

Writing helpful reviews: Examples

These examples are drawn from **real reviews** written by students in an undergraduate Zoology subject. Students were assigned the task of summarising a recent scientific publication in the style of a News & Views article from the journal *Nature*. Each student submitted a draft of this assignment which was reviewed by three other students. The reviewers were guided by a set of questions that were based around the assessment criteria for the assignment.

Each example contains two reviews of the same piece of work, in response to a **structured question**. These examples show several of the differences between **helpful** and **unhelpful** reviews.

Review question: *What do you think are the main strengths of this assignment?*

UNHELPFUL: “The paper was clear and concise.”

- This is a positive comment, but is very short, and doesn't give the author much of an idea of what was good about the paper.

HELPFUL: “I think you've written this piece rather well and in a coherent structure and have been able to address all the main areas that a news and views article requires. I really liked your title. I found it clear, short and straight to the point which was what was asked from us. You've demonstrated the use of scientific terminology but still allow students from other areas of science to be able to understand the focus of this article.”

- This comment is much more specific, and gives the author a clear idea of the strengths of the paper.
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Review question: *As a reader, did you feel that enough background information was provided to allow you to understand the study's key outcomes?*

UNHELPFUL: “More needs to be written about the fish species. Also, the theoretic model and experimental model need to be explained so that reader knows clearly what is being studied.”

- This comment is unbalanced as it only provides negative comments, and the comments are unspecific. It would be more helpful if line numbers and potential suggestions for improvement were provided.

HELPFUL: “The background information is very clear (i.e. the species used, why a fish might cheat a client, what cheating is). The actual background section itself is quite short though – maybe it could help just to have a sentence explaining the strategy of service & client, perhaps referencing another paper that describes this phenomenon. Maybe you could expand a little on "studies of theoretic game model" that you introduce in section 3. This would then tie in better with the next paragraph.”

- This comment is much more balanced – it provides both positive comments and constructive criticisms. Where criticisms are made, they are followed up with specific suggestions for improvement.
- **Author response:** “This review was in-depth and extremely helpful, with clear suggestions for me to follow.”

For more information about student peer review, visit: <http://peerreview.cis.unimelb.edu.au>

Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Review question: *What are your main suggestions for improvement to this article?*

Example 1:

UNHELPFUL: “It doesn't need improving. There aren't any improvements that I could make.”

- This comment doesn't give the author anything to work on - it is unlikely that the piece of work is perfect already.

UNHELPFUL; “I would read through it thoroughly and make sure you are happy with your wording. Since you wrote it a few days ago, taking a fresh look at it may help you to see where sentences can be adjusted to flow better. Avenues for further research were presented in paragraph 6, but I think these might be better to be saved until the end. In the 2nd last paragraph, you introduced new findings from the study. These should probably be introduced closer to the beginning as placing them near the end makes it seem as though they are tacked on.”

- This comment is much more constructive and helpful for the author. The reviewer has obviously thought carefully about the assignment and has provided suggestions for improvement in a respectful and insightful way.

Example 2:

UNHELPFUL: “Get rid of the three columns and go back to two.”

- This comment is very brief, and refers only to formatting rather than the content of the paper, which is frustrating for the author.

HELPFUL: “Perhaps the author could spend less time discussing previous studies in the ‘background information’ section and instead explain the facts of the natural history of the geckos, as this section is currently quite confusing. Instead of going through each individual study, the author could take the most pertinent bits from each study and combine them to form a clear section about the natural history of the geckos. I also think the author needs to explain in more detail early on why anti-predator behaviours are costly because I don't think there was enough emphasis on the fact that these geckos are missing out on searching for food and looking for mates because they are in engaging in anti-predator behaviour. There are a lot of scientific terms that I didn't understand and which probably don't need to be mentioned (e.g. sympatric).”

- In contrast this comment provides detailed suggestions on where the author could improve the content of the paper.

Review question: *Is the balance between the different sections about right? Or has too much space perhaps been allocated to one section (e.g. background) at the expense of another (e.g. results)?*

Example 1:

UNHELPFUL: “No. There is not enough space left for covering the background of the study.”

- While this comment is potentially valid, it is phrased in a negative tone, and would make the author feel ‘attacked’.

HELPFUL: “The balance feels very good; however you may consider the possibility of expanding the background section with greater information on theoretical concepts being tested”

- This comment raises the same issue as above, however it is phrased in a much more positive light and the author is less likely to get defensive.
- **Author’s response:** “Although stating good and bad points, none of it was portrayed negatively. The comments were given helpfully, with clear points for me to follow.”

Example 2:

UNHELPFUL: “Good balance among all sections”

- This comment is brief and not very constructive.
- **Author response:** “Although this review pointed out a number of good points, it was very short and often vague. The comments were all nice, although some of them were unconstructive, such as the lack of criticisms in many of the sections.”

HELPFUL: “The balance between the sections is about right. As we’ve already discussed, the issue is that pretty much every section is disproportionately large, but nothing a good, thorough copyedit can’t fix. The author ought to look at removing about 300 words from the article length, which amounts to 40 words per paragraph.”

- This comment is much more constructive, and provides some specific suggestions for improvement.
- **Author response:** “I really appreciated how **specific** the review was in its comments on various parts of my article, it really helped me **pin-point the areas that needed further editing**. There were not only positive but also constructively critical remarks made on a variety of aspects of the article that I would have never picked up on.”

Example 3:

UNHELPFUL: “I think the overall balance was good, with no section out-weighting any other at all.”

- While this is a positive comment, it doesn’t provide the author with anything to work on.
- **Author response:** “Very positive which was great but not much area given to improve on, most sections just said it was all good (I highly doubt it was almost perfect).”

HELPFUL: “Not the best balance: The “Introduction to the natural phenomenon” and “rationale for the study...etc...” sections were a bit too lengthy. While very clear, they could be trimmed down quite a bit and made to be much more concise, while still providing sufficient information. For example, I think lines 108 to 113 are unnecessary to the theme and idea of the article. You don’t

refer to it before or after the section and while it provides support for the authors' concepts, it is not necessary to understand the author's aims, methods or results, so you don't need to put it in."

- In contrast, this comment is much more helpful as it provides specific suggestions for improvement.
- **Author response:** "Despite initially getting the wrong review, yours was very helpful with lots of good critical comments that were lacking from my other reviews. Clearly and concise unlike my own essay".

Example 4:

Review question: *Is the balance between the different sections about right? Or has too much space perhaps been allocated to one section (e.g. background) at the expense of another (e.g. results)?*

UNHELPFUL: "Yeah I think that the balance is really good. Each section has just the right amount."

- This is a positive comment, but doesn't give the author anything to work on.

HELPFUL: "It is balanced quite well overall. You possibly get carried away with presenting results, and could instead place a little more emphasis on the merit of or strength of inference that is possible from her results, and state your opinion on the quality of her methods."

- This comment shows how you can still write a helpful review, even if you find the piece of work really good.

Review question: *Is the problem clearly stated? Does it agree with your own understanding, from reading the paper?*

UNHELPFUL: "No. Once again, it is hard to understand the problem without knowing/ or have read the study before hand."

- This comment indicates that the reviewer hasn't put in much effort to understand the general topic, which means that the author will be less confident in their suggestions.

HELPFUL: "No. From my own reading – I would classify the 'gap' in knowledge as relating to differences in genders in adopting either a cooperative or non-cooperative solution to IPD. It is also stated that the previous study they refer to as relevant to their own work (the bluestreak cleaner wrasses study) only provided 'indirect' measures of cheating, so it could be possible to also include this in your statement of problem (i.e. "Unsuresness (maybe 'uncertainty' would work better) of gender bias in the cleaner goby and lack of direct measurements of cheating, has led to the improved experimentation etc.." --also use of phrase 'biological lifestyles'- I think what you are referring to is more commonly stated as ' (differing) life history strategies'"

- In contrast, this reviewer has clearly gone to the effort to do some extra reading and gain a better understanding of the topic. This means that the reviewer has more authority and can make more constructive and accurate suggestions..
- **Author response:** This review was indepth and extremely helpful. Thank you for the help!"

Review question: *Did you feel that the article had good flow and structure? Was it easy to follow the author's train of thought from one paragraph to the next?*

Example 1:

UNHELPFUL: “Yes the author has done a very good job. It flows really well from one section to the next. There is a logical progression.”

→ While this is a nice comment, it doesn't really help to improve anything.

HELPFUL: “It had good flow and structure from paragraphs 1-5, but somewhat lost its flow from then on. This can be fixed by adjusting the order in which you present your points. For instance you make conclusions and propose avenues for further research in paragraph 6, but these should be saved until the end. Paragraph 7 was good since it questioned the paper's findings. Paragraph 8 was strange since it introduced new findings from the paper and if these are to be discussed, they should be introduced earlier where you presented the key findings.”

→ This comment is much more insightful and helpful because it provides specific things that the author can work on and is balanced – it provides by positive comments and constructive criticism.

Example 2:

UNHELPFUL: “The article flowed really nicely and it was easy to follow the author's train of thought from one paragraph to the next.”

→ This is a nice positive comment, but doesn't really show much insight compared to the comparison comment below.

HELPFUL: “There is a general underlying structure, but it could be improved. You seem to introduce the article twice on page 1: in line 14 and again in line 32. Only one of these introductions is necessary. In your discussion of the results, the first result you list is the species of fish that came to be cleaned. This seems like a relatively insignificant finding, and would be better listed later on, worked into the introduction on species biology, or left out. Many of the paragraphs on the first page are very short – perhaps they could be put together into larger paragraphs.”

→ This provides both positive and critical comments and is specific due to the use of line numbers, and it provides direct suggestions for improvement.