

What Makes for an Effective Review?

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We are thankful and appreciative to individuals who review manuscripts for *Adult Learning*. We recognize that the journal would not exist without their contributions.

As guidance for writing quality manuscript reviews, we describe our expectations of reviewers, do's and don'ts of review writing, helpful resources, and sample reviews.

Our Expectations

A quality review requires sufficient time investment, cognizance of the literature of the field, knowledge of research methods, and awareness of the constrictions and possibilities of practice. We strive to invite reviewers who are knowledgeable of the topic addressed by a manuscript.

Reviewers should practice both honesty and generosity of spirit. Reviews should be professional, unbiased, and fair. Highly critical reviews without any positive comments can be very discouraging, especially to new authors. Reviewers should note positive aspects of the article, as well as provide constructive and detailed feedback about issues that could be improved. It is helpful if requests for change are accompanied by a detailed justification for the request. Reviewers should not only note aspects that need improvement and change but should also characterize how those changes could be accomplished.

Reviewers for *Adult Learning* are expected to provide detailed responses to the seven questions that are built into the review form. You may also wish to write an introduction and a concluding statement. Reviewers also have the option of offering confidential remarks to the editors, feedback directly to the author, and uploading a separate word file to support the review.

1. How clear is the purpose of the manuscript?

- a. A clear purpose statement is important for readers to understand the manuscript.
- b. Clear writing is essential for publication in *Adult Learning*. In your review, please address how well the author(s) are able to communicate their ideas.
- c. Do the author(s) adequately define unfamiliar vocabulary and acronyms they use?

d. Do the author(s) have background knowledge that they do not recognize they should share, i.e. tacit knowledge, so that the reader can better understand the manuscript?

e. Conversely, do the author(s) over-explain issues that are common knowledge for people in the field of adult education?

2. How innovative is the manuscript? Does it have anything new to say to adult educators?

a. Please consider whether the manuscript is up-to-date and innovative.

b. We often receive manuscripts in which the only citations are to adult education classics (e.g., Knowles, andragogy, self-directed learning) published before the turn of the 21st century. Contemporary adult education literature is being continuously published on varied topics and we expect manuscript author(s) to indicate their awareness of this fact by citing both classic and contemporary literature, as appropriate. If needed, please refer manuscript authors to topics and authors of literature they can read to improve their manuscripts.

3. Will the manuscript appeal to a broad cross-section of readers (e.g., practitioners, administrators, instructors, program developers, professors, graduate students)?

a. *Adult Learning* has a diverse readership. As you review the manuscript, please think about how it might be understood by *Adult Learning's* audience who may be interested in adult learning but not be knowledgeable of a specific topic a manuscript is designed to address. The author(s) should be able to clearly explain their topic and not be speaking exclusively to specialists in their own area.

4. Are the implications for practice clear?

a. A major focus for *Adult Learning* is on the practice of adult education. To address the mission of *Adult Learning* authors must consider the meaning of their manuscripts for how the ideas expressed can be used to influence and improve adult education practice.

5. Does the author(s) use supporting references when appropriate?

a. We receive manuscripts from authors in many different fields; however, because the focus of *Adult Learning* is on adult learning and adult education, we require that the authors reference the literature of adult education.

b. *Adult Learning* uses APA, 7th edition.

6. How important and/or timely is the topic?

a. We seek to invite reviewers who are knowledgeable of the topic area for each manuscript and can reflect on its contemporary relevance. We also encourage reviewers to assess the appropriateness of the manuscript by using resources provided by SAGE to identify related publications.

7. How well-written and organized is the manuscript?

a. Because an experienced copyeditor reviews all accepted manuscripts prior to their publication, reviewers need not spend their time pointing out minor spelling or grammatical problems. Instead, please use your review to address substantive issues regarding the topic, organization, methods, innovativeness, timeliness, implications for practice, and appeal of the manuscript for our readers.

b. We want to encourage international authors; therefore, please use special tact when reviewing manuscripts written by author(s) whose first language does not appear to be English or who may reside in countries where literary conventions differ. For example, Americans tend to be accustomed to direct speech whereas other cultures may approach communication more indirectly.

Do's and Don'ts of Review Writing

DO	DON'T
Consider whether you have sufficient time to conduct a quality review. Reviewing can be a lot of work – before you commit, make sure you can meet the deadline.	If you don't have time to do a thorough review, please don't accept an invitation for review.
Accept invitations for review in subject areas that match your expertise so that you are able to provide a high-quality review.	Accept invitations to review when you have a potential conflict of interest. Remember, adult education is a small field and we tend to know what our colleagues are working on. If you are reasonably sure that you know the author(s) of the manuscript, discuss this with the editor before you accept responsibility for a review.
Be specific and provide detailed notations of both the positive and negative aspects of manuscripts.	Write a hasty review or be vague because you have invested insufficient time to really study a manuscript.

Provide detailed suggestions for improvement. Quote specific text from the article so that the author(s) can see exactly what you mean. Use page number and line numbers to indicate the location of the quote.	Write a nasty review. Saying “this manuscript has no redeeming value”* (or something equally devastating) is highly negative and does not include specific explanation of what might be improved in a manuscript.
Begin and end reviews with a positive comment, if possible.	Let the anonymity of the blind, peer review process lure you into writing something you would never say to someone in person. Manuscripts can also be written by students and people new to the field. They may never dare to submit a manuscript again!
Compare the manuscript under review with the literature of adult education.	Use a review to communicate your own biases or to wish the author had written the manuscript in the way you would do it.
Consider the emotional journey an author(s) may experience in relation to the review.	Be hostile or attack an author(s)' personhood.

* *A real comment received by one of our colleagues*

Resources for Reviewers

[What makes for a quality peer review?](#)

[The Perils of Peer Review](#)

[Ten Tips for a Truly Terrible Peer Review](#)

Elsevier Research Academy provides a [Certified Peer Reviewer Course](#). Module 3.1 is titled *How to Write Helpful Review* and takes 25 minutes to view.

Committee on Publication Ethics guidance for [Peer Review](#).

American Psychological Association Manual of Style, 7th edition.

Sample of an Excellent Review for *Adult Learning*

General Comments:

The author(s) does a good job of pointing out the need and importance of _____ (Fill in the specific topic). There is also a lot of clarity around the differences of opinion among various stakeholders. The author(s) effectively explained how these differences can actually be accommodated within the same classroom. I enjoyed reading the paper and found it interesting and engaging. However, I think it needs some more clarification, attention to detail, and fulfillment of the promises of the title and the abstract. Here are my observations of gaps in the manuscript that, if addressed, would make it acceptable for publication.

Narrative Assessment:

1. How clear is the purpose of the manuscript?

You state your purpose on p. 4 as “an effort to adapt _____ in _____ settings, (a relatively new area), and demonstrate the importance of including diverse stakeholders in these processes.” After reading your article, you do not describe the “effort to adapt;” instead, the article describes stakeholders’ thoughts and viewpoints, not an actual adaptation. This is a crucial difference. Please rephrase your purpose to reflect the content of the study and article. The paper falls short in two ways. I felt unclear about the class that is being adapted. I think it would be good to make this clearer and explain also that the data collection process was designed to refine the plan. It wasn’t clear whether this plan was used for “pure” research purposes or for a starting design that would then be refined by stakeholder input (or both). The purpose of the paper itself is a bit unclear. Was this a research study or a process to inform model design (or both)? If it was for the purposes of grounding the focus groups and interviews (for research purposes) or serving a dual purpose of research and design, there should be a research question. That is missing. In addition to making the overall purpose of the paper clearer, having a research question would help focus the paper a little more. At this point, the paper strays from one specific focus in little spots here and there. If the author(s) states a really clean, clear, crisp research question and then carefully ensures that every sentence speaks to that question, the paper will gain just the little bit of extra focus and consistency needed.

2. How innovative is the manuscript? Does it have anything new to say to adult educators?

Addressing _____ concerns in adult education settings is a relevant and underrepresented topic, and I think it is an important aspect to discuss. The author(s) offer diverse perspectives, and the variety of viewpoints presents valuable information to adult educators. The topic is the strongest aspect of this manuscript, and its importance to adult education makes revisions worthwhile.

3. Will the manuscript appeal to a broad cross-section of readers (e.g. practitioners, administrators, instructors, program developers, professors, graduate students)?

The topic of addressing adult education and _____ will likely appeal to practitioners, instructors, and program developers. Although there may be some academic interest, I think the topic appeals to people involved in creating and implementing programs and classes. As the authors mentioned, there are few resources that address _____ concerns although the need is present.

4. Are the implications for practice clear?

This is one area that the author(s) could elaborate on. Although the paper ends with a brief discussion of the importance of stakeholder input, adding a section with specific recommendations or implications for practice would help readers distill some of the ideas shared in the findings. From what the different stakeholders shared, are there particular actions or plans adult educators could take? It would strengthen the paper if the author(s) discussed the positionality of the stakeholders and the ways in which this might have shaped their responses. I think there are very good and likely reasons why they might have taken such different positions on some of the topics. Although the author(s) can't know why for sure, I think that at least a little surmising helps the reader make sense of the differences. This is touched on in the conclusion, but I think more could be made of it in the findings.

5. Does the author(s) use supporting references when appropriate?

Many of the supporting references are appropriate. See Question 7 for specific instances where more support would be helpful. In the framing of the paper where literature is cited, I was bothered by the lumping together of participant subjectivities. Research from all of these populations was cited in making the case for adapting instruction. This seemed to tend toward the sense that all learners are the same (which seems nonsensical to me), and, therefore, an argument supporting specific needs of one group can be made for any other group. If it somehow necessary to utilize this kind of blurred description of research in terms of population focus in order to make the case, the author should acknowledge that the research does focus on different populations and that not all findings may translate across populations but they do all suggest the shared needs. Or just more generally make clear that not all populations are the same and why it is still appropriate to blend these populations together. Some more care in the discussion of the research is needed here. Likewise, the author seems to equate the terms _____ and _____ as one in the same with this sentence: "...". Along these same lines, I think more care needs to be taken in terminology. Terms are used somewhat interchangeably and without much definition until later in the paper. Pick a term, define it carefully (who is and is not included in this population) and then use that term consistently. If other terms need to be used for some reason, explain why.

6. How important and/or timely is the topic?

Although _____ concerns affect many adult learners, the topic is not well-studied, and this manuscript provides insight into this relevant topic. The stakeholders' thoughts discussed in

this article are timely, and this study opens the door to further study if/when the programs they discussed are implemented.

7. How well-written and organized is the manuscript?

I struggled the most with the writing and organization of this manuscript. I strongly recommend the use of subheadings in the findings section and avoid presenting additional findings in the discussion section. Although the topic is important and timely, the information was not clearly presented and there were many grammatical and structural writing problems. The authors should carefully review all sections of the manuscript for grammar, particularly comma use and clear sentence structure (I also advise against using passive voice). The lack of attention to clear writing was distracting from the purpose and content of the manuscript.

Concluding Thoughts:

I believe that all of these suggestions are very doable and will make a good paper even better! As an adult educator who is deeply interested in the research and practice on ____ (Fill in the specific topic). I found the article timely and engaging. Re-organization of the manuscript to provide further detail and clarity will strengthen it and will provide a valuable contribution to the field of adult education.

Recommendation:

Accept	
Conditional accept (conditional upon revision)	
Revise and resubmit	X
Reject	

Manuscript Ratings:

Criteria	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Content			X	
Organization	X			
Readability		X		
Relevance to practice			X	
Writing style		X		

Some specific suggestions relating to the manuscript organization are:

- Review terms to ensure that the reader understands what you refer to and that you are being specific to the situation. For example, you refer to “_____” (a topic term) on p.2, line 29 without specifying what type? Simply using the term without describing it in more detail is unclear.
- You use the phrase “_____” after already defining and using “_____” (acronym). You can use the acronym after the first reference to it.
- It would be helpful for you to add a few sentences to describe the type of setting you envision for these classes/groups. It is not clear from your writing exactly what the setting is hoped to be.

Introduction:

- You mention “_____” and this seems like a very specific term that is not discussed or mentioned elsewhere. I suggest defining and explaining further or using a different term.
- Include more description of your study: you say, “an effort” – describe further.
- You make several statements that would benefit from additional support. For example:
 - o “_____” (p. 2, lines 22-25). Why? Because it’s not addressed in literature? Elaborate.
 - o “_____” (p. 2, lines 42-43). Who is making these efforts?
 - o “_____” (p. 2, lines 45-47). Fewer what/who?
 - o “_____” (p. 2, line 47). Exist where? Through what organizations/efforts?

Data collection:

- This section needs more detail. For example, you mention the two focus groups but not how many people were involved with each group, where they took place, any details about the participants, who conducted the groups/interviews, and how long the groups/interviews lasted.
- Additional details: how many participants of each type? What were their roles? What is their level of education? Are they people who would be involved in the classes or are they speaking for others they know? Was there only one participant per interview? In-person or via phone or other method?
- Additionally, please specify who the research team was – the same as the authors?
- On p. 4, line 38, you mentioned a “partner organization.” It is unclear who/what the partnership is with.
- These are some of the details that would be helpful to the readers. There are more – I suggest re-reading the section and pretending like you know nothing about this project, or perhaps having someone else read it. As it is, I had many questions.

Findings:

- Use sub-headings to further clarify and organize your findings. For example, use your themes, such as you see fitting, to provide subheadings you think encapsulate the data you share. This would help the reader process the findings in a more manageable way and focus on each aspect of the findings that you present.
- Clarify exactly who you mean by “stakeholders” – all participants?
- Use of quotes: refrain from using something a specific person said when discussing a group’s viewpoint. For example, starting on p.5, line 50, you say “participants . . .” but then follow by a quote from one participant said. If you use a quote from one participant,

you could rephrase it to be something like: “Participants focused on ... One participant commented “. . .” Also, it is unclear from your text whether the two quotes are from the same person or two people. Review all uses of quotes for clarity and appropriate attribution (Some are fine).

Discussion:

- In the paragraph on p. 9, lines 10-36 (“Through collecting data . . .”), further discussion of some of the reasons behind various participants’ views would be helpful. For example, one reason practitioners may be concerned with _____ is the implementation of _____ and its implications for program funding.
- The paragraph “In addition, the stakeholders . . .” (pp. 9-10, beginning with line 38) seems more like findings than discussion.
- P. 10 line 15 – who are these “experts”?
- In general, using more references to support your discussion would be helpful. Although there may not be much literature on the topic, you could look for more from related fields to support your discussion. Overall, this is a helpful discussion of topics in the paper.