Increasingly there is a problem for journals with reviewers declining to review papers either by a negative response to the invitation letter or with no response to the invitation. Why is this? Reviewing may be viewed as a “thankless” task that is not recognized by institutions, research centers, or companies. It does not usually affect the size or even the presence of raises or promotions. Reviewing papers is critically important.

In this editorial, I will be making the case that reviewing papers is a significant responsibility and professional obligation. For a faculty member at a university, there are many activities that are essential to the students, the department, the college or university that should be done, even if they are not recognized for merit raises or promotions. Performing these activities is part of what it is to be a professional. Reviewing papers for a journal is analogous to these activities. For those in government or industry research, performing the duties of a reviewer is part of what it is to be a professional.

There is another argument for responsibly reviewing manuscripts. It is the expectation that a manuscript that you submit will be reviewed. Let us consider that a researcher publishes one paper in the journal in a given year. That paper will have been reviewed by four or five people: two or three reviewers (usually including an associate editor), a section editor, and the editor-in-chief. It seems reasonable to suggest that there a reciprocal obligation for the researcher to agree to review a similar number of manuscripts in a given year. Many researchers publish multiple papers per year, and I contend that the reciprocal obligation ratio should hold.

The review of a manuscript should focus on what is good science. Obviously, the manuscript should be in sufficiently good English to be understandable by reviewers and editors. The copyeditors for the journal do an excellent job going through every manuscript. It is unnecessary for reviewers to list every minor mistake of style. Instead, reviewers are asked to focus their judgment on the quality of the science including the following: the experimental design, the analytical methods employed, the novelty of the research findings, the significance of the work encompassing statistical, biological, and potential industry, whether the literature has been comprehensively reviewed, and the likely impact of the research. Areas where the clarity requires attention in a revision are also important to identify.