

PALTRIDGE, B. (2017). THE DISCOURSE OF PEER REVIEW: REVIEWING SUBMISSIONS TO ACADEMIC JOURNALS. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reviewed by Gillian Skyrme

Massey University

I recently participated in an on-line survey about academic peer reviews. Among the questions were some about the value of training for writing reviews and what form such training might take. Thinking back to the anxiety I felt as I wrote my first reviews, the concern that the tone was right, that adequate weight was given to this element or that, that one did not display one's novice status, I was struck by how helpful some kind of training would have been. At that time, I was not aware of whether such training existed and nobody suggested it to me, so perhaps it did not. But clearly in the interim steps have been taken to open up this occluded genre, and this book makes a useful contribution to the process, one that would be of immense value to new reviewers and of great interest to the more seasoned.

The book addresses two major audiences. Early on, Paltridge indicates that his intended primary audience was linguistics experts with an interest in unpacking the discourse of an interesting genre (p. 18). However, at the end of Chapter 1 in his *Overview of the Book*, he indicates that the aim of the published version is to demystify reviews “in a way that will be of benefit to new researchers and those that are not familiar with the process and expectations of peer review and what is expected of them when they respond to the reports they receive” (p. 28). I imagine that both audiences would feel well served. Although the literature reviews that begin each chapter indicate that reviews have, at least in recent years, been the subject of some research scrutiny – including those for the same journal that is the source of Paltridge's reviews in the current study, *English for Specific Purposes* – it is an area that is new to me, and I found the book enlightening.

It is a very thorough account, beginning with consideration of other kinds of academic reviews, such as those elicited for promotion applications. On p. 21, it homes in on the main subject in question, as indicated by its subtitle, reviews of submissions to academic journals, taking a variety of perspectives, including genre, pragmatics, politeness and evaluation. Each of these perspectives is carefully introduced with a very thorough account of its background and seminal texts, followed by indications of how other authors have applied that particular perspective to reviews. Paltridge then reveals what he has uncovered in his own analysis.

Particular strengths of the book for me included Paltridge's use of his own publishing history to illustrate the interconnected web of texts that peer reviews form part of, sharing with the reader not just examples of reviews he himself had received, but also his responses to them. These included the letters that accompanied his revisions and indications of changes that he made to the final text. In his analysis of the reviews that forms the core of the book, copious excerpts illustrate points made, which is very helpful for the reader. Another value is his consideration of reviews with four different outcomes: accept, accept with minor revision, request for major revisions and reject. This provides a nuanced understanding— inevitably there are many differences in the reviews written in these categories, although some commonalities as well.

One of these seems to be a concern on the part of their writers for the tone and impact of reviews. For example, critical comments are often carefully hedged, a pattern of a positive comment preceding a negative seems to be pervasive, and rejections are always explained. Another aspect of this is a tendency to use indirect means of indicating that a change is required, which Paltridge points out can be very confusing for those unfamiliar with the genre – indirect they may be, but required, nevertheless. As well as textual analysis, the data draws on reviewer questionnaires, and the often extensive answers they provide explain that careful tone. Reviewers who had experience of scathing reviews early in their careers were determined not to inflict the same pain on their subjects, and were driven by a 'review as you would be reviewed' approach. They sought ways to make their points that would as far as possible support the author to make positive changes and work towards improving the quality of their work. Nevertheless, Paltridge warns novices that rejections can be very blunt.

Interestingly, most of those interviewed indicated that they had learned how to write reviews by reading those they had received of their own submissions, which brings me back to my first point about training for this task. In fact, among the newer reviewers were some who had received preparation for it, in postgraduate courses where they were invited to participate in a reviewing process. Paltridge takes up this notion in a very useful final chapter where he outlines a possible plan for providing such training. Perhaps ALANZ should consider implementing just such a process. This book would be very useful reading for it.