

Preparing a referee report

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Useful references

Jonathan B. Berk, Campbell R, Harvey and David Hirshleifer:

- [How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process](#): *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2017, Vol 31 (1): 231-244.
- [Preparing a Referee Report: Guidelines and Perspectives](#)
- [A Checklist for Reviewing a Paper](#)

General

- Peer review is fundamental to the efficacy of the scientific process
- Role of referee is to provide unambiguous advice to the editor about whether or not a paper is publishable
- Requires a lot of (mostly nonvisible) effort, but it's an important part of the job if you do scientific research

Structure of this session

1. Invitation
2. Cover letter
3. Referee report
4. Some remarks

Invitation

- **Decide immediately whether you will be able to complete the review within the allotted time, and accomplish the **commitment** if you accept the invitation**
 - It is ok to ask for an extended deadline
 - Always inform the editor about a delay if you are going to miss the deadline
 - Never provide severely late reports without notifying the editor!
 - If you cannot provide the review within allotted time, provide suggestions for alternative reviewers

Invitation

- **Decide whether you are a good match for the submission**
 - **If you know little about the topic, you can decline the invitation and inform the editor about this**
 - **Note: the editor may have a good reason for selecting you, and verifying this can make your job more useful (e.g. paper with theoretical and empirical part)**
- **If you have reviewed the paper for another journal, alert the editor before accepting the review**
 - **Editor can decide whether (s)he prefers a fresh view or an assessment whether the paper has improved**

Invitation

- **If you (might) have a conflict of interest: alert the editor before accepting the review**
 - **Examples are past/current/planned co-author, colleagues, (former) student/advisor, personal friend, if you have competing research, (past) disputes with author**

- **You might feel that you cannot complete the report anonymously: it is reasonable to decline**
 - **If you do not mind the loss of anonymity, you should still alert the editor**

Cover letter

- I. **Summary of the paper's core contribution**
 - Note that the editor may not be an expert in the field

- II. **Assessment: strengths and weaknesses of the research in its current state**

Cover letter

- III. Advice: is the core contribution a publishable result, or likely publishable with one round of revision?**
- **Be decisive: you are asked to make a recommendation**
 - **Reasons for uncertainty can be included in the explanation for the recommendation**
 - **A revise recommendation is a serious commitment that involves a lot of work for the authors: you should not make a revise recommendation to simply defer judgment**

Referee report

- I. **Brief paragraph summarizing the contribution of the paper to the literature**

- II. **General assessment of the importance of the paper: most subjective part of the report, and the core explanation of your recommendation**
 - **Take into account the level (top core, top-field) and the scope (general interest, field) of the journal**

 - **Note: in many economics-related fields, rejection rate is more than 90%**

 - **There are plenty of “correct” papers that do not make a significant enough marginal contribution to existing knowledge**

Referee report

III. Recommending rejection

- Contribution (far) below the bar of the journal
- **Crucial problem(s) that is (are) not fixable:** provide scientific justification
- A brief report is acceptable: it is not your task to provide feedback and help the authors to revise the paper (you are helping the editor to make a decision), even though it is kind when you do this

Referee report

III. Recommending a revise and resubmit

- There are crucial problem(s) that could be corrected or addressed in a revision
- For each crucial problem, provide a clear scientific explanation of why the problem is critical, and what a correction to the problem would look like to satisfy you
 - If the authors satisfactorily address the issues, you should recommend publication in next round
- Number your comments (easier for the editor to write decision letter and authors to reply)

Referee report

- IV. **Comments and/or suggestions that could improve the paper**
 - **Problems with the paper that do not make it unpublishable: optional for authors to address them**
 - **You cannot hold up publication if the authors do not address these problems**
 - **Ultimately, the author's names go on the paper, not yours: they have a responsibility not to waste good suggestions, subject to fact that there are differences of opinion and suggestions costly to implement**

Second round report

- Same as first round report, except that the section on importance of paper is omitted
- Do not add new items that you could have reasonably asked for in the first round report
 - If you have to add an item, explain that you made a mistake in the first report
- If the authors satisfactorily addresses the issues of the previous report, you should recommend publication

Some remarks

- Your report should be consistent with the cover letter (particularly when you do not make a specific recommendation in the report): if you recommend “reject”, do not mislead the authors in the report
- Reread carefully your draft report and think about what a critic might make of your arguments
- It is not your job to “make work” for the authors
 - Referees often request extensive additional analysis that add little value added or which could easily be performed in follow-up papers
 - The standard for publication is not infinite certainty, it is whether the paper makes a contribution

Some remarks

- It is ok to recommend (conditional) acceptance on the first round: do not feel you have to put the author to work to demonstrate your diligence to the editor
- The main job of the referee is not to help write the paper as a quasi-coauthor or make an unpublishable paper publishable by directing the research
 - Good ideas must be communicated: if quality of writing is so bad, the paper should be rejected
- Always take a scientific stance in your report: do not insult the authors or use overly emotional or accusatory language
- If you are aware that the authors have behaved unethically with respect to the submission, notify the editor

Some remarks

- **Beware of the behavioral bias of looking for evidence that confirms your view or supports your prior research: your job is to determine whether research is of interest for the profession**
 - **Beware also of other biases you may have (e.g. gender, institution or previous publications of authors)**
- **Do not engage in “signal-jamming” to persuade the editor that you are smart and dedicated**
 - **Referees often feel obliged to provide reports with extensive lists of complaints: sometimes allegedly fatal flaws are actually minor blemishes (but distinction may not be obvious for non-specialist editor)**
 - **Editors want primarily an assessment of publishability of the paper, rather than provision of long list of demands even for excellent papers**

Some remarks

- Do not dismiss papers that attack big questions relative to more routine extensions and variations merely because flaws can be found
 - Some papers are more ambitious, and ambitious papers often necessarily have loose ends: weigh the pros as well as the cons
- Golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you
 - Set an example for the kinds of referee reports you would like to receive as an author, or as an editor
- Note: these are general comments, referees should consult the instructions of the journal that has requested advice for additional guidance