

Introduction

Writing a constructive report can be challenging. Whether you're an early career researcher wanting to ensure you're using the right tone, a non-native English speaker looking to improve your written English or an actively engaged reviewer wanting a refresh, we've outlined some key tips and guidance on language.

Your report isn't just for the authors but will also be read by our Editors. Being clear and constructive in your report, not only is an excellent way to establish your expertise and insightfulness; but also is vital in assisting the Editor to share your constructive critique for the authors.

In our examples, we use the English alphabet letters (X, Y, Z) as placeholders; for genuine reviews, you would include the actual wording or area you are referencing.

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Constructing your feedback

Be clear and use simple language.

For example:

- The uncropped western blots have not been provided.
- The Method section is well-written.

Be concise.

It's best to fit one or two comments into a single sentence, then try to merge multiple ideas in one long sentence. Comments should be linked together if you're discussing the same section of the manuscript.

For example:

- Figure 2 is too blurry to read and the graph in Figure 3 does not have a named axis. Figure 5 is missing.

Think about the words you're using and if they suggest a positive, negative or neutral feeling.

For example:

- The authors have exploited their results to support their conclusion.

Exploited is a loaded term. It sounds as if we're accusing the authors of an immoral or negative action. A better wording:

- The authors have utilised their results to support their conclusion. Utilised is generally a neutral word!

Be mindful of your tone in general.

Tone is much harder to convey in writing than speaking.

For example:

- A weakness of the paper is the authors' illogical conclusion.

'Illogical' may be factually correct and we could be saying it very sensitively. However, it could be read and interpreted as passive aggressive. The sentence structure also links 'illogical' with 'the authors', so unintentionally, we might be being impolite to the authors. A better way to write the example is:

- A weakness of the paper is the conclusion, as the author's results do not fully support the conclusion they're making.

Structure your critiques.

Identify the issue, expand on why it's an issue and then how the authors should revise their manuscript to resolve the issue.

For example:

- X paper has not been cited in their discussion section (pg. 7, line 315). As the results of that paper supports the author's findings here and would strengthen the manuscript's conclusions, the authors should include it as a reference.

For technical, medical, anatomical and methodical terms, aim for accuracy.

This will entirely depend on the discipline and your expertise.

A few examples:

- SARS-CoV-2 instead of COVID-19.
- Use male and female (Sex) for biological differences including chromosomes, sex organs, and endogenous hormonal profile as per the SAGER guidelines. For social studies with human participants, gender is often more appropriate to use, in this case men and women.

Define abbreviations you may use and/or ask the authors to define an abbreviation, if they haven't already.

Once the abbreviation is defined, the abbreviation can just be used after.

A few examples:

- In this paper, the authors explore the ways that the Human Papillomavirus (HPV)... HPV has been linked to...
- The authors should define 'GPM' (page 5) in the manuscript text.

What to avoid

Being too informal or casual.

For example:

- The exemplary Dr. X and co., did wonderful. (Too informal).

To make the above example more formal:

- Overall, the authors have done a great job. (Formal but still actively praising the authors).

Colloquial language where possible.

Colloquial language is a form of casual language. It's not always best to assume if authors are native or fluent English speakers. In any case, since English is so widely spoken, there is no one list of English colloquialisms that all native English speakers will understand.

Imagine if your phrase can be taken literally; if it can't, try to avoid using it.

For example:

- I draw the line at asking the authors to re-run their statistical analysis of the data (here this means to set a limit about something; to object to the action being described).

Lots of run on sentences without proper punctuation.

Punctuation is important for understanding what idea(s) are being conveyed.

For example:

- The study has a lot of limitations which the authors have not included and the methodology is not fully described so it could reduce the ability for other researchers to reproduce other than that it's okay to publish

The above is very hard to read. If you find creating long cohesive sentences challenging, try to stick to the 2 comments per sentence rule.

Including offensive or impolite language.

- This paper is awful, horribly written and it should be rejected.

Put yourself in the author's shoes when writing your comments and remember that our Editors are reading your reports too. Even if you feel and think this about a paper – your comments reflect on your professionalism. A better way to write the above example:

- This paper should be proofread by an English editing service, to improve the overall writing and structure of the paper.

Unhelpful feedback is...

When completing your report, it's important to think about the actions the authors should or could take to improve their study and their manuscript. But it's just as important to ensure that your requested actions are specific, accurate and conveyed clearly.

Lacking in detail.

For example:

- Sometimes, the paper misses out important citations.
- In parts of the manuscript, there are typos.

Where does the paper miss out these citations, and if possible, what are these important citations? Where and what are these typos? A better way to write the above examples:

- The main text is lacking in citations overall and the reference list is on the shorter side for a review article. Considering this, the authors should cite further relevant papers – for example 'ABC' by author X et al.
- Methods, lines 116 and 118. 'anlysis' should be 'analysis'.

Vague language.

For example:

- The figures aren't clear.

'Clear' here can mean many different things. Are we talking about the quality of the figure image, the layout or the overall presentation?

Even if your understanding of a word has a single meaning, make sure to be specific so that the authors understand exactly what you mean. Some better ways to write the example above:

- The Figure panels aren't clear because they have a confusing layout. For example, Figure 1D is before Figure 1A.
- The Figure image quality is poor and it's difficult to read them.
- The Figure panels do not have labels included.

Unnecessarily complex language.

For example:

- Ergo, the veracity of the author's analysis is MIA in the discussion documented, which is the undoing of this scientific examination.

We want meaning to be clear and assessable to all our English speakers. Even 'complex' words and phrases are misused by native English speakers.

If you're using a word or phrase that could be replaced by a simpler version and the meaning of the sentence stays the same, please use the simple version. A better way to write the example above:

- The accuracy of the authors' data analysis should be included in the discussion section as a limitation of this study.

Ask for the paper to be proofread by a native English speaker.

For example:

- This paper should be proofread by a native English speaker as the grammar and spelling errors make it too difficult to read.

Being a native English speaker does not guarantee a high-level competency in English spelling or grammar. Native speakers can be just as prone to making or ignoring mistakes as non-native speakers. A better way to write the example above:

- This paper requires significant language editing as the grammar and spelling errors make it too difficult to read.