

ROCKY MOUNTAIN FUR TRADE JOURNAL

Peer Reviewer Guidelines

The process of peer review is critical to the *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* as a scholarly publication. Without the expertise of peer reviewers, the *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* could not offer excellent, cutting-edge information in the clear, concise format that that is our goal.

The peer-review process is straightforward. As papers come in, editors contact potential peer reviewers. Once assigned, papers are sent to the reviewers, who are given approximately two weeks to complete the review. While reviewers may return their comments and complete response by e-mail, mail, or fax, the *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* staff prefers the response be returned by e-mail as an MS Word document.

Deciding Whether to Review a Paper

Reviewers are Consultant to the Journal - By agreeing to review a paper, the reviewer agrees to become a consultant to the journal and to adhere to these guidelines for the review of manuscripts. The reviewer must be able to judge fairly and objectively the quality and significance of the work under review. He/she is obligated to support and encourage publication of work of high quality while appropriately challenging flawed work. Before agreeing to review a paper, the reviewer should consider their ability to meet this standard.

From an editor's point of view, the ideal reviewer is a researcher who is working in a similar discipline as the subject of the paper yet not in direct competition with the author. Ideal reviewers understand the hypotheses underlying the research. They are able to judge the quality of the data and its analyses, and assess the validity of the conclusions. Ideal reviewers also assess the significance of the work to the field.

Reviewers should avoid potential conflicts of interest - When in doubt consult with an editor and err on the side of caution. Issue to consider:

- Avoid reviewing a paper that is too close to reviewers own work. The reviewer is under obligation to keep all reviewed research and data confidential and not use in their own work. If a paper is too close to the reviewers own work, it can be a no win situation when the reviewer publishes their own future work on the subject.
- Reviewers are not given the name of the paper's author, but the reviewer may recognize the work of a close colleague. This does not mean the paper should not be reviewed, but a reviewer should avoid reviewing the work of a co-worker, relative, mentor, close friend or someone the reviewer has collaborated with recently.
- A strongly held personal belief or a vocal public position on an historical argument could raise problems if it compromises or appears to compromise the objectivity of a review

Provide Timely Professional Review - Reviewers must read and critique manuscripts within a relatively short time. In some cases it may be as short as 48 hours, though it is

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often 2-3 weeks. It is unfair to both the author and the journal to accept a paper for review if you know you cannot review it rapidly. Nor should a reviewer give a paper only a cursory reading and provide a superficial, careless review. In agreeing to review a paper, you are contracting to provide the journal with a thorough and incisive appraisal.

The review need not be long: indeed in the case of the very best and very worst papers, written critiques may be short. However, even these short reviews require time, reflection, and thought. Most reviewers estimate that they spend from 1-3 hours on a typical manuscript review. Some reviews prove difficult, and require much longer.

Issues to Consider Once You Have Received the Paper

Manuscripts are confidential - Manuscripts under review are confidential documents, and should be treated as such. They contain unpublished information and ideas that must be kept confidential. Reviewers cannot share the paper or its contents with colleagues. Moreover, reviewers cannot use the information in the paper in their own research or cite it in their own publications.

Reviewers should not contact authors - Reviewers should not contact the author about the manuscript during the review process. The review is a confidential process and the authors remain blind to the identity of the reviewers. If a reviewer needs information from the authors, the reviewer should contact Journal staff, who will communicate with the author.

Seeking advice of a colleague - Sometimes a reviewer may wish to seek advice or information from a colleague during the course of a review. However, this should be done on narrow subjects and should be done without discussing the paper under review or revealing the research and theories in the paper. The reviewer should note in the comments to the editor that a colleague has seen the paper and assisted with the review. This is important for the journal records and also assures that the colleague gets appropriate credit for contribution to the review.

Reviewers are the agent of the journal - A reviewer may feel bad about rejecting a paper and empathize with the authors of the paper, but they must be able to make such a recommendation when it is the appropriate one. Allowing a badly flawed paper to pass unchallenged into the peer-reviewed literature, sets a trap for the unsophisticated reader who will read the manuscript and simply accept the flawed conclusions at face value. Peer review is viewed as a process providing a stamp of approval to the paper and its contents.

The key result of the review is a recommendation regarding publication. In making the suggestion for acceptance, revision, or rejection of manuscripts, reviewers help set the standards of the journal. Reviewer must consider the manuscript from the perspective of the Journal and the field of fur trade history. Reviewers must be aware of subtle biases that influence their judgment and recommendations. Papers that challenge existing thought or that present surprising findings must not be dismissed too readily during the

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review process. Papers that purport to break new ground and cause rethinking of previous assumptions require careful scrutiny, but the potential importance of such papers makes it important that they be reviewed thoughtfully, carefully, and objectively.

The review should focus primarily on the history - The reviewer should consider and comment on a variety of issues, including the importance and novelty of the work; the appropriateness of the material and methods; the rigor of any experimental design; the quality of the data; the appropriateness of any statistical analyses; the rigor of the interpretation of the data; and the validity of the conclusions drawn in the paper. The reviewer may have comments on the length of the paper, the writing quality; the clarity, accuracy, and completeness of figures and tables; the accuracy and adequacy of the introduction which frames the area of the research, the discussions of prior and related work, and the citations to the literature. The comments made in the review should clearly present the reviewer's analysis of the quality, novelty, and importance of the history and the effectiveness and appropriateness of its presentation in the manuscript.

The review should not focus on grammar - Editors frequently receive reviews that focus completely on minor editorial problems (typographical errors, misspellings) and do not comment on the history in the paper. Such reviews have limited value as they do not advise the editor on the value and validity of the historical research contained in the document, nor help the editor make an informed decision concerning publication.

Reviewers should identify sentences or paragraphs where the wording is sufficiently erroneous or ambiguous that the research is unclear. They should point out editorial errors that result in historic misstatements and errors in referencing. A note to the editor that a manuscript requires major editorial assistance, perhaps because the author is not fluent in English, or a warning that a manuscript is so carelessly prepared that the research cannot be rigorously reviewed is always in order. However, the reviewer should not waste inordinate amounts of time correcting minor problems with spelling, grammar, or punctuation. The journal will hire grammar editors to work with authors of published papers.

Writing the Review

Reviews should be clear and specific - Make comments as specific as possible, referencing page numbers where appropriate. Comments must be clear, concise, and accurate; focused more on the content of the article rather than issues of editorial style.

Although their primary purpose is to advise the editor, comments to the author frequently are of value in guiding revision of the paper and in suggesting ways to improve the project by the inclusion of additional data or experiments.

Comments to the author may be very brief, especially in the case of an excellent, well-prepared paper. They may be extensive if the reviewer feels the paper has valuable elements but requires many revisions and corrections to present the findings effectively. Hence, there is an element of mentoring and advising inherent in the review process.

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Comments should be constructive and courteous - When writing the review, the reviewer should remember that the review may be sent to the authors, so it should be written in a constructive tone. Comment on specific examples of strengths and problem areas. Comments and recommendations should be supported with citations to specific figures, tables, or sections of text. When the reviewer's criticisms rely on, or are supported by data in the literature, the reviewer should provide citations to those relevant sources. A good review helps the author think more clearly about their work and its design, execution, presentation and significance.

Focus on how the argument is supported, not on whether you agree or disagree with it. There is no need to argue with the author. Raise objections or ask for explanations to clarify or suggest ways of strengthening the argument. Peer reviewers do not necessarily have to agree with theories and conclusions of a paper, but should make sure the paper is accurate and thorough. Difference of opinions given the same set of facts is a healthy debate that the Journal wants to encourage.

Some reviewers, hiding behind the mask of anonymity, submit critiques that are so rude, snide, sarcastic, or argumentative that they must be censored before being sent to the authors. Some are not transmitted to the authors, depriving the author of beneficial insights the reviewer might have provided. Gratuitous rudeness, personal criticism and locker room humor are never appropriate. Even the most serious criticisms can be worded and presented in such a way as to be constructive and collegial. Reviewers should write critiques using a style and tone they would want to see in a review they might receive of their own work.

Reviewers are asked to comment about the following:

- **Overall Impression** – What is your overall impression? Did the subject intrigue you and make you want to read more? Did the paper meet those expectations and cover its stated objectives? Is the paper speculative or does it present a convincing argument?
- **Relevance** – The purpose of the Journal is advance the knowledge and research of the field. The target audience for the publication is the author's and reviewer's peers and not a general audience. Does the paper advance debate or contribute new knowledge or theories to Rocky Mountain Fur Trade history?
- **Accuracy** – Are all facts stated in the paper backed up with reference to the source? Known or suspected factual errors should be noted.
- **General or Vague Statements** – General statements should not be used unless defended with facts. For example, statements that start "A trapper once said...." or "Historians believe...." are not statements of fact unless backed up by references. If the author does not define who the "trapper" or "historians" are, then the statements are not likely to support their theory.
- **Experiments** – In cases where experiments are conducted with support of historical research, procedures should be clearly defined in such a way that they

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could be duplicated. Procedures should also be constructed to minimize errors and false results.

- **Original Work** – The reviewer should indicate if the work appears original. If work is derived from previous work, that should be stated. Reviewer should point out similar work that was not referenced.
- **Complete** – The author should make a rigorous and thorough defense of theories and subject. This means complete presentation of all relevant information. Reviewer should suggest other relevant information or sources that were not used. Are the references sufficient? Is there a plausible counter-argument that the author should present?
- **Presentation** – Was the paper clearly written and organized logically? Should the paper be expanded or condensed?
- **Recommendations** – The reviewer should make any other recommendations they feel will improve the work.

Recommendation for Publication - Finally, the peer reviewer will rate the paper as “ready for publication” or “not ready for publication.” This is a subjective opinion based on the overall presentation of the work. A paper needing minor revisions and changes should be rated as “ready for publication” with indications of parts that should be fixed. Papers requiring significant changes should be rated as “not ready”, with an indication if the paper could be published in the future with more work or whether it is doubtful the paper could be amended to warrant publication.

After the Review

Do not keep copies of the reviewed paper - When the review is finished, it is sent to the journal. If the reviewer prefers to read a hard copy rather than electronic text, the reviewer should destroy the paper copy. The reviewer should keep a copy of the review itself until certain that the review has been received by the journal and the editor has no questions.

Confidentiality remains even after the review is complete - Both the contents of the paper and the outcome of the review remain confidential until the paper is published. Even after the paper is published, information on the review process should remain confidential. The reviewer should not reveal the identities of reviewers to the authors. This is especially important when there were differences of opinion between reviewers or when contentious issues were raised during the review process. If a reviewer anticipates being in a situation where the paper will be discussed, the reviewer should read the final published version of the paper. It is not uncommon for a paper to evolve substantially during the review process. Data may be added or deleted and the analyses refined. It is possible that the conclusions drawn in the paper will be altered or restated more precisely. The reviewer therefore should discuss the published version of the paper, rather than the earlier version that was reviewed in confidence.

Contacting Journal Staff – If you have any questions, please contact Journal staff at journal@mmmuseum.com or 307-367-4101.