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GUIDE FOR REVIEWERS

In principle we follow well established rules by Elsevier and Nature Journals.

1. **The Review Process:** All submitted manuscripts are read by the editorial staff. To save time for authors and peer reviewers, only those papers that seem most likely to meet our editorial criteria are sent for formal review.

Those papers judged by the Editor-in-Chief to be of insufficient general interest or otherwise inappropriate are rejected promptly without external review (although these decisions may be based on informal advice from specialists of editorial board).

Manuscripts judged to be of potential interest to our readership are sent for formal review, typically to two or three reviewers, but sometimes more if special advice is needed (for example on heavy interdisciplinary nature combining more than 2 disciplines). Peer review assists the editor in making editorial decisions and through the editorial communications with the author may also assist the author in improving the paper.

The Editor-in-Chief with reviewers then makes a decision:

- Accept, with minor/major or without editorial revisions.
- Invite the authors to revise their manuscript to address specific concerns before a final decision is reached.
- Reject, but indicate to the authors that further work might justify a resubmission.
- Reject outright, typically on grounds of specialist interest, lack of novelty, insufficient conceptual advance or major technical and/or interpretational problems.

Reviewers are welcome to recommend a particular course of action, but they should bear in mind that the other reviewers of a particular paper may have different technical expertise and/or views, and the editors may have to make a decision based on conflicting advice. The most useful reports, therefore, provide the editors with the information on which a decision should be based. Setting out the arguments for and against publication is often more helpful to the editors than a direct recommendation one way or the other.

Editorial decisions are not a matter of counting votes or numerical rank assessments, and we do not always follow the majority recommendation. We try to evaluate the strength of the arguments raised by each reviewer and by the authors, and we may also consider other information not

available to either party. Our primary responsibilities are to our readers and to the scientific community at large, and in deciding how best to serve them, we must weigh the claims of each paper against the many others also under consideration.

We may return to reviewers for further advice, particularly in cases where they disagree with each other, or where the authors believe they have been misunderstood on points of fact. We therefore ask that reviewers should be willing to provide follow-up advice as requested. We are very aware, however, that reviewers are usually reluctant to be drawn into prolonged disputes, so we try to keep consultation to the minimum we judge necessary to provide a fair hearing for the authors.

When reviewers agree to assess a paper, we consider this a commitment to review subsequent revisions. However, editors will not send a resubmitted paper back to the reviewers if it seems that the authors have not made a serious attempt to address the criticisms.

We take reviewers' criticisms seriously; in particular, we are very reluctant to disregard technical criticisms. In cases where one reviewer alone opposes publication, we may consult the other reviewers as to whether s/he is applying an unduly critical standard.

We occasionally bring in additional reviewers to resolve disputes, but we prefer to avoid doing so unless there is a specific issue, for example a specialist technical point, on which we feel a need for further advice.

2. **Selection of Peer Reviewers:** Reviewer selection is critical to the publication process, and we base our choice on many factors, including expertise, reputation, specific recommendations and our own previous experience of a reviewer's characteristics. For instance, we avoid using people who are slow, careless, or do not provide reasoning for their views, whether harsh or lenient.

We check with potential reviewers before sending them manuscripts to review. Reviewers should bear in mind that these messages contain confidential information, which should be treated as such. Reviewers are mainly chosen from the Editorial Board.

3. **Writing the Review Report:** The primary purpose of the review is to provide the editors with the information needed to reach a decision but the review should also instruct the authors on how they can strengthen their paper to the point where it may be acceptable.

As far as possible, a negative review should explain to the authors the major weaknesses of their manuscript, so that rejected authors can understand the basis for the decision and see in broad terms what needs to be done to improve the manuscript for publication elsewhere.

Referees should not feel obliged to provide detailed, constructive advice regarding minor criticisms of the manuscript if it does not meet the criteria for the journal (as outlined in the letter from the editor when asking for the review). Referees should be aware that authors of declined manuscripts may request that referee comments be transferred to another journal where they can be used to determine suitability of publication at the receiving journal.

Confidential comments to the editor are welcome, but it is helpful if the main points are stated in the comments for transmission to the authors. The ideal review should answer the following questions:

- Who will be interested in reading the paper, and why?
- What are the main claims of the paper and how significant are they?
- Is the paper likely to be one of the most significant papers published in the discipline this year?
- How does the paper stand out from others in its field?
- Are the claims novel? If not, which published papers compromise novelty?

- Are the claims convincing? If not, what further evidence is needed?
- Are there other experiments or work that would strengthen the paper further?
- How much would further work improve it, and how difficult would this be? Would it take a long time?
- Are the claims appropriately discussed in the context of previous literature?
- If the manuscript is unacceptable, is the study sufficiently promising to encourage the authors to resubmit?
- If the manuscript is unacceptable but promising, what specific work is needed to make it acceptable?

These issues are mostly included in the Referee Report but can also be written at the end of the Report as Detailed Comments as well as comments on the article text itself.

4. **Other Questions to Consider:** We appreciate that reviewers are busy, and we are very grateful if they can answer the above-mentioned questions. However, if time is available, it is extremely helpful to the editors if reviewers can advise on some of the aforementioned points, taking into account that there are not any special ethical concerns arising from the use of human or other animal subjects, conflict of interest, plagiarism.
5. **Timing:** MAA journal is committed to rapid editorial decisions and publication, and we believe that an efficient editorial process is a valuable service both to our authors and to the scientific community as a whole.

We therefore ask reviewers to respond promptly within the number of days agreed. If reviewers anticipate a longer delay than previously expected, we ask them to let us know so that we can keep the authors informed and, where necessary, find alternatives.

Any selected reviewer who feels unqualified to review the research reported in a manuscript or knows that its prompt review will be impossible should notify the editor and excuse himself from the review process.

6. **Anonymity:** We do not release reviewers' identities to authors or to other reviewers, except when reviewers specifically ask to be identified. Unless they feel strongly, however, we prefer that reviewers should remain anonymous throughout the review process and beyond. Before revealing their identities, reviewers should consider the possibility that they may be asked to comment on the criticisms of other reviewers and on further revisions of the manuscript; identified reviewers may find it more difficult to be objective in such circumstances.

We ask reviewers not to identify themselves to authors without the editor's knowledge. If they wish to reveal their identities while the manuscript is under consideration, this should be done via the editor, or if this is not practicable, we ask authors to inform the editor as soon as possible after the reviewer has revealed his or her identity to the author.

We deplore any attempt by authors to confront reviewers or determine their identities. Our own policy is to neither confirm nor deny any speculation about reviewers' identities, and we encourage reviewers to adopt a similar policy.

7. **Double-Blind Peer Review:** MAA offers two double-blind peer review options.
 - **Standard Review Process:** Authors who choose this option expect to hear within 12 weeks about acceptance. If accepted the paper will appear in one of following issues.
 - **Rapid Review Process:** Authors who choose this option expect to hear within 10 days about acceptance, and if accepted they are obliged to convey a processing Fee.
8. **Editing Reviewers' Reports:** As a matter of policy, we do not suppress reviewers' reports; any comments that were intended for the authors are transmitted, regardless of what we may think of

the content. On rare occasions, we may edit a report to remove offensive language or comments that reveal confidential information about other matters.

We ask reviewers to avoid statements that may cause needless offence; conversely, we strongly encourage reviewers to state plainly their opinion of a paper. Authors should recognize that criticisms are not necessarily unfair simply because they are expressed in robust language.

9. **The Peer Review System:** It is editors' experience that the peer review process is an essential part of the publication process, which improves the manuscripts our journals publish. Reviews should be conducted objectively. Personal criticism of the author(s) is inappropriate.

Reviewers should express their views clearly with supporting arguments. Not only does peer review provide an independent assessment of the importance and technical accuracy of the results described, but the feedback from reviewers conveyed to authors with the editors' advice frequently results in manuscripts being refined so that their structure and logic is more readily apparent to readers.

It is only by collaboration with our reviewers that editors can ensure that the manuscripts we publish are among the most important in their disciplines of scientific research. We appreciate the time that reviewers devote to assessing the manuscripts we send them, which helps ensure that MAA publishes only material of the very highest quality. In particular, many submitted manuscripts contain large volumes of additional (supplementary) data and other material, which take time to evaluate. We thank our reviewers for their continued commitment to our publication process.

Much has been written, on the peer review system as a whole. Alternative systems have been proposed in outline: for example, signed peer review, blind peer review and open peer review. The system has been exhaustively studied, reported on, and assessed - both positively and negatively. Our position on the value of the peer review system is represented in the following rationale: The goals of peer review are both lofty and mundane.

It is the responsibility of journals to administer an effective review system. Peer review is designed to select technically valid research of significant interest. Reviewers are expected to identify flaws, suggest improvements and assess novelty. If the manuscript is deemed important enough to be published in a high visibility journal, reviewers ensure that it is internally consistent, thereby ferreting out spurious conclusions or clumsy frauds.

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.

One problem with manuscript selection is the inherent tension between reviewers and authors. Reviewers wish for only the most solid science to be published, yet when they 'exchange hats' to that of author, they desire quick publication of their novel ideas and approaches. Authors of papers that blow against the prevailing winds bear a far greater burden of proof than normally expected in publishing their challenge to the current paradigm. Veering too far in one direction or the other leads to complaints either that peer review isn't stringent enough, or that it is stifling the freshest research. It is the job of the editors to try to avoid both extremes.

Journal editors do not expect peer review to ferret out cleverly concealed, deliberate deceptions. A peer reviewer can only evaluate what the authors chose to include in the manuscript. This contrasts with the expectation in the popular press that peer review is a process by which fraudulent data is detected before publication (although that sometimes happens).

We are requesting peer review's positive understanding and patience, as even papers that are misunderstood by reviewers are usually rewritten and improved before resubmission. Mistakes are made, but peer review, through conscientious effort on the part of reviewers, helps to protect the literature, promote good science and select the best. Until a truly viable alternative is provided, we wouldn't have it any other way.

10. **Peer Review Publication Policies:** All contributions submitted to MAA journal that are selected for peer review are sent to two (or more), independent reviewers, selected by the editorial board.

Any manuscripts received for review must be treated as confidential documents. As a condition of agreeing to assess the manuscript, all reviewers undertake to keep submitted manuscripts and associated data confidential, and not to redistribute them without permission from the journal. Manuscripts must not be shown to or discussed with others except as authorized by the editor. If a reviewer seeks advice from colleagues while assessing a manuscript, he or she ensures that confidentiality is maintained and that the names of any such colleagues are provided to the journal with the final report.

Privileged information or ideas obtained through peer review must be kept confidential and not used for personal advantage. Reviewers should not consider manuscripts in which they have conflicts of interest resulting from competitive, collaborative, or other relationships or connections with any of the authors, companies, or institutions connected to the papers.

By this and by other means, MAA endeavours to keep the content of all submissions confidential until the online publication date. Although we go to every effort to ensure reviewers honour their promise to ensure confidentiality, we are not responsible for the conduct of reviewers.

Reviewers should be aware that it is our policy to keep their names confidential, and that we do our utmost to ensure this confidentiality.

Under normal circumstances, blind peer review is protected from legislation. We cannot, however, guarantee to maintain this confidentiality in the face of a successful legal action to disclose identity in the event of a reviewer having written personally derogatory comments about the authors in his or her reports.

For this reason as well as for reasons of standard professional courtesy, we request reviewers to refrain from personally negative comments about the authors of submitted manuscripts. Frank comments about the scientific content of the manuscripts, however, are strongly encouraged by the editors.

11. **Ethics and Security** (see also [Basic Information](#)): MAA editorial board reviewers may seek advice about submitted papers not only from technical reviewers but also on any aspect of a paper that raises concerns. These may include, for example, ethical issues or issues of data or materials access.

Very occasionally, concerns may also relate to the implications to society of publishing a paper, including threats to security. In such circumstances, advice will usually be sought simultaneously with the technical peer review process. As in all publishing decisions, the ultimate decision whether to publish is the responsibility of the Editor-in-Chief.