

How to Write a Referee Report

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Refereeing is essential to academic research

- Journal editors are the ultimate gatekeepers when it comes to publication
 - Their job is to decide what papers are 1) credible; 2) important; and 3) of interest to their readership
 - With hundreds of papers submitted each year, editors need help making judgments on which get published
 - Referees are unpaid, specialized assistants to editors in this process

Refereeing is essential to academic research

- Credibility is obviously very important
 - If studies are published that use flawed methods or falsified results, the credibility of the entire field suffers
 - Good gatekeeping by an editor and his/her referees benefits all of us, even if we don't publish in that journal
 - Bad gatekeeping reflects badly on all of us

Refereeing is essential to academic research

- Since publication is a signal of quality, refereeing allows us to better select our reading material (i.e., it saves us time)
 - Good editors (and referees) pick up good new work by young unknown scholars that we might not otherwise know was there
 - Without expert quality control, we'd just sit around reading the same old people with good reputations
 - Because that's the only signal of quality we'd receive

How does it work?

- Your first referee report may be given to you by your advisor
 - It's good training for you
 - It's a good way for your advisor to see how you think and what you know
 - It's also a good way for your advisor to make it home in time for dinner
- As you get known in the field, editors will begin to send you requests to review manuscripts

Handling requests to review

- If asked to review a manuscript, your obligation is to
 - Referee the work if you are qualified
 - Tell the editor if you are not qualified to referee the work
 - Suggest appropriate alternative reviewers if you can't do the review
 - Agree to a time by which you will complete the review
 - Complete a substantive and helpful review on time

Is it ever OK to say “No!”?

- At this point in your career, only if you’re not qualified to comment or if there’s a conflict of interest
- Later on, you may find yourself becoming popular with editors
 - Kees, Daniel, others get swamped with requests
 - If demand for your services gets too high, you can start refusing; but that’s years off at this point
 - Then you’d start refusing to referee for journals that are of less interest to you (and that you intend never to publish in)

Is it ever OK to say “No!”?

- Keep in mind that if you refuse to referee for a journal (more than once or twice) you may begin to reduce your probability of getting published at that journal.
- Some journals require you to referee if you submit to them
 - Berkeley Electronic Press requires that you do two referee reports for every paper you submit
 - Or else pay them ~\$250 per submission.

What does a referee do?

- Your job is twofold. You 1) advise the editor; and 2) advise the author(s)
 - Ultimately, your job is to tell the editor whether or not they should publish it and why or why not
 - But along the way you do a valuable assessment of the paper which you are expected to share with the authors
 - Generally, a referee writes two documents
 - Comments for the authors
 - A review and recommendation for the editor
 - There can be substantial overlap between these docs

Organization of the report to the editor

- There's no one way to do it but the following is how I tend to do it
 - 1) Summary of the work
 - 2) Recommendation to the editor (publish, revise, or reject)
 - 3) Discussion of the importance of the work and how it contributes to knowledge
 - 4) Methodological issues (if any)
 - 5) Suggestions for revision (if any)

Summary of the work

- The editor has hopefully read the paper, but it may have been awhile
- The summary reminds them what the main findings and methods of the paper are
 - Summarizing the work is also useful for authors, because if your summary doesn't match their idea of what the paper is about, they'll know they need to communicate better!

Recommendation to the editor

- Here you just tell the editor what you think they should do with the paper
- This is hard!
- You need to make an objective assessment based on
 - The quality and content of the paper
 - The quality and typical content of the journal (i.e. does the paper match?)
 - I've rejected a paper at the AER that I then accepted at the JPubE (with virtually no changes)

Discussion of importance and contribution

- This can be easy if the authors have done a good lit review and motivation of the paper
 - However, if you don't agree with their assessment of how the paper fills a gap in the literature, you need to explain why you don't agree
 - Don't take what the authors say at face value. Think critically about whether their paper is really as big a contribution as they say it is
 - If they lack good motivation but you see the paper as filling an important gap, you should tell the editor—you should also tell the author how to better motivate their paper

Methodological issues

- This is usually the meat of the report
- We all come at research from different angles
 - There are many ways to skin a cat
 - You will (hopefully) have questions, concerns, suggestions, etc. about the methods used by the authors
 - Have they dealt with a key endogeneity problem?
 - Have they made an unrealistic and unnecessary assumption?
 - Would the model benefit from certain changes
 - Is the dataset up to the task?

Methodological issues

- I often ask questions of authors
 - Did you try this?
 - Might this alternative hypothesis explain your findings?
 - Can I see evidence in support of this assumption?
 - Can you do the following test?
- Sometimes I ask that certain things be added to the paper (or dropped)

Suggestion for revision

- Referees will typically suggest things that ought to be done in order to make the paper acceptable for publication
 - You can do this even if you're rejecting the paper
 - Consider the author's next submission. This could be useful information
 - If you plan to reject the paper don't tell the author, "I'd recommend this for publication by this journal if you did the following..."

Notes on Writing

- I think most people don't comment much on writing, but I tend to
 - If the paper's badly written I tell them and tell them why and how it could be improved
 - It's kind of embarrassing to do this, but sometimes it needs to be done
 - The trick here is to try to be nice. It's hard when you've spent hours trying to figure out what the hell the authors are trying to communicate to you.

How blind is the process?

- It used to be double-blind and some journals still try to do this
 - The internet makes one side of the double-blind approach virtually impossible
 - If you get a manuscript with no names on it, but it's posted somewhere online, you'll easily identify the authors
- Most journals now do single-blind refereeing
 - You know the authors but they (in principle) don't know you

Don't Google authors before writing the report

- Try to write an objective review without considering who the authors are
 - If you find they're grad students you might treat them differently from a senior prof at Harvard.
 - The point is for every manuscript to get a fair review
 - If you must, Google the authors once you're done

Things to avoid

- Being nasty.
 - Small, insecure people sometimes write nasty reports. They can be devastating to authors.
 - Pretend the authors are friends of yours. Be honest, but think about their feelings.
- Telling the authors to write a new paper
 - Some referees love to tackle the paper as their own project and totally revise it (or, tell the authors to totally revise it)
 - Don't write this paper! Write that paper instead!
 - Render a verdict on the paper, suggesting modest revisions if necessary.

Things to Avoid

- Gratuitous self-citation
 - If you really want the authors to know who you are, this will give you away.
 - The editor is unlikely to be impressed.
 - Certainly cite yourself if the paper would benefit from the authors reading your work
- Going into too much detail for the editor
 - The editor is busy. Make the editor's report one page or less; highlight key issues. Make a strong case for the position you take

Things to Avoid

- Demanding perfection
 - The authors are limited to about 20 pages to make whatever case they're trying to make
 - Their case won't be 100% watertight
 - Models could be tweaked
 - Alternative empirical specifications could be tried
 - Other datasets could be explored
 - Set a reasonable standard. You don't have to be 100% convinced by what they've done. You should find their argument compelling, but it doesn't need to be watertight.

Things to Avoid

- Doing it at the last minute
 - The best report will be one that involved stewing over the paper for some time.
 - Read the paper soon after you get it from the editor. Then sit on it
 - Open a file where you keep notes
 - Write down thoughts as they come up
 - Reread the paper again later when you go to do the review in earnest. The stewing time will pay off.

Keep in mind that you can benefit from this

- You'll learn things to try and things to avoid in your own work
- You'll make an editor happy if you do a good job
- You may even pick up a research idea along the way
 - Naturally you can't poach ideas from the manuscript, without citing them
 - But you're entitled to new research ideas that stem from reading it