

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

“Where to next”: The secret to writing constructive review comments

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We write this letter from our perspective as reviewers and authors in health professional education who have received unhelpful feedback. We offer guidance to colleagues who act as reviewers of our manuscripts. As authors, we expect to receive feedback that provides us with a critical evaluation of the suitability of our manuscript for publication. Unhelpful feedback can leave us feeling deflated because we have not been given enough information about each problem, why it is important and how it could be addressed. Receiving this type of specific feedback is constructive, as it enhances a writer’s understanding of where, why and how they can improve.

As authors, we have a responsibility to contribute to the peer-review process by keeping the cogs of journals’ publication processes in motion and by providing critical evaluation to help develop the field of health professional education research. However, reviewing someone else’s writing can feel like a daunting task when there are competing priorities. We offer four reminders to reviewers about how to write constructive review comments. These reminders are informed by the concept of “where to next” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). “Where to next” gives insight into how writing can be improved in the future rather than focusing on positive or negative feedback. These reminders may help authors new to scholarship to feel supported in the peer review process.

Our four reminders for writing constructive review comments are:

1. Assume the best. Work with the idea that authors have provided you with the best manuscript they can write.

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2. Identify a problem. Locate an issue or concern, such as a claim that may benefit from further substantiation. Refer to the problem specifically, with a description or quotation. Include the problem's location page, paragraph and line number (e.g., page 3, paragraph 1, line 4).
3. Explain why this problem was identified. Reasons may include the need for logical argument development, specific details or justified explanations.
4. Offer a possible solution. Refer authors to journal guidelines, academic writing conventions or back to claims, ideas or the aim within their manuscript.

We emphasise the fourth reminder because it is often the missing ingredient in reviewer feedback, and as authors, we feel it has the most value to improve our manuscripts and shape our future writing. These reminders apply during the moments of reading a manuscript and writing a review comment rather than to wider considerations that a reviewer should think about as they prepare to review a manuscript. These wider considerations are provided by the journal as guidance to reviewers (see <https://fohpe.org/FoHPE/about#peerReviewProcess>). We invite reviewers to reflect on their experiences of giving and receiving comments about their writing. Consider whether comments have been constructive. By engaging with these four reminders, we encourage reviewers to write comments that authors will find helpful. Rather than simply keeping the cogs of publishing in motion, we aim to improve the review process for all.

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References

- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>

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