Guide for Reviewers

Double-blind peer review at Peripherals

Version 1.0 *August 2026*

doi.org/10.65257/pal.d.xw2cax

Read this before accepting an invitation. It takes about 15 minutes. Pay particular attention to §3 (accepting, and the first skim), §5.3 (essential and strengthening) and §8 (what the recommendations mean).

Applies to: Issue 2 (2026) and subsequent issues until superseded.
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1. The journal and the standard

Peripherals is a peer-reviewed journal organised through Terminally Online, the student organisation for new media and digital culture at the University of Amsterdam. It is run by students and recent graduates working voluntarily alongside their studies.

Issue 2 has two tracks: the **Regular Track** (open topic) and the **Special Track** (*Generated Cultures*). Manuscripts run 3,500 to 9,500 words of body text, excluding references. Submissions are classified as **Research Article**, **Theory or Methodology**, or **Opinion or Reflection**. These are assessed differently; see §5.2.

Most of what we publish began as coursework. That is normal here.

A *Peripherals* review asks:

> **Does the argument hold, does the evidence support what is claimed for it, and can whatever remains be repaired in one round of revision?**

Four requirements, however, do not vary with the author's career stage.

- Claims must be supported by the evidence offered for them;
- Sources must be referenced accurately and must appear in the bibliography;
- Methods must be stated clearly enough for a reader to judge them;
- Ethical and permissions obligations apply in full (§6).

Everything else is assessed in proportion: the breadth of literature engaged, the ambition of the theoretical claim, the scale of the corpus, the sophistication of the method. A first article is not required to be field-defining.

> If you find yourself writing that a claim would need a much larger dataset to convince, consider whether the repair is a larger dataset or a narrower claim. Usually it is the second, which the author can do.

1.1 The review is developmental

Most of our authors are writing their first article, and for many this is the first time their work has been read by anyone other than their grader.

As a principle we follow: begin by saying what the piece does *well*, and be specific. An author revising under pressure will cut the passage you valued if nobody identified it. "The reading of the comment threads in MS. §4 carries the analysis and should not be shortened" is usable. "Interesting paper/section" is not.

Avoid superlatives and verdicts you cannot substantiate. Describe what the manuscript does and what follows from it. Our house register is composed and warm, and we ask reviewers to approach author feedback in the same spirit.

2. Your role and the editors'

Two readers report on each manuscript, independently, without seeing each other's work. You advise; the editors review reader reports and reach an editorial decision. We weigh reports by how well they are substantiated, not by counting recommendations.

Your report reaches the author in full, alongside a covering letter in which the editors set out the decision and say which points are binding. We neither paraphrase you nor merge your report with the other reader's. Where you disagree, the covering letter tells the author which points are contested. Disagreement is expected.

Many of our reviewers are Issue 1 authors, and many Issue 2 authors will review for Issue 3. Review with more specificity than you would think necessary.

3. Accepting, and the first skim

We approach reviewers well before the reading starts. We describe the papers we have in your field, say how many there are, and ask what you can take on and in what time. Nothing is sent until that is settled, so by the time this Guide and the manuscripts reach you, you have already agreed to read them. What follows is a check rather than a second decision.

Skim each manuscript when it arrives. Under 30 minutes is usually enough to see whether anything in it points to a conflict, and whether it falls within what you can assess. **If your skim turns up a conflict of interest, or shows that a manuscript lies well outside your expertise, tell us within 3 days.** Otherwise we take it that neither applies, and the dates we agreed with you stand.

Nothing here needs a separate message when you are first approached. A conflict you cannot see until you have the manuscript in front of you is not one you could have declared earlier.

3.1 Conflicts of interest

Tell us if any of the following applies. A conflict is not usually disqualifying. Declaring it is what lets the editors weigh your reading properly, and it protects you as much as the author.

- You have co-authored with the author, or plan to.
- You supervised, taught, marked or examined the work, or took the same course alongside it.
- The manuscript comes from a research cluster or group project you belong to.
- You have read a draft, given feedback on it, or been thanked in it.
- You have a close personal relationship with the author.
- You have work in preparation or under review on substantially the same object.

- You are publicly committed against the theoretical position the manuscript argues from, to a degree that would colour your reading.
- You have any other reason to think you could not give a fair reading.

Assess the manuscript on its argument and evidence alone. Nothing about where it comes from, or about the author's nationality, beliefs, gender or any other characteristic, has any bearing on a review.

A conflict can also surface late: a name in an acknowledgement that was not stripped, a dataset you recognise, a project you turn out to have heard about. Tell us whenever you notice it, including after you have begun writing.

> Our reviewer pool and our author pool are drawn largely from the same programme, so some overlap is expected. Declaring it costs a few days of reviewer reallocation; not declaring it costs authors their confidence in the process.

3.2 Competence, including partial competence

Competence here means the background to judge the manuscript's argument and its evidence. It is not seniority, and not a publication record.

The working test is a single one. **You are competent on a claim if you could state why it needs revision and how it might be improved, rather than only that it is unfamiliar to you.** Two consequences follow. Unfamiliarity with a literature is not incompetence, and is not a reason to withdraw from an area you can otherwise judge. Disagreement with the position the manuscript argues from is not incompetence either; where it is strong enough to colour your reading it is a conflict, and belongs in §3.1. "I would not have approached it this way" is not a competence judgement at all, and §5.1 sets out what to do with it instead.

We match manuscripts to readers before we approach you, and where a manuscript spans two areas we pair two readers so that between you the whole of it is covered. Partial competence is therefore expected rather than exceptional, and it is not a reason to decline. What we need is to know where your reading stops, so that we can check whether the pairing still covers everything.

This matters here more than at most journals. Several Issue 2 manuscripts sit across two areas by design, such as a film analysed through platform theory. If you can assess the film argument but not the claims about algorithmic circulation, say so after your skim and again at the top of your report.

Part 0.3 of the form offers three positions, and the middle one is the position most often needed: that you can judge whether the claims in an area are used consistently and supported, without being able to judge whether they are correct within their own field. Taking that position is a complete and useful answer rather than a hedge, and it is the honest description of most cross-area reading.

Neither direction of error is the safe one, and both cost something.

- A scope declared **narrower** than it is leaves the manuscript with fewer readers than the pairing assumed. The area you set aside was assigned to you, and your co-reviewer was not asked to cover it.
- A scope declared **wider** than it is puts an author under revision on a judgement that was not secure. Where a criterion in Part 2 is one you cannot judge, mark it *Outside my scope* rather than rating it, and leave it out of Part 3.

We read the declared scope alongside the report itself. A criticism made in an area you set aside

carries less weight with us, and an area you claimed but did not reach tells us the pairing did not cover the manuscript after all. Neither is held against you, and both are more easily corrected the earlier we see them.

Part 0.3 records what you expect before you begin, and Part 9.4 records where the reading proved least secure once it is done. Answer both. They are not the same question, and it is useful to us when the answers differ.

Tell us at once, and not in your report, if you discover mid-reading that you cannot assess the manuscript. Waiting until the deadline costs the author the whole window.

3.3 Time and deadlines

Reviewers take on different numbers of papers, and papers differ in length and complexity, so we agree your timeframe with you before anything is sent. **14 days per manuscript is the general maximum**, and most reviewers need less than that. The dates that apply to you are the ones settled when you accepted, and they are repeated in the e-mail that sends you the manuscripts.

Please reply within 48 hours when we first approach you, whether you accept or decline. It lets us go to the next reader without losing the author a week. The 3-day skim window in §3 sits inside the time we agreed, not on top of it.

If you need longer than we agreed, say so as early as you can. We can usually accommodate a few days.

4. Confidentiality

4.1 The manuscript

The manuscript is unpublished work, and so is your report on it. Until the manuscript is published, and afterwards:

- do not circulate the manuscript under review or your report, quote either, cite either, or refer to the findings of either;
- do not use anything in the manuscript to advance your own work;
- do not discuss the manuscript, your report, or the fact that you reviewed it, including with your supervisor.

To consult someone with an expertise you lack, ask us first. We can usually arrange it. Anyone who helps must be named in the confidential part of your report so that they are recorded and can be credited.

Confidentiality does not lapse on publication, or if the manuscript is declined.

4.2 Generative AI

Do not enter any part of the manuscript, or of your report, into a hosted AI service. This includes ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, other AI/LLM services, and any translation or summarising tool that sends text to a server. Pasting either into such a service discloses it, whatever the retention policy says. This applies to your report as well as the manuscript, because it paraphrases confidential findings. The obligation also covers partial extracts.

You may use offline spelling and grammar tools on prose you have written yourself. Declare any AI assistance in Part 9 of the report.

4.3 Anonymity

Review is double-blind. The manuscript reaches you without a name, and your name is not disclosed to the author.

Manuscripts are anonymised as far as we can manage, and cover-sheet matter is stripped before they are sent to you. If identifying material remains in the manuscript (a name in a file property, an acknowledgement, and so on), tell us and disregard it. Do not attempt to identify the author, and do not search distinctive phrases.

If you recognise the author, or think you do, tell us and stop there. Do not confirm it, and do not let it enter your reading. In a pool this size it happens often and is not automatically disqualifying.

Do not sign your report or include details that identify you, and do not contact the author directly at any point.

5. Reading the manuscript

5.1 How to read

Read the whole manuscript *once* without annotating, and develop a view of what it is trying to do. Then read it *again* with the form open. Reports written from a single annotating pass tend to over-weight the first few pages and to mistake the order of presentation for the structure of the argument.

> **Assess the article the author wrote rather than the one you would have written.** The commonest failure is to describe a different, adjacent paper and treat the difference as a fault. Where the author's framing is defensible, work inside it. Where the framing itself cannot support the claims made on it, say that directly and say why.

5.2 Break the manuscript into several assessed aspects, by their category

Across categories, academic integrity is paramount (see more in §5.4). All works, including films and other media, must be properly cited, referenced and acknowledged.

	Research Article	**Theory or Methodology**	**Opinion or Reflection**
Core question	Do the data support the claims?	Is the conceptual work sound, and does it advance something?	Is the position *argued* rather than *asserted*?
Elements for close judgement	Corpus and sampling: what was collected, when, by what rule, how much. Coding and its reliability. Whether findings are read off the evidence or imported	Whether the literature is engaged or listed. Whether the intervention is stated. Whether counter-positions are considered	Whether claims are grounded in something a reader can check. Whether the confidence of the voice is earned by the argument

	Research Article	Theory or Methodology	Opinion or Reflection
Method statement	Required, and explicit	Required in proportion: which texts were selected, and how they were read	Not required. The object and the stake should still be clear
Ordinary weaknesses	Small sample, single coder, one platform, short window. Note these as limits to be stated and bounded, rarely as grounds for decline	Reliance on seminar reading lists. A survey without a thesis	Drifting into unsupported generalisation
Elements that do not require inclusion	Statistical inference or a control condition where the design is qualitative	Novel theory. A competent synthesis with a clear position is publishable	Neutrality, or a full literature review

> Sampling and method opacity is the commonest repairable weakness we see, across all 3 categories. The repair is usually a paragraph giving the *N*, the window, the inclusion rule and who coded. New fieldwork is rarely needed. Where you find it missing, ask for the paragraph.

5.3 Distinguish what is *essential* and what is *strengthening*

> Kindly note that this is one of the most important sections of this Guide. The form asks you to put every point in one of two classes below.

Essential means the manuscript cannot be published without it. For example, an unsupported claim, a missing method statement, a source that does not say what it is cited as saying, a structural problem that hinders argument delivery, an ethics or permissions gap.

Strengthening means the manuscript would be better with it and is publishable without it. Examples include further literature, a comparative case, an extension, a different emphasis.

Novice reviewers characteristically produce a single undifferentiated list of many observations, which the author then reads as conditions to be met. Therefore, it gives better flexibility and ease to the author if some observations can be *considered* or contested.

> A useful test for the essential list: if the author did only this, would you be content to see it published? Aim for 2 to 6 essential items. More than 8 is a signal to reconsider either the list or the recommendation.

5.4 What is not your job

- **Copy-editing.** We copy-edit and typeset every accepted article. Do not correct commas, capitalisation or reference formatting.

- **Line-by-line correction of anything.** Where a problem recurs, name the pattern and give 2 examples rather than listing every instance.
- **Rewriting.** Do not supply replacement sentences for prose that is merely not in your preferred style. A suggestion that genuinely improves clarity is a different matter and is welcome.
- **Style preferences.** British or American spelling, citation style variations, heading conventions. The editorial team revises these separately after the author revises the manuscript.

Reference *integrity* is a different matter and is yours: a work cited in the text and absent from the bibliography, a claim attributed to the wrong author, a quotation that misrepresents its source. Those are essential revisions.

5.5 Language and citation

Many of our authors write in a language that is not their first. Comment on expression only where meaning is at stake, such as a sentence you cannot parse or a term used in a way that changes the argument. Phrase it as a question about meaning rather than a judgement about the writing. A manuscript is not weaker because its English lacks idiomatic language.

In your feedback, do not ask the author to cite your own work, your supervisor's, or your friends', unless the argument genuinely requires it. Where you recommend literature, always explain what engaging with it would do for the argument. Generic remarks such as "the author should engage with the platform studies literature" are not actionable. Engaging with a source means arguing with it in the body, not adding a line to the literature review or bibliography.

6. Matters to report rather than judge

Some findings are not yours to assess or resolve. Record any of the following in Part 9.3 of the form, leave it out of the report to the author, and do not investigate further:

- significant parts of the text that appear to be taken from another source without attribution, beyond reasonable cases of forgetting to add a citation;
- data or quotations you have reason to think fabricated or altered;
- substantial overlap with published work, or with a manuscript you have seen elsewhere;
- suspicion of undisclosed generative-AI authorship of the text, where you can point to something **concrete** rather than an impression of the prose. Note that "AI detection" tools are unreliable and are not compliant with our confidentiality policy;
- an undeclared conflict of interest on the author's part, including but not limited to:
  - Membership of the object. The author moderates the subreddit, runs the Discord, or is a creator on the platform whose economics they assess;
  - Employment or internship with the company, platform, or organisation analysed;
  - Funding or in-kind support from an interested party: an industry-partnered thesis, API credits or hardware from the vendor under study;
  - Relationship to the people studied: interviewees who are friends or coursemates.
- **ethics and permissions problems**: identifiable individuals analysed without a consent or identifiability note, personal data reproduced in screenshots, copyrighted images or film stills reproduced without a permissions line, research involving human subjects with no ethics statement.

Ethics and permissions problems are the commonest of these, and we find that many authors simply overlook them. Flag them, but do not attempt to apply a standard. Say what you saw

and where. The position on permissions and queries to authors will be established through the editorial team, and applying your own would produce inconsistency between manuscripts.

Do not accuse anyone of anything in the author-facing report. **Instead, always raise them with us first**. We have a process, and it begins by asking the author.

7. Writing the report

7.1 How much to write

Parts 1 to 8 of the form should come to roughly **1,000 words** in total, and each part carries its own guide. Under 500 words overall is rarely enough for the author to act on. Much over 1,500 words usually means essential and strengthening points have not been separated, or the manuscript is not ready to proceed further.

> Part 3 and Part 5 of the review form expect 300 words each for different purposes: Part 3 diagnoses issues present in the paper; Part 5 prescribes how to address them. Writing the same point in both is the commonest way to overrun the word count budget without telling the author anything more.
>
> - Plan for 4 to 6 hours in total, including 2 readings of the manuscript.

The ratings in Part 2 exist so that you do not have to write a paragraph on every criterion. Mark all 6, using *Outside my scope* for any criterion the judgement of which is not yours (§3.2), then explain in Part 3 only those you marked *Needs work* or *Serious concern*.

7.2 Be specific, and substantiate

Anchor every point to a place in the manuscript: a section, a page, a figure. Write manuscript sections as "MS. §3", short for *manuscript*, so that they are not confused with sections of this Guide or the review form. General statements need evidence in the same way the manuscript's do. If you write that an argument has been made before, name where. If you write that a claim is unsupported, say which claim and what would support it.

Less useful	More useful
"The methodology is weak."	"MS. §3 does not state how many posts were collected, over what period, or on what inclusion rule. A short paragraph giving the N, the date window and the selection criterion would let a reader assess the claims in MS. §4."
"This has all been said before."	"Rogers (2019, ch. 2) makes a version of this argument about query design. The contribution would be clearer if the manuscript stated what it adds to that account."
"Confusing."	"I could not follow the move from the claim about visibility on p. 6 to the conclusion about labour on p. 11. Is the intermediate step that…?"

7.3 Tone

Address the work, never the author. Avoid remarks about what the author does not know or has not read, and avoid sarcasm.

> The reliable test is whether you would be comfortable having the sentence attributed to you. Anonymity is never a licence to be mean!

Where a manuscript has serious problems, say so plainly and specifically. Plain is not the same as harsh; vagueness in the service of kindness is its own unkindness: an author who cannot tell from your report what is wrong cannot fix it.

7.4 Confidential comments

Part 9 holds your recommendation, the reasoning behind it, anything under §6 (*matters to report*), where your reading proved least secure (§3.2), whether you will read a revision, any assistance you had, and anything else you want to raise.

It must not contradict what you told the author. A report reading as broadly positive while carrying a private recommendation to decline puts us in an impossible position and misleads the author about their prospects. If you think the manuscript should be declined, the author-facing report must contain the reasons.

8. The recommendations

Choose one in Part 9.1. Your recommendation goes to the editors and not to the author, so that the decision reaches them once, from us, with the two reports explained. We weigh both reports against the manuscript and against what the issue can accommodate. **We do not count votes.**

Recommendation	What it means at *Peripherals*
Accept as it stands	Publishable now, with no essential revisions. Rare. Do not use it to be encouraging.
Accept with minor revisions	The essential list is short, specific and completable in about a week. No new reading, no new data, no restructuring. The editors verify the revisions and the manuscript does not return to you.
Major revisions	The argument is sound, or can be made sound, but its key contribution needs work: an unsupported claim, an absent method statement, a structural problem, a gap the author must engage with. 2 to 4 weeks of the author's time. It may come back to you. **This is the most common outcome, and is not a bad result.**

Recommendation	What it means at *Peripherals*
Decline for this issue, resubmission welcome	The manuscript has a future but cannot reach it on this issue's timetable. Use this instead of declining work that is promising but not close. Note that elsewhere in the social sciences "*revise and resubmit*" usually means a submission kept open with a path to acceptance, which is closer to our *Major revisions*. Ours closes the submission for this issue and invites a fresh one.
Decline	The argument requires substantial work that cannot be repaired within the schedule, or the manuscript falls outside our scope. The author-facing report must make the reasons plain and usable, so that the author can take the manuscript elsewhere knowing what to do with it.

> Do not use *decline* to mean that a manuscript needs a great deal of work; that is major revisions, or decline for this issue. Do not soften a recommendation because the author is a student; an author who is accepted on sympathy and then reviewed harshly in public has been done no favour.

9. After your report

The editors read both reports and the manuscript, and reach a decision. Where a report contains material identifying a reviewer, or a remark about the author rather than the work, we will ask you to revise it or redact that passage and tell you we have done so. This is rare and is not a judgement on your assessment.

The author receives a decision letter with both reports attached in full, anonymised as R1 and R2. If you are willing to see a revision, we may send it to you with the author's response.

> Reviewing a revision is a narrower task. Assess it against your own original essential list and the author's answers to it. Raise a new essential point only where the revision itself created one. Introducing fresh demands that the first round did not raise is a common way to introduce unnecessary pressure on authors and to raise doubts about the initial review's credibility.

Reviewers are acknowledged by name in the following issue unless you ask us not to in Part 9.7 of the form. The acknowledgement never links a reviewer to a manuscript and appears only after publication. For a record of your review, write to us and we will confirm it without naming the manuscript.

10. Checklist for reviewer's personal organisation

Reviewing readers do not need to submit anything from this Guide, including the following section. The mandatory checklist items are in the review form itself.

After your first skim:

☐ No conflict under §3.1, or I have declared one
☐ I can assess this manuscript, or I have said which part I can assess
☐ I can meet the date

Before you send:

☐ I summarised the argument in my own words, and it matched the paper
☐ All 6 criteria are rated, and each defect is rated in one row only
☐ Every point is anchored to a section, page or figure
☐ Essential and strengthening are in separate lists
☐ The essential list is 2 to 6 items, and doing only those would satisfy me
☐ No copy-editing, line-editing or rewriting
☐ I said what the manuscript does well, specifically enough to protect it
☐ Nothing in the report identifies me, and nothing addresses the author personally
☐ My confidential comments are consistent with my report to the author
☐ Anything under §6 appears in Part 9.3 only
☐ No part of the manuscript went into a hosted AI service
☐ A recommendation is ticked in Part 9.1, and §8 is what I mean by it
☐ Part 3 diagnoses and Part 5 prescribes, without repeating each other

Appendix: sources

This guide follows the **COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers** (Committee on Publication Ethics) and the COPE Core Practices, adapted to *Peripherals*. We have specifically added rules on reviewers' use of generative AI, the treatment of coursework-derived manuscripts, and the word budget.

The COPE guidelines are short and worth reading directly: `https://publicationethics.org/guidance/guideline/ethical-guidelines-peer-reviewers`

Contact `peripherals@terminallyonline.nl` with any question, including whether something counts as a conflict.