

Double-Blind Reviews: A Step Toward Eliminating Unconscious Bias

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Starting in January 2022, we are excited to announce that *Clinical and Translational Gastroenterology* (CTG) will transition from a single-blind to a double-blind peer review system.

The peer review process, wherein scholarly work is scrutinized by experts before publication, serves as the foundation of medical advancement. At CTG, we believe that balanced, thoughtful, and fair peer reviews constitute the backbone of our Journal's scientific rigor.

Like most peer-reviewed journals, CTG heretofore used a single-blind review system, in which the reviewers' identity is unknown to the authors, but the authors' identity was known to the reviewers. With double-blind reviewing, neither the authors' nor reviewers' identities are shared. Historically, arguments against double-blind review claim that successful blinding is cumbersome, and it precludes comprehensive assessment of a manuscript and its authors. Proponents of double-blind review suggest that it is a more impartial process that limits biases and results in higher quality peer reviews.

Biases based on investigators' reputations, institutional prestige, race, and/or sex—whether conscious or not—permeate the scientific community. Research comparing single-blind with double-blind reviews has shown that the perceived author and institutional prestige are associated with increased rates of manuscript acceptance (1,2). Sex-biased and racial biases have been demonstrated in various scientific enterprises and likely impact peer reviews as well. Indeed, research from CTG Associate Editor, Dr. Violeta Popov, has shown that female authorship in gastroenterology journals lags behind the percentage of women practicing in the field of gastroenterology (3). Although this does not prove causality, any steps taken to remove potential biases bring us closer to a more accurate assessment of the science presented in submitted manuscripts. We anticipate that double-blind reviews will help mitigate the biases that exist in the scientific press. These sentiments are supported by a study of 40,000 research paper authors in which double-blind review was considered the most effective form of peer review (4). Moreover, evidence suggests double-blind reviews are of higher quality than single-blind reviews (5).

At CTG, we queried our community of authors and reviewers regarding their preference for a single- or double-blind review process. With 88% author and 80% reviewer response rates, nearly 65% of respondents signaled their support for double-blind reviews (in near equal distribution between reviewers and authors). Fewer than 10% of respondents disfavored double-blind reviews.

We recognize that a double-blind review process is an imperfect system. Unintentional exposure of author or institution identity is sometimes unavoidable, such as in small, specialized fields or subsequent to early sharing of data at conferences. Successful blinding of author identity is achieved approximately 60% of the time (6,7) and may be increased to 75% with the removal of identifying allusions and self-citations (8).

Starting in January 2022, identities of authors' names and institutions will be withheld from reviewers. The authors will be instructed to avoid first person self-referencing and allusions to affiliations as much as possible. Title pages with author and institutional information will be uploaded as an individual document, separate from the remainder of the manuscript. This will facilitate blinding of manuscripts sent for external expert review.

We acknowledge this may impose an additional burden on both authors and CTG staff. However, given the support we have heard from our authors and reviewers, we feel the benefits justify these efforts.

The CTG Editorial Board is proud of our dedication to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our decision to adopt a double-blind review process reflects our deep commitment to decreasing bias whenever possible. We realize there will be challenges because no system is perfect, but we also look forward to bringing those challenges to light and systematically addressing them in a transparent fashion. In this spirit, we will be self-monitoring the success of our efforts and welcoming feedback from authors, reviewers, and readers.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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