

EDITOR'S CORNER

Peer Review at *American Antiquity*

Peer review of manuscripts submitted to *American Antiquity* has had a short, spirited history of 20 years. In the earlier, simpler time before peer review the editor was sole evaluator of the papers submitted for publication. Recent conversations with previous Editors Ray Thompson (July 1958–April 1962), Tom Campbell (July 1962–April 1966), and Robert Bell (July 1966–April 1970) verify that formal peer review—written evaluations by outside reviewers of every manuscript submitted for publication—was not part of their editorial procedure. All three confessed to having sought advice on manuscripts treating topics beyond their broad experience and expertise. It remained for Ed Wilmsen (editor from July 1970 to April 1974) to address the rapid expansion in archaeological inquiry that had made it impossible for an editor, alone, to make an informed appraisal of every manuscript. In 1970, along with changes in format, design, and policy, Wilmsen “instituted a formal review procedure wherein all manuscripts accepted for consideration are sent to two readers for critical evaluation” (*American Antiquity* 1970:278). Two readers have been the review standard for the past 20 years of *American Antiquity*'s 55-year history.

There is no need, now, to dwell further on the short history of peer review at *American Antiquity* other than to place recent changes in context. The system I took over from Ray Wood—and he from Patty Jo Watson—for continuing peer review comprised two sets of oak card files, four drawers in all, labeled A–L, M–Z, Geographical, and Topical. Currently positioned beside the IBM 50Z computer in gray plastic, the yellowed-oak card files present a stark image of anachronisms, incongruities, and the incompleteness of recent rites of passage in *American Antiquity*.

Changes in peer review have, for the time being, left untouched the basic structure and order of 3-×-5 cards. Two modifications, however, strengthen the procedure. First, my wish to update and expand participation in the review process is fully compatible with the capacity of the oak card files, though the response to the call for reviewers posted in the *Bulletin* and at the annual meeting in Las Vegas fell well shy of the 5,000 or so members of the Society. All interested archaeologists are encouraged to take advantage of this open-enrollment period. Send your name, address, telephone numbers, and areas of expertise typed on a 3-×-5 card to the editor.

The second modification of peer review is an increase in the number of readers from two to a minimum of four. This increase is necessary to provide authors and the editor with a greater range of advice and comment as well as to speed up the manuscript review process. With the two-reader system, divergent reviews and delinquent reviews—both rather commonplace occurrences—required additional readers, which, in turn, further prolonged the manuscript review. By selecting four readers from the start I intend to shorten appreciably the time between submission and publication. Already it has been possible to move manuscripts beyond the doldrums of delayed reviews that bedeviled Ray Wood's office (*American Antiquity* 1989:457).

Expanding the number of readers brings more people and perspectives into the review process. Although authors are the immediate beneficiary of an expanded peer review, the intellectual vitality of the discipline is the ultimate winner. In fact, if the present health of Americanist archaeology is to be measured by the prodigious labor of most reviewers, then we are in good shape, indeed.

The relationship between author and reviewer in peer review is a sensitive one to begin with, and it can be worsened by anonymity. The combined weight of convention and academic privilege dictates that the reviewer retain the right to remain unknown to the author; in some journals the author's identity is withheld from the reviewer. In both procedures anonymity is employed to increase the objectivity of decision making. We hardly need more studies to show that manuscripts by prominent individuals sometimes do not fare well in a blind review; everyone knows that the review system has subjective elements that defy elimination. Although I think that it can be irre-

sponsible to hide behind anonymity, the importance and complicatedness of peer review must not be tied to this one issue. A few thoughts on the matter of anonymity follow.

I can envision no justification for blind reviews—where the author is unknown to the reviewer—of manuscripts submitted to *American Antiquity*.

I will continue to protect the reviewer's right to anonymity, even though its legitimacy, to my way of thinking, diminishes with an increase in the reviewer's rank, job security, and leadership role within the discipline. Anonymity is a thin screen for tenured professors in secure positions of authority and responsibility; for the untenured and insecure it affords some protection against the subjectivity that pervades archaeology and all interpersonal relations among archaeologists. I agree with Norman Hammond (*American Antiquity* 1984:162) that "blanket anonymity is not only unnecessary in the pervasive form in which it presently exists, but it is bad for the intellectual development of the field, bad for the development of responsibility in the profession, and bad for individual self-discipline."

A significant portion of the mystical power of the reviewer and, thus, part of the rationale for anonymity, stems from the common misperception that reviewers, in effect, vote on manuscripts and that their vote determines its fate. Regardless of how it may have been or appeared to have been in the past, under the present editorial regime the review process is not a referendum; publication decisions are made by the editor with the invaluable advice of expert reviewers and not by the vote of the reviewers. Under these conditions it might be argued that the editor has more reason to remain anonymous than the reviewers. I easily can envision positive reviews of excellent manuscripts that would be inappropriate for publication in *American Antiquity*.

Increasing specialization of the membership and of archaeology requires that a number of scholars be consulted in evaluating a manuscript. Thus, the change from two to four reviewers is another necessary response to growth of the field. Unchanged is that the editor remains solely responsible for manuscript decisions, which are more akin to manuscript development than to manuscript sorting into accept or reject piles. Editorial decisions rely heavily upon the expertise of reviewers to assist authors in crafting and recrafting papers into significant contributions to published knowledge. This pursuit of good scholarship requires strong, honest peer reviews by good scholars.

J. Jefferson Reid
Editor