

BRIEF GUIDELINES FOR COMPLETING A REVIEW IN ASA, CSSA, AND SSSA JOURNALS

Thank you very much for agreeing to review a manuscript. The reviewer's job is to help the author(s) improve the scientific quality of their manuscript.

Guiding Principles in the Decision Process

An acceptable manuscript will meet the following general criteria:

It advances the science by presenting either new knowledge in an area or information toward a better understanding of existing processes and concepts.

- Sound methodology was used and is explained with sufficient detail (and can be replicated).
- Conclusions are supported by data.
- The reviewer's job is not to find reasons to reject a manuscript but to help the author improve the manuscript so that the author, journal, and reader all benefit.

Ask questions: "Is the science good?" and "Is it understandable?" or "What is needed to make it clear?" Look past formatting or style unless it presents confusion.

Possible Conflicts of Interest

Excuse yourself from reviewing a manuscript if a conflict of interest exists. A "yes" to one or more of the following questions (adapted from the USDA-ARS) poses a possible conflict.

- Are the authors and you co-investigators on a current research project?
- Have the authors and you jointly published an article in the past 3 years?
- Do you work at the same location as the authors?
- Are you close friends with one or more of the authors? Or have you had significant and acrimonious disagreements with the authors in the past?
- Are you working in the same area of research with the authors so that you might be considered to be a competitor or gain an advantage by reviewing the manuscript?

In summary, ask yourself if there is a possibility or appearance of a conflict of interest by you reviewing this manuscript; if so, you should decline an invitation to review.

Evaluating the Abstract

A reader should be able to readily determine the value of the article and whether or not to read it com-

pletely based on the abstract. It also should provide the literature searcher with enough information to assess its value and to index it for later retrieval. The abstract consists of one to two sentences each for the (i) justification or rationale for conducting the work, (ii) objective, (iii) significant results (present quantitative results), (iv) discussion of results, and (v) conclusion. The writing should be concise and clear, identifying scientific names of plants, other organisms, and chemicals; figures, tables, or references should not be cited.

Evaluating the Remainder of the Manuscript

General Content

- Does the title of the paper clearly reflect its contents, and does it use impactful words to capture the reader's attention? Note: Most journals suggest the title should be 12 words or less.
- Is the content useful or does it advance the science? Is there a segment of the journal's readership that would find it useful?
- Did the author(s) review the existing literature adequately? Are all references needed or are some extraneous? Are references listed according to the style manual?

Quality of Writing

- Clarity is important. Manuscripts with sound science must also be well written to be acceptable.
- Whether you are an expert in the subject discussed or not, you should understand the paper's content. Read each paragraph carefully. Is there likely to be confusion? If so, request that the author clarify. Suggested revisions are often appreciated by authors, but please do not feel obligated to rewrite the manuscript.
- Do the paragraphs flow smoothly? Is the manuscript readable? Can you make suggestions for improvement?
- Is there unnecessary repetition? Can you suggest deletion of sentences, phrases, or words that add little to the paper?
- Are enough examples provided to assist readers in relating to the author's ideas? Can you suggest some examples that the author might want to include in his or her revision?
- What parts of the manuscript do you really like? Let the author(s) know. Your comments should be constructive but not derogatory.

Do not be concerned about minor grammatical errors, British vs. American spellings, minor reference formatting issues, and so on, unless they cause confusion; these will be corrected by editorial staff should the paper be accepted. Obvious grammatical mistakes should be marked by reviewers. However, reviewers should not rewrite manuscripts with excessive English grammar mistakes.

Technical

- Is the paper acceptable in terms of methods, procedures, and so forth? If not, how would you have done it?
- SI units are required by most of our journals.
- The following should be given at first mention: Latin names for plants, insects, or pathogens; soil nomenclature; chemical names of pesticides.

Statistical Analysis

- Is the experimental design sound? Has the statistical analysis been conducted properly?
- Does the experiment have true replication of treatment combinations?
- Did the authors appropriately declare fixed and random factors in their experiment?
- Does the experimental design include enough details so that the results can be judged for validity and so that previous experiments may serve as a basis for the design of future experiments?
- Did the authors use means separation procedures correctly?

Tables and Figures

- Are all the tables and figures necessary? If so, are they understandable? If not, could you suggest another format? Are the tables and figures self-explanatory?

Supplemental Material

A one- or two-sentence description of the supplemental material should be included in the main manuscript directly preceding the reference list. All supplemental material should be reviewed. The same standards of format and quality apply to supplemental tables and figures.

Remember

- Please return your comments and recommendations to the Associate or Technical Editor before the deadline.
- Do not allow the manuscript to be reproduced while in your custody.
- Do not rewrite a poorly written manuscript, but suggestions to improve clarity are extremely helpful and appreciated. Manuscripts can and should be released if the clarity or quality of the English grammar prevents a clear understanding of the work.
- Reviewers will remain anonymous.

Additional Resources

- *Reviewer: ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Position Description and Review Guidelines*: <https://agronomy.org/files/publications/editor-guide-reviewers.pdf>
- *Publications Handbook and Style Manual* and individual journal instructions to authors: <https://www.agronomy.org/publications/journals/author-resources/style-manual>