

A Postdoc's Place in Peer Review



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Graduate school techniques: mastered. PhD dissertation: signed and completed. Independent research career: in the making.

The postdoc state of a career is complex: on the one hand, you're still a trainee with a mentor; on the other hand, you're more of an expert in your field than you may appreciate. You're learning new techniques but can critically evaluate others. You're working hands-on over a lab bench but also "playing professor" and mentoring students. You're writing first-author papers that someone a few years senior of you is reviewing, holding the fate of your precious data in their hands.

By now, the fate of submitted manuscripts is no mystery to you—editorial board decision, peer review, rebuttal and resubmission, publication. However, until now, you were likely only involved with one side of this story: the author's side (unless you were ghost reviewing for a previous mentor). In this role, you are contributing to a large mass of evidence that becomes a scientific theory. On the other side are the gatekeepers maintaining the integrity of the latest and greatest science.

There is typically one thing our respected scientific elders have in common: they review papers (or even serve as associate editors and editors). However, how did they gain the trust to take the reins of peer review into their own hands? It is no surprise that drafting and publishing take some practice. Your advisers who helped get you to your postdoc likely mentored you into polished scientific writers. Critical peer review of science is no different—holding the life of submitted manuscripts (and their potential impact on science) should not be delegated to amateurs.

However, how does one get out of amateur hour? Unlike writing papers—essentially a prerequisite to submitting your dissertation—practice reviewing scientific literature is not a given in graduate school. While many graduate courses include a critical review of the literature as part of the curriculum, many postdocs still do not find a route to becoming a trusted reviewer. Editorial boards will unanimously agree with this—becoming an independent reviewer should be a mentored process.

Fortunately, as mentored junior researchers, we all have an essential ace in our pockets—our mentors! There is a good chance that one of them serves as an associate editor (or editor) for a journal in your field. (And if you've ever talked to an AE, they have probably come across many papers that they have struggled to identify competent reviewers for.) Opportunism at its finest! Just like seeking proper mentoring, it's now up to you to make a move—ask to review a paper for them. This sounds oversimplified, but considering the postdoc workload, it's pretty fair to assume our senior investigators think we don't have time for this.

Here are some ideas for making time for this, opening doors to becoming a trusted reviewer:

- Talk to your mentor. Is the mentor not on an editorial board? Talk to someone else in your department. Only geriatric neuroendocrine toxicologists in your department? Look to your society (including SOT)! You've likely met an expert AE inundating you with questions regarding your poster at past meetings.
- Got a go-to journal for your field? Published in this journal before? Consider reaching out to AEs on the editorial board, or leveraging your network to forge these connections.
- **Don't skip that section on the manuscript submission site.** You know which one I'm talking about—remember the "Expertise Terms" section you glanced over while rushing to finish your author profile to submit your last paper? While this isn't a direct route to being asked to review papers, it is an excellent first step that AEs sometimes use to identify potential reviewers.

With all the moving parts of our professional development, there is no one way of growing into an independent investigator in our fields. Involvement in peer review is often overlooked—no surprise, as you only get one extra line on your CV per journal you review. However, becoming a gatekeeper for the newest findings in our fields is an essential mechanism toward becoming a recognized expert in our fields. Finally, you have to start somewhere to advance up to AE (or even editor!)—why not get started now? (Plus, that line on your SV looks pretty slick!)

Happy National Postdoc Appreciation Week! (Complete with one more job—I mean *service*—to add to your list.)