

Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors

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Suggested citation: Anti-racist scholarly reviewing practices: A heuristic for editors, reviewers, and authors. (2021). Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/reviewheuristic>. Licensed under

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1. What is this Document?

This document offers explicit guidance on anti-racist professional practices in the form of a heuristic for editors, reviewers, and authors involved in academic reviewing. When we say “anti-racist,” we follow [Ibram X. Kendi’s definition from *How to be an Anti-Racist* \(Chapter 1\)](#) that situates anti-racism in relation to racism, in terms of policies and ideas, and that reminds us there is no neutral or non-racist position:

- “A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people. There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups.”
- “Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society. ... An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences--that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.”
- “Racism is a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas. Antiracism is a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas.”

This is **a living document; we invite active feedback, revision, and work to keep it up-to-date to account for additional scenarios and perspectives.** As scholars of technical communication, our perspectives are connected to that field’s history and contemporary practices. To hold the field accountable while offering situation-specific support, we authors of this document commit to being available to members of the field who encounter racism and other forms of structural oppression in the academic reviewing process. We also acknowledge existing groups such as [the CPTSC diversity committee](#) and [the coalition of editors involved in recent anti-racist work](#) as possible resources for mentoring and intervention on behalf of members of the field who encounter racist oppression in academic reviewing.

The creation of a heuristic for anti-racist scholarly reviewing practices emerged from challenges made by [Angela Haas in her 2020 ATTW “Call to Action to Redress Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy”](#) and [Miriam Williams and Natasha Jones in their 2020 blog post, “A Just Use of Imagination.”](#) In these calls, these scholars asked members of the field to engage seriously with anti-racist change-making. This document responds to their calls by focusing on academic reviewing processes. We ask:

How might we dismantle the existing exclusionary and oppressive philosophies and practices of reviewing in the field of technical and professional

communication and replace them with philosophies and practices that are explicitly anti-racist and inclusive?

With that broader question in mind, we also ask: What would a system of inclusivity, rather than gatekeeping and disciplining, look like? In what follows, we imagine such a system as well as the process of building this system.

We have articulated a series of questions in the form of a heuristic for authors, editors, manuscript reviewers, co-authors, graduate mentors, and tenure and promotion reviewers to use in their roles in these institutional, embedded practices that are often exclusionary. We seek to navigate the extant oppressive and exclusionary practices in technical and professional communication reviewing processes, recognize how our identities and lived experiences (and ultimately, our careers) are shaped by these practices, and offer a heuristic for active application of inclusive practices.

Scholarly publishing practices and norms are context-specific. Discipline, publisher, publishing model, journal, genre, and editors', authors', and reviewers' identities all shape the particularities of any given moment of writing, reviewing, editing, and publishing. Just as it is impossible to provide universal rules for "good writing," it is impossible to provide universal rules for scholarly publishing. So instead, this heuristic is designed to be applicable in any given situation to guide decision-making and action-taking.

2. How to Use This Document

We want this document to inspire continued examination of academic review practices to prevent harm (e.g., racism, gatekeeping and other oppressive actions). We begin by suggesting some role-specific ways you might use this document:

For Editors

- Publicly and officially endorse this heuristic
- Adopt this heuristic in your own editorial practices
- Require that editorial board members commit to using the heuristic
- Require use of the heuristic by reviewers
- Revisit your publication's review practices at least annually

For Reviewers

- Consult the heuristic during your review writing and before submitting your reviews
- Mention that you are using this heuristic in your reviews

For Authors

- Use this heuristic as a tool to call out and push back against racist editing practices (e.g., by citing it in responses to editors or reviewers)

- Call upon the contributors to this document (listed above) or the scholars who have signaled their support (listed at the end) for help when you encounter racist (or otherwise oppressive) practices in academic publishing
- Request or recommend reviewers who have signaled support for anti-racist publishing practices by signing onto this document

For Allies/Accomplices

- Commit to mentoring, supporting, and advocating for marginalized and untenured scholars who encounter racist (and otherwise oppressive) academic publishing practices
- Sign onto this document to signal your support for developing an anti-racist scholarly reviewing system

For anyone involved in academic publishing:

- Question what might be missing from these practices once put into action in your specific context
- Openly discuss these practices with others involved in your process and brainstorm small adjustments based on needs

As you consult this heuristic, we recommend adopting two major principles to guide your professional practice:

Consider anti-racism to be part of your job.

- Protect vulnerable stakeholders, including readers, authors, research participants, reviewers, and others
- Recognize and reject the kinds of problematic treatment experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other people of color during review processes
- Consider who could be harmed or triggered by reading/seeing your citations or lack thereof
- Be mindful and intentional in how you write about identities (e.g., capitalizing Black, appropriately referring to scholars as Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC))
- Write positionality statements (e.g., following [Nedra Reynolds' "write from where you are"](#))
- Commit to reading to understand racism and anti-racism
- Read intentionally to imagine the field expansively and encourage bold ideas that expand existing conversations

Use inclusive language, understanding that what is inclusive changes over time.

- Use people's self-identified correct pronouns
- Seek out terms currently preferred by groups to refer to themselves
- Do not substitute dominant group perspectives or experiences for the whole: e.g., "women got the right to vote 1920." Well, *white* women did.

3. Academic Review Processes Can Reinscribe Racism

During Summer 2020, authors of this document met weekly, starting with a series of future workshops (Vidal, 2005). In the future workshops, we brainstormed areas of focus to redress racist publishing practices in the field, generated lists of shortcomings, and imagined optimistic futures of more inclusive and representative publishing practices.

During our workshops, we identified the following problems and practices, which this document addresses:

- Reviewing can gatekeep, reinforce the status quo, and reproduce existing white, dominant, and patriarchal norms.
- Anonymity can shield bad behavior, including racism at the micro and macro levels and the use of punitive and violent language.
- The reviewing process is opaque and contains hidden tacit practices that can exclude new scholars, especially those who are already marginalized.
- The labor of anti-racist reviewing and critical citational practices disproportionately falls on Black, Indigenous, and other scholars and reviewers of color.
- Review processes are embedded within larger organizations and communities, some of which have yet to commit to anti-racist practices as part of their missions.

Within scholarly publishing, people play multiple roles. Each role offers insights, knowledge, and/or power to contribute to the process of recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing (or [the 4Rs process developed by Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019](#)) racist philosophies and practices.

Roles include:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| • Editor | • Tenure and promotion reviewer |
| • Manuscript reviewer | • Readers |
| • Author | • Students |
| • Co-author | • Emerging scholars |
| • Graduate mentor | |

4. Scenarios/Stories

Because we recognize that experiences of oppression vary based on positionality, privilege, and power, we have provided illustrative scenarios or stories that demonstrate the need for action from each of the positions of power and privilege in the reviewing process. These stories are anonymized personal narratives that describe the exigence for this heuristic and provide examples of situations in which editors, authors, reviewers, instructors, or tenure & promotion committee members might use it within specific positions, programs, or places.

Author Story: An untenured BIPOC scholar receives a review of their chapter manuscript that includes racist and oppressive language and that is passed on, unedited and unmitigated, by the editor of the edited collection, who is a senior scholar in the field. The BIPOC author recognizes that it is a risk to point out to a senior scholar that the review they passed on includes racist and oppressive language, because it might lead not only to losing this publication opportunity, but also to further negative impacts on external tenure reviews. What if there were a network of allies and accomplices to whom this scholar could turn for support so that they do not have to address situations like this alone?

Author Story: A scholar whose primary theoretical and methodological frameworks are Black Feminist receives reviews that say the Black Feminist approach is distracting because the article isn't about race: the reviewer suggests removing the distracting theory or making the entire article about issues of race.

Editor Story: An editor receives an email from an interested contributor inquiring about a journal's inclusive language and anti-racist practices policy, yet the editor and journal's editorial board do not have an explicit statement to share, nor have they considered that their outlet should have such a statement.

Editor Story: An editor is trying to balance competing goals: e.g., turning around a publication decision quickly to support authors *but also* preserving rigor (e.g., thorough review by at least two anonymous reviewers) *but also* acknowledging constraints that interfere with stakeholders' ability to fulfill their duties (e.g., reviewing during a pandemic while homeschooling children or reviewing as a BIPOC activist scholar during a time of widespread racial protests). The editor has to make a judgment call. When should a publication decision be made without two anonymous reviews: e.g., a revised manuscript with one review recommending "accept" and the other reviewer not responding to reminder messages? Should the editor delay the decision by at least a month to secure another review, or should the editor make the call and move on? And if the editor does accept the publication, is it prudent to conceal that only one anonymous review of the revised manuscript was conducted? In other words, would such information call into question the "quality" of the journal and the scholarship it publishes?

Reviewer Story: A reviewer receives a book proposal on new work by a junior scholar that engages race and other underexplored areas. The proposal is well done and builds on recently published scholarship in technical communication. The reviewer is excited about the work's potential effect on the field and rates the proposal highly. Later she learns that the book was not accepted because the other reviewer didn't see its promise and the editor presented the reviews as two equal opinions, but decided to reject. This editorial decision negatively impacts the career of the author as they have no avenue to appeal or discuss the decision and they have to look for another venue, potentially in another sub field. The editorial decision negatively impacts the reviewer by ignoring her decision in favor of more traditional, status quo approaches to the field. The editorial decision harms the field because it communicates to the author and the reviewer that the [gatekeepers of the] field of technical communication does not value work on race or emerging and underexplored areas. It also harms the field because it forecloses the possibility of scholars building upon and citing this work in technical communication, pushing them to instead look to other subfields to engage with related ideas.

Tenure & Promotion Story: An external reviewer or senior scholar is asked to review a multiply marginalized or underrepresented (MMU) scholar's dossier for Tenure and Promotion. When reading the MMU scholar's institutional T&P requirements, the reviewer realizes that the T&P promotion documents do not include the scholar's community-based work under research; instead, all of their community-based work falls under service.

Tenure & Promotion Story: An external reviewer or senior scholar is asked to review a marginalized scholar's tenure packet, and the reviewer notes an especially high service load (and a gap in publication history). The candidate is one of very few non-white faculty on campus, and they have been asked to serve on a disproportionate number of departmental hiring committees and university-level committees to enable those committees to meet institutional requirements for diverse membership. The reviewer additionally recognizes that marginalized scholars, and especially BIPOC, are regularly called on for both official and unofficial mentoring that is rendered invisible by institutional records of service.

5. Heuristic Guide for Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices

A. Recognize a range of expertise and encourage citation practices that represent diverse canons, epistemological foundations, and ways of knowing

- Reviewers and editors mentor authors on how to frame articles within the context of field conversations.
- Reviewers and editors frame reviewer comments to support author revisions.
- Reviewers and editors recognize that citation practices are political. We form communities of practice/discourse communities in how we cite, excluding and including particular ways of knowing. We give particular ideas power and visibility in how we cite. We decide whose work matters, who should be tenured and promoted, who belongs.
- Reviewers recommend pieces to cite; lack of certain 'canonical' citations is not automatically grounds for rejection.
- Reviewers resist requiring the existing canon be cited and recognize that some canonical work may be purposefully uncited because of oppressive and harmful actions taken by those authors.
- Reviewers and editors recommend relevant work by MMU scholars to authors.
- Reviewers and editors recognize and support research that pushes at field boundaries and consider how to encourage authors to show connections without shutting down or being defensive about expansion.
- Reviewers and editors read and respond to work on its own terms without demanding it be reframed through dominant forms of expertise.
- Reviewers respect lived experiences as a source of expertise and excellence where appropriate.
- Reviewers and editors account for the relationship between positionalities and expertises and value a variety of expertise--do not position one kind of expertise as universal.
- Reviewers and editors resist reflexively suggesting that certain work is not within the purview of the field.
- Reviewers and editors value and be willing to imagine the field beyond their individual perspectives.

B. Recognize, intervene in and/or prevent harmful scholarly work—both in publication processes and in published scholarship

- Editors collaborate with advisory boards to write and make available a transparent and clear journal policy on requiring anti-racist language use and welcoming a broad range of writing styles.
- Editors specify in the journal style guide the preferred terms, especially for marginalized identities and update the style guide as terms change.
- Editors build into the publication process comprehensive editing that provides another layer of protection against oppressive and anti-racist language ("catches" that are often too small for reviewers and too big for copyeditors).
- Editors and reviewers consider inclusive citation practices to be a requirement for

recommending publication. Bibliographies that only cite white scholars are unacceptable. Reviewers and editors recommend that authors consult existing lists of marginalized and/or underrepresented scholars. Scholarship that does not cite inclusively must be revised to be considered for publication.

- Editors and reviewers recognize an expansive notion of citations, including social media posts that shapes the thinking of another scholar.
- Editors and reviewers reject and/or require revisions from authors to prevent and/or intervene in practices that might do harm or create trauma in either the implementation of methods or the circulation of accounts of the research; this harm may include harm to local communities, to MMU scholars, or to the TPC community at large.
- Editors reject review practices that are exclusionary and intervene before sending potentially traumatic reviews to authors.
- Editors recognize problematic reviewers, resisting the use of scholarly reputation and other excuses as justification for racist review comments. Editors trust BIPOC authors who identify a review as racist.
- Editors and editorial boards identify and replace exclusionary terms or descriptions in aims and scope, journal information, and other journal documentation.

C. Establish and state clear but flexible contingency plans for review processes that prioritize humanity over production

- Editors proactively contact reviewers to offer deadline extensions or new deadlines.
- Editors proactively inform authors that publication decisions may be delayed.
- Reviewers in positions of privilege offer to take on additional reviews to lighten the workload of those who become unable to conduct their reviews.
- Editors engage in regularly scheduled (e.g., annual, at editorial changeover, etc.) recursive oversight and revision of review practices to ensure they remain inclusive.
- Editors, reviewers, and authors proactively offer flexibility and generosity in times of personal and communal crisis.

D. Make the review process transparent

- Editors make all review guidelines publicly available.
- Editors make a detailed description of publication processes and timelines publicly available.
- Editors send all reviewer feedback and editorial framing of reviews to authors and reviewers, while applying anti-racist editorial judgment on if and how to send the feedback in cases of racist reviews.
- Editors create a mechanism to gather feedback from authors about the publication process.
- Editors create a mechanism to gather feedback from reviewers about the review process.
- Editors and editorial boards create an appeals process for authors whose work has been subject to discriminatory reviewing.
- Editors make equity and inclusion practices explicit in review processes and procedures.
- Editors and editorial boards include examples in journal documentation from a wide range of contexts (e.g.: sample fictional anonymous reviews, excerpts of past reviews shared with reviewer permission, etc.).

E. Value the labor of those involved in the review process

- Editors recognize that multiply marginalized scholars may receive disproportionately more review requests.
- Editors document the number of reviews each person has conducted to avoid overburdening specific scholars.
- Editors trust MMU reviewers' insights, particularly when they choose to recommend rejection rather than labor to help authors revise work that is explicitly bigoted or forwards unsubstantiated claims that do not engage deeply with multiply marginalized scholars' research.
- Editors consider whether full review by two external scholars is truly needed for revised manuscripts.
- Editors are explicit about expectations of editorial board members, especially the number of reviews they are expected to conduct per year.
- Editors offer official letters to reviewers and editorial board members acknowledging their labor.
- Editors and editorial boards make the reviewer and board composition processes explicit and reflective of those contributing labor.
- Editors and editorial boards create reviewer guidelines that direct reviewers' attention and reduce unnecessary labor.

F. Editors commit to inclusivity among reviewers and in editorial board makeup

- Editors and editorial boards ensure that those who are invited to serve on editorial boards and as reviewers reflect the diversity of the field, both in terms of demographics and rank.
- Editors acknowledge that MMU scholars are often disproportionately asked to provide and perform service and offer to send targeted letters recognizing the work and their contribution to the journal and field.
- Editors and editorial boards create policies for reviewing and removing board members or reviewers whose reviewing practices are not aligned with the journal's policies on inclusion and anti-racism.
- Editors proactively identify and publicize journals' inclusion practices (e.g., TCQ including "all articles...use accessible examples and illustrations" in the aims and scope).
- Editors create, share, and enforce an accessibility policy, such as requiring alt text for images, transcripts for multimedia, etc., which enables disabled scholars to serve as reviewers and editorial board members.
- Editors publically convey clear expectations for and obligations of editorial board members.

6. Signaling Your Commitment

To publicly signal your commitment to engage in anti-racist academic reviewing practices, you can:

1. Signal your commitment by completing [this Google Form](#)
2. See other people who have signaled their commitment on the [Commitment Page](#)
3. Share this document with your coalition or network
4. At the end of your reviews for journals, consider adding the following language in your sign off:

In preparing this review, I sought to engage in anti-racist practices as articulated in this [Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices](#). If you find that I've fallen short of any of these practices, I invite you to share your feedback with the editors, whom I hope will share this feedback with me.

Note About Potential Updates to the Heuristic

The "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors" document may be updated in the future to reflect improved practices and insights from marginalized scholars. In case of any updates, you will receive a notification to the email address you provide and you will have the opportunity to review the updates and keep or opt out of having your information on the Commitment Page.