



James C. Peterson

# Why Anonymous Peer Review Is the Professional Standard

In each March issue, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* publishes a list of scholars who have generously given authors and the journal peer review in roughly the year before. Quite intentionally, their names are not specifically attached to particular resulting articles, nor to essay titles that did not make it into the journal. We want to express appreciation for how they have shared their expertise without pay or other recognition, while keeping their particular dialogue with the journal and authors anonymous. This is to encourage a crucial step in providing the best possible quality to serve our readers. The ideas in each published article have stood on their own in a collegial dialogue where they could be challenged and tested without special status of acceptance or approbation because of who said them. *PSCF* is not a vanity press that publishes an article because of the professional credentials or association standing of an author. Neither does it screen out an argument because of who said it. The argument is separated from its writer so that it is evaluated only on its content.

Sometimes a reviewer or author will feel that they have, earlier, heard an argument or “recognized” a style from a particular individual and that only that person would write in that way. The piece may be highly idiosyncratic—but the editor will not confirm who the author of a proposed essay or peer review is, and there are many people in the world that seek to write for the journal. Only about one in three submissions eventually makes it to publication, and none without improving through revision. Nor should the essay author contact the possible review author to see if they wrote the review. The point at this stage is to deal with the arguments, not the personalities of past experiences—positive or negative.<sup>1</sup>

Recently an objection was raised that said *PSCF* has not published a formal policy forbidding an author from trying to ferret out and confront a particular anonymous reviewer, and therefore authors have a right to do so. Well, *PSCF* has also not published policy against plagiarism, or misquoting, or making up references. These actions are so antithetical to the clear intentional process of the journal that

they should not have to be spelled out as inappropriate. The expectation that reviewers receiving anonymized essays to review, and authors receiving anonymized reviews as a result, to maintain anonymity, should not have to be stated as a legality, or repeatedly explained. Almost all peer-reviewed journals have always required this. There are statistics showing that more than 98% of peer-reviewed journals do not publish reviews and reviewer names.<sup>2</sup> There is good reason why they do not, and *PSCF* has not since its inception 74 years ago. Anonymous peer review is central to the very structure of how the journal is experienced by authors, reviewers, and readers.

In the ongoing effort to welcome and equip new authors, *PSCF* has gone beyond assuming standard professional expectations and the very structure of the process, to state and appreciate the method of *anonymous* peer review. This is clear in each March issue when expressing thanks to the prior year’s anonymous reviewers, inside the front cover of each issue, and at further length in an article in the *ASA’s God and Nature* entitled “Peering at Double-Blind Peer Review.” The standard process of anonymous peer review of anonymized essays is not a secret! Here is a section from that essay:

Reviewers are motivated to do incisive and fair critique because the system judges their essays too, and the editor will see their peer review alongside that of others. Reputation is hard to earn and easy to lose. Reviewers will not necessarily agree with the author’s conclusions, but they can articulate what would be needed for the most effective contribution. Naturally, sometimes they will disagree with each other as well, although it is quite striking how often there is a clear consensus in their independent critiques. Granted, no one reviewer catches everything. Individual reviewers will often spot concerns that other reviewers did not. The combination of multiple peer reviewers giving their best advice is a tremendous help to the editor, as well as to the author who is willing to improve her work. As the author rewrites the essay taking into account the suggestions of the reviewers, the editor decides when indeed the article has satisfied the comments in the critique, and standards to be

# Acknowledgment

published. This triggers the type of letter I most enjoy writing: that the essay is clear, accurate, well-informed, and making an important contribution—and so will appear in the journal.<sup>3</sup>

If an essay does not make the cut to be published in *PSCF*, this in no way limits an author from publishing their arguments. On the contrary, hearing reviewer responses that are not laudatory is an opportunity for the author to foresee reader concerns; the author can then write more clearly and make better arguments. If the author feels that their essay would be better recognized by another journal, they can next offer it to other journals. That is the standard response to not being chosen for one journal's publication. No one's freedom to make their case has been compromised. Even when a journal decides not to publish the manuscript, the author can improve their essay on the next try from what was said in the anonymous peer review, at no charge to them. That is a gift.

If the author is not persuaded by a criticism from a reviewer, they can and no doubt will state so privately to the editor. They also can articulate, in any forum that will have them, that they have heard an objection to their work and this is their reply to it. Peer reviewers, who have freely donated their time to help an author improve their work, should not have to expect that a communication informally shared with an author may appear in print with or without their reputed name. We all write more directly when wrestling privately with an anonymous idea than we do when we are trying to protect a known correspondent's ego or are expecting to be read by a broad audience.

If an author confronts a fellow scholar as the possible reviewer and receives permission to assign their name for publication to an originally anonymous peer review, that does not justify publishing the review. This would undermine the expectations and benefits of the process for everyone else. The scholarly conversation at this important stage is destroyed by games of tracking down attribution for censure or refutation. This promotes pointless speculation and attack on people just trying to help the author and journal readers. It makes it more difficult to find scholars willing to give their time and expertise freely, subverting a crucial step in journal quality.

If an author undermines the anonymous peer review process, it is unlikely that they will be entrusted again with the benefits of counsel from anonymous peer review. ▲

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jacalyn Kelly, Tara Sadeghieh, and Khosrow Adeli trace the discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of such anonymous peer review in "Peer Review in Scientific Publications: Benefits, Critiques, and a Survival Guide," *The Journal of the International Federation of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine* 25, no. 3 (October 25, 2014): 227–43, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4975196/>.

<sup>2</sup>Joanna Wilkinson, "Who's Using Open Peer Review?," October 27, 2017, <https://clarivate.com/blog/whos-using-open-peer-review/>.

<sup>3</sup>James C. Peterson, "Peering at Double-Blind Peer Review," *God and Nature* (Summer 2018), <https://godandnature.asa3.org/peterson-peering-at-double-blind-peer-review.html>.

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*Editor-in-Chief*

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## 2021 Peer Reviewers

*We wish to thank the following scholars for their crucial service in anonymous peer review.*

Charles Austerberry  
Ryan Bebej  
Robert Bishop  
John Bloom  
Dorothy Boorse  
Dustin Burlett  
Peter Bussey  
David Chettle  
Roy Clouser  
April Cordero  
Evangeline Cornwell  
Gregg Davidson

Robert Dean  
Alan Dickin  
Danilo Diedrichs  
Elise Eifert  
Sy Garte  
Robert Geddes  
Brian Greuel  
Robert Hayes  
Erin Haynes  
Christy Hemphill  
John Hilber  
Gordon Hugenberger

August H. Konkel  
Heather Looy  
Richard Middleton  
George Murphy  
John Pohl  
Thomas R. Roose  
Rodney Scott  
Philip Senter  
Erin Smith  
David Snoke  
John Walton  
Janet Warren