

*Good practice
in the review procedures
In science*



MINISTERSTWO NAUKI
I SZKOLNICTWA WYŻSZEGO



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Good practices in the review procedures in science

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This study was carried out by the Team for Ethics in Science, which advised the Minister of Science and Higher Education from 2009 to 2010.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

transparent, reliable and honest practice of science is a guarantee of its quality and a prerequisite for dynamic development. only substantive conduct in all aspects of scientific and academic activity, devoid of features of scientific protectionism, can help to build a strong position of Polish science.

Demands formulated in this way are among the priorities of our ministry. in addition to a number of procedures and rules designed to eliminate all manifestations of unreliability and bias, it is particularly important to promote in the scientific community attitudes of unconditional honesty, conscientiousness and deep responsibility for the actions taken. I am convinced that the dissemination and nurturing of good practices is our common challenge, which should be taken up in the fight against existing irregularities.

It is with great satisfaction that I would like to present you with a document that is an important voice in the not easy but necessary debate on scientific integrity. the presented study is the fruit of the thorough work of a community of scientists particularly committed to the promotion of ethical principles. "good practices in review procedures in science" is a set of the most important recommendations relating to the duties of both the entities ordering and accepting reviews, as well as the duties of reviewers themselves.

The present study was carried out by the Team for Ethics in Science, which advised the Minister of Science and Higher Education in 2009 - 2010. i would like to thank the chairman prof. dr. hab. Witold Marciszewski and the members prof. dr. hab. Andrzej Górski, prof. dr. hab. Jan Hartman, prof. dr. hab. Aurelia Nowicka, prof. dr. hab. Ryszard Nycz, prof. dr. hab. Henryk Samsonowicz, prof. dr. hab. Jerzy Szacki, Rev. prof. dr. hab. Andrzej Szostek and prof. dr. hab. Aleksandra Wiktorowska for their help in solving the many complicated problems of scientific dishonesty, but above all for the substantive debate, the result of which is the study just placed in your hands.

It is my intention that this document will support you in the review proceedings and in counteracting irregularities. because I believe that in this area of doing science, transparency of principles is the foundation of its proper development and builds the authority of the scholarly community in Poland.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barbara Kudrycka'.

PROF. BARBARA KUDRYCKA
Minister Nauki i Szkolnictwa wyższego

Introduction

Reliable reviewing of scientific papers, research projects and other documents of an academic nature, as well as units conducting research and teaching activities, has a decisive impact on the level of doing science, being the foundation of academic culture and a source of social authority of scientific communities. Attention to the high level of review procedures and reviews themselves is a prerequisite for the practice of science and the activities of scientific institutions worthy of the name. The practice of reviewing and the procedures for reviewing scientific papers, research projects and other documents with scientific content are subject to numerous pathologies, among which we can indicate: conflict of interest, cronyism and nepotism, bias against the background of institutional and substantive disputes, negligence and incompetence. The document "good practices in review procedures in science" aims to counter these pathologies by indicating the principles of proper review procedures.

Consisting of two parts, the document contains recommendations for the sound conduct of review procedures in science by institutions conducting scientific research or supporting science (part i) and recommendations to be followed by reviewers (part ii). The document applies to all types of official procedures involving the solicitation and use of reviews, among which are: scientific promotion proceedings, grant and award competitions, allocation of funds for investment in science, granting of permits for teaching activities at the academic level, evaluation of units conducting teaching activities, evaluation of materials proposed for printing in scientific publications, and others. It is proposed that "good practices in review procedures in science" should be promoted and disseminated by central institutions acting on behalf of science, as well as made available by institutions conducting review procedures to all interested parties, including those who are commissioned to prepare reviews. Due to the general nature of the document, the recommendations formulated therein need to be supplemented due to the specifics of individual scientific disciplines. Such additions, for example, in the form of regulations, could be annexes to this document, expanding on its individual points. These annexes should be edited by the individual scientific committees of the Polish Academy of Sciences and applied, as appropriate, in various types of proceedings, for example, in doctoral and postdoctoral chairs, grant competitions and others, on the grounds of the discipline of science to which they relate.

Part I

Responsibilities of the entity ordering and accepting reviews (conducting proceedings involving the review procedure)

1. PROPER SELECTION OF REVIEWERS

It is required to select reviewers who are as competent as possible in the field.

The determinant of a potential reviewer's competence is not only his or her knowledge, as evidenced by a significant academic record, but also his or her reputation as a reliable reviewer. It is unacceptable to ask people selected for this purpose to perform reviews because of their presumed leniency or harshness in evaluation. It is also unacceptable to identify reviewers in return for good service on their part to the entity ordering the review or because of a desire to create income opportunities for them. If there are very few specialists in a given field, foreign reviewers should be used whenever possible. When there are strong factual and institutional disputes in a given field that may be related to the subject matter of the work being reviewed or the activities of the person being reviewed, the review ordering entity must make special efforts to ensure that these disputes do not translate into bias in the review procedure.

2. CONTRACTS FOR THE PREPARATION OF REVIEWS

Contracts for the preparation of reviews should be highly probative of their reliability and timeliness, and reviews that do not comply with the contract should not be accepted.

It is necessary to conclude appropriate contracts with reviewers. Such contracts should set a high standard of reliability and detail for reviewers, ensure the credibility of their conclusions, and be appropriate to the needs of the entity ordering the review. In the case of evaluating works presenting the results of empirical research, the review ordering entity should not be limited to sending the work or documentation. It is also obliged to indicate to the reviewer in the contract the way to access the materials constituting documentation of the conducted research. The entity ordering the review may not

accept the review performed if it does not comply with the contract and relevant laws, such as the Law on Academic Degrees and Titles and on Degrees and Titles in the Arts, from which certain obligations of the reviewer arise. In particular, it is unacceptable to accept reviews that clearly do not meet the substantive and formal requirements of a scientific review, including perfunctory reviews, dominated by unmotivated critical opinions or unmotivated praise, lacking a logical connection between content and conclusion, i.e., reviews that are strongly critical, but with a positive conclusion or vice versa. the timing of the review should correspond to the breadth of the tasks facing the reviewer. For the sake of the interests of those directly concerned, especially the authors of the reviewed papers or grant applications, the review contract should strictly treat exceeding the deadline for review execution. Indeed, it is reprehensible to block the review procedure due to passive waiting for the delayed delivery of reviews.

3. INDEPENDENCE OF REVIEWERS' OPINIONS

It is unacceptable to probe the reviewer's opinion or to pressure the reviewer - both in the period preceding the conclusion of the contract for the preparation of the review and during its execution by the reviewer

It must be considered reprehensible to informally consult with a prospective reviewer about the content of the reviewed work, application or research project, etc., before entering into a contract with him to perform the review. The prospective reviewer may, and in some cases should, have the opportunity even before receiving the draft contract and then the work itself, to let the interested party know whether he or she will be able to undertake the review and possibly by what deadline. However, he should do so only on the basis of brief information about the content (table of contents, introduction, abstract) and volume of the work to be reviewed. the candidate for reviewer should have full freedom to decide whether to accept or reject the work for review. If it is a legal obligation to undertake a review, it is not up to the entity ordering the review to assess whether, in a given case, the reviewer is subject to such an obligation. It should be considered particularly inappropriate to send a reviewer a proposal to conclude a contract for the performance of a review at the same time as a copy of the entire work. This is because it could mean putting him in a difficult situation - in the event that a possible refusal to review, for any reason whatsoever, could very likely be interpreted as being motivated by a desire to avoid the unpleasantness of writing a negative review. this type of situation is detrimental to both reviewers and authors of reviewed works. the requirement to submit to the reviewer, prior to entering into an agreement with him, only an abstract of the work or other documentation subject to review, is particularly important in the case of promotion procedures. At the same time, it can be considered above-standard for publishing reviews. In all

cases, on the other hand, any pressure or suggestions from the review ordering entity and third parties must be excluded - both before the conclusion of the contract and during the development of the review, except for the issue of the timeliness of the review.

4. CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN REVIEW PROCEEDINGS

The reviewer and the author of the reviewed work should not have a close personal or professional relationship.

The person of the reviewer must not be in official dependence or in close personal relations, and even less in relations of kinship, with the author of the reviewed work, project, etc. the superior should not review the work of his subordinate, although in the case when the circle of specialists in a particular field is very narrow, there may be an exception to this rule. avoiding all kinds of conflicts of interest or circumstances that could reduce the social credibility of the review procedure, is a joint responsibility of the entity ordering the review and the person who is asked to prepare a review.

5. REMUNERATION FOR DRAFTING THE REVIEW

The remuneration for drafting the review should correspond to the work that the reviewer ordering the review expects from the reviewer, as well as to accepted customs.

An inappropriately determined remuneration may interfere with the objectivity and credibility of the review and create the temptation either to treat the reviewed person or work too leniently (in the case of a remuneration that is too high, encouraging the acceptance of further assignments), or (in the case of a remuneration that is too low) to discourage the production of a review with integrity. what remuneration is appropriate in a given case is determined, on the one hand, by accepted customs (which may, however, evolve), and, on the other hand, by the size of the dossier or work submitted for review and the requirements of the review contract, and, consequently, by the amount of work necessary to reliably fulfill it. Therefore, it is inappropriate to apply standardized rates for reviews within a given type of procedure, regardless of the volume of documentation reviewed.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY IN REVIEW PROCEDURES

The review procedure should proceed with confidentiality, especially at the stage of collecting reviews, but in due course the reviews should become open to all members of the body conducting the procedure, and in some cases - especially for doctorates and postdoctorates - also open to the public.

It is required to maintain a certain confidentiality of the review process until the collection of the by a competent person or body of all required reviews. During this period, the content and conclusions of the reviews should, in principle, remain confidential to all outsiders. the possible right to information of outsiders, especially those who are directly interested, for example, the authors of the reviewed work, project or application, should be resolved in advance by the rules of work of the entity conducting the procedure or other regulation governing the course of its work. the lack of confidentiality at the stage of collecting reviews may contribute to the disruption of the independent work of reviewers, and even provide an opportunity to exert pressure on them or use other types of manipulation. once the authorized body (committee) has collected and accepted the complete set of reviews required by the procedure, it should make efforts so that the reviews can be familiarized, as early as possible, with the reviews of all persons who will have the power to make decisions within the framework of a given procedure. It is reprehensible to limit itself to informing these persons only of the conclusions of the reviews, and especially not to inform them of the significant objections that appear in the reviews, including positive reviews. in the case of proceedings financed with public funds or supervised by public authorities, the aim should be to make the reviews that are components of such proceedings as publicly available as possible, in keeping with the spirit of openness and transparency of public life in democratic countries. However, non-public entities are also encouraged to apply this rule. Various circumstances, such as the secret nature of research related to state security or the legitimate legal interests of the author of the peer-reviewed documentation or other persons involved in the review process, may lead to restrictions on the disclosure of the content of the review, but these restrictions should result from binding rules of procedure known to all concerned. the author of the review must also be granted the right to keep his or her name in the knowledge of the decision-making body, if he or she so wishes. As a regulating principle, it should be assumed that scientific reviews in the sphere under the supervision of public authorities will be public. However, openness of reviews does not mean openness of all elements of the qualification procedure. All persons participating in it are obliged to exercise discretion with regard to confidential information to which they have been given access, and any other information that could become the subject of distorting gossip and excitement in the scientific community.

7. CONTENTIOUS CASES IN REVIEW PROCEEDINGS

Additional reviewers should be appointed in disputed or complicated cases, and the opinions of all reviewers should be duly respected.

Decision-making bodies, especially committees conducting review procedures, should not ignore the conclusions of the reviewers they appoint. Instead, they should respond to them prudently and fairly. In particular, it is unacceptable to ignore negative reviews when they constitute half or more of the solicited reviews for a given work, project, etc. receipt of negative reviews in a number that constitutes a majority of the solicited reviews should result in disqualification of the subject of the review. in the event that negative reviews constitute half of all reviews solicited at a given stage, or constitute a minority, but there are more than one - it is necessary to appoint an additional reviewer. Additional reviewers should also be appointed in the case of works or projects of an eminently interdisciplinary nature or arousing particular controversy among specialists. the decisions of the bodies or persons conducting qualification and selection procedures involving reviews must not openly contradict the conclusions of the reviews when they are predominantly negative, as well as when they are predominantly positive. If such bodies use the formula of discussion and voting as the irrevocable and only form of arriving at a decision, the clear inconsistency of such decisions with the prevailing opinion of the reviewers may be grounds for challenging the conduct of the procedure as having been carried out improperly. bodies with the power to make decisions, for example, faculty councils, may express their lack of confidence in the reviews presented to them by refusing to accept them. However, when the reviews have been accepted, their conclusions should not be ignored. an exception to this rule may result from the design of the proceedings providing for the defense of its theses by the author of the reviewed work or documentation, if this person manages to convincingly demonstrate the unfoundedness of the main allegations. Recommendations by reviewers that the thesis or other document subject to review should be revised in a certain way should be carefully considered, taking such an eventuality seriously into account, if the procedure allows it. when it comes to recommending to the author to make corrections, all reviewers have the right to revise the work again. In addition, it is incumbent on the entity conducting the proceedings and ordering the review to inform the reviewer of the sequence of these proceedings, and in particular of its interruption or closure, as well as the possible re-initiation of a similar proceeding with respect to the same person, in connection with a work with content similar to that of the work previously reviewed by him. It is reprehensible to repeat a proceeding (for example, a doctoral dissertation) concerning the same or very similar work if the previous proceeding was unsuccessful, especially with the exclusion of reviewers who previously gave negative opinions.

8. IRREGULARITIES AND ABUSES IN REVIEW PROCEDURES

Any suspicions of possible irregularities or abuses should be treated with all seriousness and cleared up before the proceedings involving the review procedure are completed.

The body conducting proceedings involving the review procedure should pay particular attention to the scientific integrity of the person whose works are reviewed. It is necessary to react firmly when abuse is detected, and to exercise far-reaching caution when there are significant indications that abuse may have occurred. Under no circumstances should such signals be ignored. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that in some situations anonymous reports also have a certain degree of credibility, so that taking them into account cannot be excluded a priori and completely. The entity conducting the proceedings involving reviews is not a law enforcement agency or a court of law, but nevertheless may come into possession of evidence or become suspicious of the scientific integrity of the works and individuals qualified in the proceedings. Scientific dishonesty and abuse may consist of scientific fraud, infringement of other people's intellectual property rights, misappropriation of funds, etc. In any such situation where there is substantial suspicion, let alone certainty, of the existence of abuse, regardless of what the source of the information is, and regardless of whether the abuse is related to activities subject to qualification by the body in question, the proceedings in question should be suspended in whole or in relevant part pending clarification of the matter by competent entities. If scientific dishonesty is found, the procedure should - with regard to the guilty parties - be terminated with a negative conclusion, while at the same time providing information on the abuse to the relevant authorities. It is also important to keep in mind the possibility of slander and libel harming the author of the reviewed work. Firmness in the stigmatization of abuses should have its counterpart in the expressiveness of the acts of exoneration of the wronged party of the charges against him. It is advisable that institutions authorized to evaluate scientific research and carry out promotion procedures for subordinate employees develop internal rules of conduct to protect science from abuse, complementing the common law in this regard. These arrangements should be made public.

Part II

RESPONSIBILITIES OF REVIEWERS

1. COMPETENCE OF REVIEWERS

A specialist receiving an offer to prepare a review is obliged to carefully assess his substantive competence and practical ability to prepare a review in the allotted time, and if in doubt in this regard, to refrain from reviewing.

The entity ordering the review, acting in good faith, asks individual specialists to prepare the review, placing confidence in their knowledge and reliability. However, the institution may not have information about certain circumstances that would make it undesirable to engage a particular specialist as a reviewer. Therefore, a specialist who receives an offer to prepare a review should not consider the fact that he has received an assignment as prejudging that he is the right candidate to be a reviewer. Instead, it is his duty to consider all circumstances related to his person and to the entity ordering the review that may be relevant to the decision to prepare a review. In undertaking the preparation of a review, the expert assumes considerable responsibility, often related to the vital interests of those whose works are subject to review, and to the expenditure of significant resources for research, investment or publication. The soundness of the performance of the review fully motivating its crowning conclusions determines the fair or unfair treatment of the people whose works are being reviewed, the institution ordering the review, and the disposer of funds, who depends on the opinions of reviewers for his decisions on their disbursement. Before undertaking a review of a work, it is necessary to determine whether one is substantively competent in the subject matter of that work or in the area of science to which the work relates, for example, if it is a research or teaching project. substantive competence includes knowledge of the basic literature related to the research discipline to which the work belongs or to which it relates, and the current state of research in that discipline. If the subject of the review is to be a project for conducting scientific research using a special infrastructure, a project for conducting a course of study, or any other undertaking involving non-scientific (organizational) skills, the candidate for reviewer should have his own practical experience in the relevant field of affairs. It is reprehensible to undertake the review of numerous works on subjects belonging to very different and distant academic disciplines. no expert, even a professor who enjoys great authority, can consider himself or be considered a specialist in the entire branch of science he represents. an important criterion for considering oneself a specialist in a

particular field is, in addition to a sense of competence or lack thereof, the fact of having scientific achievements in the field or at least lecturing or seminars in its area. It is unacceptable to accept an excessive number of works for review and to commit to deadlines that are unrealistic in terms of the time available.

2. CONFLICT OF INTEREST OF PARTIES TO THE REVIEW PROCEEDINGS

One must not undertake the role of a reviewer under conditions where there is a conflict of interest or circumstances that make the parties to the proceedings suspected of such a conflict of interest.

Reviewing may be undertaken only by a person who is not connected with the author of the reviewed work or with the entity ordering the review by relations that may affect the reliability and objectivity of the review and its public credibility. Any situation in which the reviewer might benefit from writing a positive or negative review, including an unreliable review, means a conflict of interest between the reviewer and the reviewer or the author(s) of the reviewed work, project, application or other document. A conflict of interest can occur against the background of close professional ties linking the reviewer with the reviewing entity, especially those that have a financial aspect. A conflict of interest may also occur against the background of close personal ties between persons involved in the proceedings - and both positive and negative ties. Because of the conflict of interest or the risk of its occurrence, one should not undertake the review of works whose authors are persons belonging to the circle of close acquaintances, colleagues or subordinates, let alone family, persons who are or may be, in probable and foreseeable circumstances, the reviewer's superiors or who may have the power to decide on matters vitally important to him. in the case of reviewing the activities of scientific entities, the reviewer should neither at the time of performing the review, nor before that, be bound to it by an employment contract or other long-term relationship. He should also not have such plans for the future. deviations from these rules are possible in exceptional situations, due to the narrow range of specialists in the field to which the reviewed work or documentation belongs.

3. FULFILLMENT OF FORMAL OBLIGATIONS OF REVIEWERS

Unless there are special and unforeseen circumstances, the preparation of a review must not be abandoned after the signing of an agreement to this effect.

A person who has undertaken to review a work should not withdraw from this decision unless there are special circumstances forcing him to take such a step, for example, random or related to the detection of a conflict of interest. There are any special circumstances forcing him to take such a step, for example, random or related to the detection of a conflict of interest. If a reviewer realizes that he or she is clearly incompetent to write a review only after signing the agreement and familiarizing himself or herself with the work, he or she may withdraw from the agreement, explaining the situation in detail in such a way that no suspicion arises that the reason for the refusal is an unwillingness to write negative reviews. This is because it is unacceptable to refuse to write a review after reading all or part of the work and finding that the review would have to be negative. discomfort with writing a negative review can in no way be a reason for evasion. It should be considered an emergency situation if a reviewer determines that the work or documentation sent to him or her is ineligible for review due to its poor quality. Such a statement is tantamount to a negative conclusion, not a refusal to review. It cannot be the only component of the review. The review must include adequate justification for the statement. Its formal structure will therefore be different from that of an ordinary review.

4. RELIABILITY AND HONESTY IN THE PREPARATION OF REVIEWS

The reviewer must thoroughly familiarize himself with the reviewed work (documentation) and make every effort to reliably and honestly assess its professional and cognitive value, independence and novelty, in accordance with the current state of the discipline of science he represents and the requirements (resulting from the law, from the concluded contract and from academic customs) imposed on reviewers within the framework of a given type of proceedings.

When undertaking a review, the reviewer is obliged to carefully read the documentation presented to him. If the subject of the review is a scientific paper or a collection of such papers, he should read it carefully in its entirety. reliability of reviewing requires a good knowledge of the current state of research in a given discipline, having his own achievements in the field, and a sound understanding of the requirements for the author of the reviewed work of the procedure that is the subject of the review. in preparing the review, the reviewer is guided by the letter of the contract with the entity that commissioned the review, as well as the provisions of the law, if such define the duties of the reviewer.

in particular, a reviewer who is obliged to give an opinion on the novelty of a scientific work or research project submitted to him for evaluation cannot evade expressing his opinion on the matter and a possible negative conclusion if the original contribution to scientific knowledge required by law is not found in the reviewed work or project. It is also the reviewer's responsibility to assess the degree of independence of the reviewed work, including the determination of any implicit borrowings and so-called plagiarism from other works. The reviewer's responsibility for demonstrating misuse of other people's intellectual property, including plagiarism, is not complete. Nevertheless, he is expected to detect and disclose such abuses if they are related to works by well-known specialists in the field, or recent works that are important contributions to the current state of research in the field. The disclosure of abuse of the nature of plagiarism or any other abuse, such as falsification of data, forces a negative conclusion of the review. a basic requirement of fairness is the impartiality of the reviewer in formulating assessments. However, it is possible to have a review procedure in which the task of one reviewer is exclusively to criticize the work presented to him, while the other reviewer is only to point out its merits. in such a case, impartiality may not inherently be required of reviewers, but they are still bound by fairness, which excludes malice and the formulation of accusations in bad faith, as well as lip service to praise. The degree of thoroughness of the review, its volume, as well as some of its formal and stylistic features, may be determined by the prevailing academic customs in a given scientific discipline. While respecting these customs, however, they should be carefully distinguished from widespread bad practices. an example of a good custom, cultivated in many disciplines, is a brief, synthetic characterization of the reviewed work at the beginning of the review. an example of a bad, but widespread practice, is to downplay the linguistic faults of reviewed works.

5. COHERENCE AND FACTUALITY OF THE REVIEW

The review should be logically consistent and maintained in a matter-of-fact tone, should not be perfunctory, and its conclusions should be clear and unambiguous.

The review should give a fair account of the content and conclusion of the reviewed work, or, as the case may be, the content of the reviewed scientific output, the activities of the institution under review, etc., and should contain clear and well-grounded assessments of the individual components of the documentation presented to the reviewer, especially the theses of a scientific nature contained therein, as well as the desiderata, in the case of documentation of a proposal nature. The review should not be perfunctory, and in terms of volume should be within the standards accepted for the type of procedure. In addition, the review should end with a clearly expressed, unambiguous conclusion, and therefore be positive or negative, unless the procedure allows reviews conditionally positive. The conclusion of the review should be justified in its analytical part. In particular, it is inadmissible to issue reviews consisting mainly of accusations, but culminating in a positive conclusion. Similarly, reviews maintained in an emotional tone, openly biased, and especially malicious or composed of unsupported praise are unacceptable. In cases where the review procedure allows for the correction of works as a result of the reviewer's comments, the reviewer may issue a conditionally positive opinion, demanding that the work be corrected accordingly. In this case, he has the right, and if the procedure so stipulates - also the obligation to re-verify the reviewed work.

6. CONSCIENTIOUSNESS AND DISCRETION OF REVIEWERS

The review should be prepared in a timely and discreet manner, without consulting other reviewers or providing them with information about your opinions and intentions.

The review should be performed and submitted to the ordering entity within the timeframe specified in the contract, and if the reviewer is unable to meet the deadline, he is obliged to contact the ordering entity and arrange with it a new deadline for the review, which is as close as possible. In the course of preparing the review, the reviewer should not learn about the personalities of the other reviewers in the same proceeding, and if, nevertheless, knowledge of this becomes his, he should not consult his work with the other reviewers in any way, and especially not ask them about the anticipated conclusions of their reviews.

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