



In science, some manuscript reviewers do not act ethically: here I list what they do and tell you how to identify them.

Manuscript reviewers have been around for centuries. For example, in the 18th century, when **Miguel del Barco** wrote his book *Natural history and chronicle of old California*¹, he lamented that *News of California and its temporal and spiritual conquest*² had not had a better manuscript review. In science, despite recent criticisms, **peer review** remains the main filter that editors use to decide which papers get published.

Ideally, while editors concentrate on the form, reviewers help authors correct mistakes and communicate clearly and succinctly. There are, however, reviewers who do not do their work ethically, and based on my experience I have come to this classification of what they do:

1. Accept to review but do not send comments on time, or ever.
2. Accept to review manuscripts in subjects for which they are not competent.
3. Fail to indicate problems. Their reasons go from apathy to friendship, conflict of interest, fear of retaliation, or other.
4. Steal data from the manuscript. This is particularly possible in cases where money is involved, like new medicines or industrial products.
5. Give a negative review to sabotage authors, because they are competitors, enemies, or other.

To identify unethical reviewers, editors can compare reviews and look for additional opinions if there is a mismatch; but, what happens when several reviewers act unethically because there is something special about a particular manuscript, like real innovation?

As editor, I immediately become suspicious when a reviewer is not satisfied with an honest attempt by the authors to follow the initial reviewer recommendations. But the best indicator, in my experience, is when the reviewer writes in an angry tone. There is no room for anger in serious science and if you send me an angry review, my mental alarm goes off.

In scientific peer review, the rules of the game are against the authors. All they can do is point out when they feel that the reviewers are hostile and ask for an editorial board's intervention. If everything fails, there are always other journals and, hopefully, other — more ethical— reviewers.

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Images

Broken pencil. **Photo** (Public Domain)

References

¹Barco, M. D. 1980. *The Natural History of Baja California*. Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles.

²Venegas, M. 1759. *A Natural and Civil History of California*. James Rivington and James Fletcher, London.