors to understand the perspective and expertise you bring, and to interpret your comments.
The summary helps authors and editors see that you understand the paper
Stating what you like about the paper helps to make your review constructive

Some journals/conference like CONECD allow confidential comments to the editor or program chair

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MAKING
YOUR REVIEW
SOUND
CONSTRUCTIVE

Fit and audience

- As written, the manuscript seems like a better fit for [specific other journals]. These journals are a better fit because neither the theories nor the findings in the manuscript specifically inform diversity, equity or inclusion, which is the focus of [journal[].
- For the purposes of this audience, the ____ section should be written more appropriately. For example, defining ____is not probably something that this audience needs. The authors can and should, however, discuss the methodological traditions and paradigms employed, and why these are appropriate.

Taylor & Francis, n.d.

I've compiled some examples of constructive comments. Some of these come from Taylor & Franics (n.d.). Some come from actual reviews that I've written or others have written for JWM . Let's talk about what these achieve…. [audience interaction]

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MAKING YOUR REVIEW SOUND CONSTRUCTIVE

Improvements needed

- The author could strengthen the paper by...
- The paper would be significantly improved with the addition of more details about...
- I think with your data you can say more about....
- To make this paper publishable, the author needs to respond to the following substantive points...
- In the "Discussion" section I would like to see more information on...
- This is an important topic, but the argument as structured is not effective in pointing to a compelling need to study this.
- There are several areas that could make this article more impactful, but as it stands this article is not fit for publication.

Taylor & Francis, n.d.

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WHEN RECOMMENDING ACCEPTANCE

- Provide details about why it should be accepted. ~~"This is a great paper, I recommend acceptance."~~
- Demonstrate your enthusiasm by the words you use!
- This paper represents a potentially significant contribution to the journal because of its_____.
- Tell authors and editor what could be improved.
- The authors boldly take on and theories issues that have stymied the STEM community's discussions for years. The suggestions in this review are offered as potential ways to improve the readability of the manuscript for a reader who is not as well-versed in these topics. Additionally, a few specific editorial comments are made for the authors' consideration.
- This is a well-crafted paper that describes a high-quality qualitative study on _____. The theoretical frameworks are highly appropriate, the methods are well-designed, and trustworthiness is appropriately addressed. Findings from this study are highly relevant and timely. The extension of _____from its original use in _____to _____is innovative and noteworthy; this type of theoretical extension and 'cross-over' is something this reviewer believes the Journal should highly support. There are a few minor things I suggest to help boost the important contribution this work will make to the literature.

There are a few things that are really important to include in your review when you are recommending acceptance.
Provide details (important whether recommending acceptance, revisions, or rejection) actually
Demonstrate your enthusiasm to editor/program chair through the language you choose and the specificity of your comments. Here are two examples.
It's also fine to mention what could be improved—make sure that these are minor comments and not major concerns

WHEN RECOMMENDING REVISIONS OR REJECTION

- Be specific about changes that need to be made and what is critical and what is not as critical
- Why you are recommending rejection—be specific as possible.

If you're recommending revisions or rejection, it's also very important to be as specific as possible. Give examples of your concerns.
Help the author and editor understand what are major concerns and what are minor ones, potentially using the outline of the review we discussed earlier.

FINAL THOUGHTS

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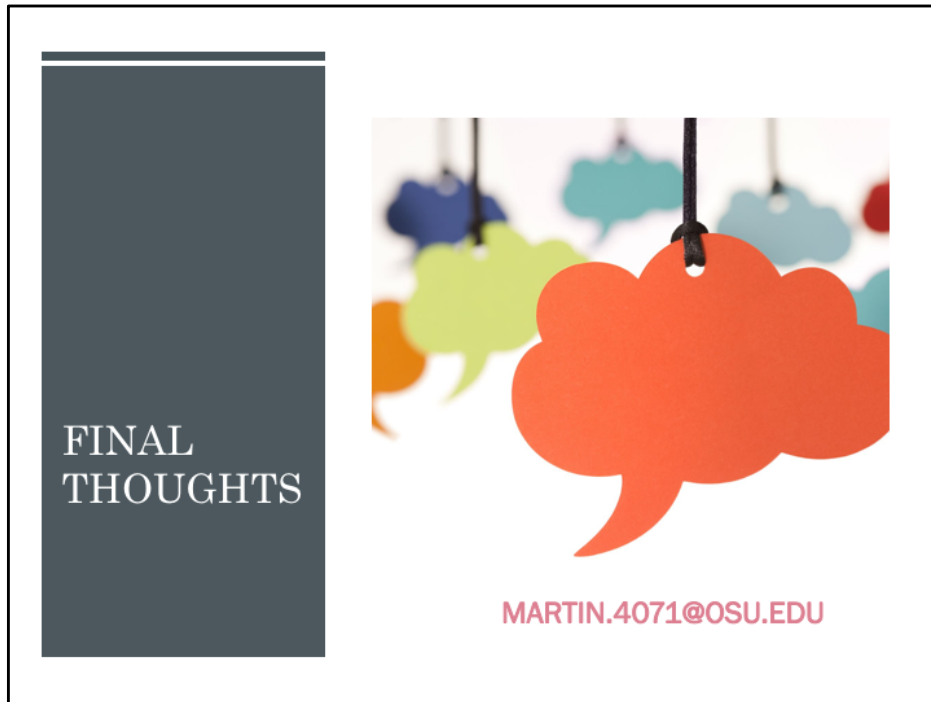
We each have a role in creating and sustaining a constructive culture for academic publishing. You can consider each review you write to be tangible contribution towards this culture!

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Other resources: Journal of Engineering Education Reviewer Resources
https://cecas.clemson.edu/jee/jee-reviewer-resources/