Editorial: Better Feedback for Our Authors and Referees

At iScience, we take service to authors very seriously. Our philosophy with respect to the editorial process is that papers should be reviewed for the findings they claim and show, as opposed to the findings we wish they showed. These are the reasons why we have been, from the beginning, painstakingly parsing referee reports to communicate to authors, for example, which comments are mandatory to address and which are instead fodder for future work.

We are periodically monitoring how our editorial process performs, through surveys, for example, so we have confidence that these practices have been welcome by our authors and referees.

With this Editorial, we want to introduce a major change to our referee questionnaires, which will improve feedback to authors, without increasing the workload for our referees.

The hard work of referees, who are helping improve the science and storytelling of millions of scientific articles each year, literally enables the scientific enterprise to function. However, sometimes authors receive referee reports that are not particularly informative, due to factors including a lack of agreed-upon standards. There are several courses and academies (such as https://researcheracademy.elsevier.com/navigating-peer-review/fundamentals-peer-review) dealing with how to review a paper: they are very useful, especially for younger researchers. At the same time, a good referee report has a simple structure, showcasing the main points of a paper, the major issues, and any additional items that might be minor, “nice to have,” or good for future work.

What is more, the comments to authors (the final result of peer review, as far as the author is concerned), are often difficult to parse. This feedback sometimes contains contradicting information about which work is necessary for publication and which is merely optional. As already mentioned, at iScience it is an important part of the work of our Editors to help authors wade through this (sometimes very extensive) feedback.

To improve on both these aspects, we are introducing structured referee questionnaires (https://www.cell.com/isience/reviewers). They standardize what good referee reports already look like, asking referees to list the key findings of the paper, mandatory work to clearly demonstrate those key points, minor/additional points, any other feedback to the author, and comments to the Editors.

At the same time, these new questionnaires achieve some important objectives. They make clear to referees the expectations of the Editors of iScience (and the authors’) with respect to what should be covered in the report. The new questionnaires make it easy to refer to the key claims of the paper, and to recommend the right improvements for each of these points. At the same time, we introduce no additional burden for our referees: the questionnaires are short and are entirely optional, in the sense that referees can still contribute free-form reviews instead. The free-form reviews can be uploaded using the “Additional comments to the authors” and “Comments to the Editor” text boxes in our online questionnaires, or sent by email to the editorial office.

The new questionnaires are the fruit of a long process, inspired by our sister journal Molecular Cell wherein similar questions, judged to be helpful by both authors and referees, have been asked since 2014. Finally, the questionnaires have been refined through discussions with a number of Editors at Cell Press, as well as with the iScience Advisory Board: their comments have been instrumental in refining this concept and ensuring that we are not introducing additional obstacles for referees.

We believe the new questionnaires will ultimately save time for both our authors and our referees. Our editorial activity of parsing through all referee comments in reaching decisions on manuscripts will continue unabated. At the same time, we hope the new questionnaires will enable the Editors to issue
decisions more quickly, reduce the length of the revision process for authors (because of clearer instructions on what is really important to do), and reduce the number of rounds of review due to better communication between the referees and editors on one side and the authors on the other.

In this last part of the Editorial, we want to refer to its title, which mentions better feedback for our referees. This relates to more thorough information about the fate of the manuscript they consulted upon. Referees at iScience will now be notified when a decision has been made on a paper they reviewed, and they will be able to view comments from all other referees, as well as the complete decision letter. We believe this will improve transparency and enable referees to interact with the journal and the research we publish in a timely fashion.

Stefano Tonzani
Simona Fiorani
Lead Editors, iScience by Cell Press

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2018.11.015