

Guidelines on Writing Referee Reports

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Abstract

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1 Deciding whether to accept a refereeing assignment

The first question you should ask yourself when you receive a new assignment is whether you should accept it. Here are several reasons why you may decline.

1. *You lack the expertise or the interest.* The subject of the paper may be too far removed from what you know, the associate editor not having assessed your expertise correctly in deciding to send you the work. Refereeing a paper on a topic with which you are not familiar is a good opportunity to learn about a new area and you should consider seizing it, but be realistic. If the background reading necessary to properly evaluate the paper is too extensive, you may not be able to gain the necessary perspective on the field to write a good report, and you may not meet the deadline.

Similarly, you should have some minimal interest in the subject. If not, it is unlikely that you will do a good job.

2. *You fear conflict of interest.* Conflict of interest may arise for various reasons. You may be currently engaged in similar research, and you feel proprietary about the subject or even some specific results contained in the paper. Or you have had a paper on the same topic rejected. If you fear that your emotions will get in the way of a fair evaluation, decline the job.
3. *You have already evaluated the paper for another journal.* To the extent that submission to a second journal can be seen as the counterpart of an appeal in the judicial system, the requirement that the judges be new is of course crucial. Often, there will be other people able to evaluate the work, and its fate should not be made to hinge on the taste of

¹Hamermesh (1992) concludes his useful article about getting one's work published with some advice on refereeing.

a single person. However, there are good reasons why you may want to look at the paper again.

- (a) It may have been revised and in fact the revisions may be substantial.²
- (b) Your opinion may have evolved in the meantime, and if the second journal is sufficiently different in its style and reputation from the first one, a different sort of report may be needed. Moreover, it may be in response to a suggestion you made in your first report that the author chose this particular journal for his second attempt, and you may feel a certain responsibility to the journal.
- (c) You may have a knowledge of the subject that few others have, and the associate editor may want to hear your opinion anyway.³ One could argue that if there are so few people qualified to referee a given work that its evaluation for successive journals has to involve some of the same referees, then it is not likely to constitute a significant contribution anyway. But I do not really agree. On several occasions when choosing referees, I have felt that I could trust only a few individuals with writing a good report, but that did not mean that with time the article under consideration would not gain readers and eventually have an impact.
- (d) If you had initially recommended rejection of the paper mainly because the research was not in your “taste”, it may be more natural that you decline the assignment than if your criticisms had to do with objective issues of correctness of the analysis or quality of scholarship. In these latter cases, a quick look at the paper will tell you whether the problems have been addressed. If not, you will save everybody precious time by writing a report.

²However, you will also come across resubmissions that have incorporated none of the comments you made on an earlier version, where not even the typos that you noted have been corrected!

³I used to systematically decline to offer any opinion on a second submission, but I found that editors expressed interest in receiving a report anyway. So, I now usually send an evaluation, including in my cover letter a history of my involvement with the work and a request that my report be given secondary importance. On this point, Hamermersh (1992) differs.

If you do accept the job, you should of course let the associate editor know that it is your second time. There are several ways in which he can use your report. Let him decide. He can certainly put it aside once he knows of your previous involvement with the work; he can use it informally as an additional input into the formation of his own opinion; or he can use it as a regular report.

4. *You are concerned about not being able to meet the deadline suggested by the associate editor.* Being occasionally late by a couple of weeks is not a major problem though. In our discipline, the process is rather slow, as you have probably discovered already when submitting your own work. On the other hand, being *deliberately* slow to avoid receiving additional assignments too soon is not the best use of your knowledge of game theory. Instead, try to do a little better than the average referee; the associate editor and the author will be grateful to you.⁴ If you have received so many refereeing requests that you run the risk of being swamped—this may happen sooner after you graduate than you may think—you certainly have the right to say no. Don't let refereeing work hurt your own research.

On occasions you will have to *postpone* the evaluation of the paper: the author may not have included all of his proofs, or his article may be based on some previous work of his own that is unpublished or not readily available. Get the material you need from the library, a colleague, or the author's web page. In some rare cases, you may have to write to the editor and request that the author make it available to you.

If you decide to decline the assignment, the sooner the better. Therefore, quickly assess the paper when you receive it. It will take you from a few minutes to half an hour to make up your mind. If you let it sit on your desk only to discover several weeks later that you have to turn the job down, you will be responsible for an unnecessary delay. Or out of guilt for this delay, you may do the work anyway, but if you had good reasons to decline it, those reasons will still probably apply; you will end up not writing a good report. Another reason why you should act quickly is if, as discussed earlier, you need additional material from the library that may take time to obtain. You do not want to discover a whole two months after receiving your refereeing

⁴For an idea of what is the normal delays, Hamermesh (1994) is a good source. He also provides detailed information about the sociology of refereeing.

assignment that you absolutely have to consult a related discussion paper by the author to do your job properly.

2 The components of a report

Your report should have the following components, listed here in order of increasing specificity and decreasing importance. They pertain to the substance of the contribution and then to the quality of the exposition:

1. An *overall evaluation of the paper*, with an explicit recommendation to
 - (a) Publish, and for journals that have notes sections, the category in which the work would best fit (a regular article or a note), or
 - (b) Encourage a resubmission, or
 - (c) Reject.

If you recommend publication, you should list what changes you think are necessary for the final version. If you are in favor of inviting a resubmission, again *be very explicit in describing the improvements that you require to endorse publication*. Be realistic and do not accept the paper subject to the author accomplishing some unlikely feat of generalization; if publication would require too much of an improvement, it is safer to recommend rejection. Otherwise you will have to debate whether the progress the author has been able to make constitutes enough of a step in the direction you indicated to justify publication. Even worse, you and the associate editor might end up having to argue with the author whether he has passed the threshold of improvement necessary for publication.

Your recommendation should be based on an assessment of

- (a) The paper's *significance for the field* and
- (b) Its *appropriateness for the journal to which it has been submitted*, both in terms of originality—is the contribution substantial enough?—and in terms of subject matter—is the topic pertinent to the statement of purpose of the journal? There should be a good match between the journal and the paper.

2. Comments about *the results*. You should reflect on their significance: are the assumptions economically relevant and the conclusions interesting? You should also think about the mathematics involved. Are the results correct as stated? Could they be strengthened? Could their proofs be simplified? Why did the author rely on some sophisticated mathematical result whereas all of the previous literature only used elementary techniques? You should ask this sort of questions. Not all of these answers can be explicitly given in the paper, but if you do not find the basic information you need to answer the most important ones, request that the author provide them at the next round, either in his reply to the referees or in his revision. You may end up deciding that some of the material in his reply to you is worth transferring to the paper, or conversely that some developments inserted in the revision in response to your comments do not deserve to be published after all. At the next round, you will have information that may require that you modify the advice you gave on the original version. Be flexible and certainly, acknowledge misconceptions you may have had at first.

If you think the paper is fundamentally flawed, you will find it difficult to motivate yourself to go through the proofs, and indeed, in such a case, you do not have an obligation to check them. On the other hand, you should have checked the proofs of a paper that you recommend for publication. In some cases, going through all of them will require a considerable amount of time, and spot checking may be acceptable and even unavoidable. If in the proofs that you do read, you find too many imperfections (missing quantifications, inequalities going the wrong way, and so on), it is natural for you to become suspicious of the entire work, and in particular not to trust the author with the steps he left to the reader, either because they are “easy” or “similar to steps in some earlier paper”, or “involve tedious calculations”. Insist that in addition to fixing all the errors you noted, he include the complete arguments, either in his revision or in a reply to the referees. Reserve your judgment until then. If there are too many problems, simply reject the paper.

If your spot checking has led to no discovery of flaws, you will feel reasonably confident that the argument is correct in its entirety, especially if it seems intuitively true. Then and again, if going through all the proofs in detail would take you more than a few hours, you may have

an excuse not to do it. But you should tell the associate editor that this is the case.

3. Comments about the *structure of the paper*. Is the structure clear? Should this paragraph or this section be moved or deleted? Should this proof be relegated to an appendix? Should this theorem be presented as a lemma instead, and this proposition as a corollary of the main theorem?
4. Suggestions on how to improve the *expository aspects* of the paper. The author should have done all he can to make his work easy to understand. In formulating your comments, think about the papers that you have found particularly clear or enjoyable in the past, and try to identify the reasons why you felt that way about them.

Should this step in a proof that is taken from some earlier article be reproduced, or is a reference to that work enough? Should numerical examples or figures be added? Should more effort be devoted to placing the paper in the context of the existing literature? Although the general tendency of referees is to ask for deletions, do not hesitate to ask for changes that may cause the paper to become longer if you feel that these additions will make the paper easier to understand, and even if they do not lead to a more general result. If you recommend that the paper be shortened, once again be very specific; authors are always reluctant to eliminate anything. A request that the paper be cut down by half is not precise enough. Give a specific list of the cuts that should be made.

5. Comments about *details of the presentation*. Here, I include whether a formula should be displayed on a separate line and whether a condition should be given a different name; whether the importance of a conclusion should be emphasized by distinct typeface (italics, boldface); whether a paragraph should be cut in two and so forth.

You may want to divide your requests for revisions into two parts:

1. Some requests are non-negotiable: the model should be coherent; there should be no errors in proofs; proper credit should be given to previous contributors. You have a right to demand that the author respect the universal principles of good writing such as simplicity and unity, that

the structure of his paper be clear and his language free of unnecessary technical jargon. When you receive the revision, you also should not accept from the author as an excuse for doing something wrong that that is the way it is done in earlier literature on the subject, or by such and such well-known predecessor.

2. Some of your suggestions are simply for the author to think about and are left to his discretion. You believe that incorporating them in the paper would improve it, but you can also conceive of reasons why the author might disagree with you; you see counterarguments to your proposals, or costs to their implementation. For instance, an additional way of motivating the model may lengthen an already long introduction; presenting a proof for the n -person case instead of the two-person case may obscure an argument that happens to be very transparent in the two-person case; dropping certain regularity conditions may prevent the use of elementary mathematical tools, and so on.

There may be aspects of the paper that you dislike but are quite legitimate. Here you can only suggest changes and try to convince the author of your reasons for wanting them; you cannot insist on them. For instance, the writing style may not be what you prefer; however, you cannot force your own style on the author. For instance, you may have to accept that he present a proof verbally if his goal is to make the argument easily accessible to his less mathematically oriented readers, even if your own preference is for a formal proof. However, if this verbal proof is missing crucial quantifications or other critical information, the readers can only be fooled into believing that they understand, and you can demand that these important elements be made precise.

I recommend that you begin your report with a summary of the article, even though, as associate editor or author, I have not found summaries of much use; indeed, they often amount to little more than a restatement of the abstract, and referees tend to use them to pad their reports. However, *if written in your own words* instead of being lifted from the paper, a summary does have significant benefits:

1. It helps make the report self-contained.
2. It effectively reassures the associated editor and then the author that you have read and understood the paper.

3. You will find the effort required to describe the main contribution of the paper, and here I repeat *in your own words*, very useful in forming your own opinion. The process of summarizing will help you better understand the true importance of the contribution. For instance, you may discover that you disagree with the author on certain aspects of his work, such as the importance of some of his results, and you may end up recommending that he bring out the significance of certain assumptions or provide different interpretations for his findings. Then, you are not summarizing anymore but already evaluating, and you should make this clear: “Although the author presents his work as a contribution to the theory of strategic games, in my view his main result is Proposition 2, which has important implications for the theory of implementation. I suggest that the paper be presented as a contribution to that literature.”

Concerning the style of your report, my most important practical recommendation here is to ***number the various recommendations and requests that you make***. Do not lump several points together. If a request has two parts, call them Part 1 and Part 2. At the next round, the numbering will make it very easy to check whether your suggestions have been taken seriously. You will soon have the experience of receiving revisions from uncooperative authors who have done the bare minimum to address your criticisms while claiming that they have thoroughly dealt with them. By being precise in your demands, you will make it more difficult to escape the changes you think are needed.

What about the evaluation of the revision? First, compare it to the previous version, section by section and paragraph by paragraph. Check how each of your numbered recommendations and requests for changes has been implemented. If the author has not included the reply to the referees that you asked for, or has only paid lip service to your suggestions, refuse to evaluate it again and write to the associate editor to demand that the author complies.

I do not have a recommendation on how long your report should be. A paper that suffers from some fundamental flaw can be very short. The comments on a paper that excited you may take several pages. For such a paper, your assessment itself is only a small part of your report, your suggestions for improvements constituting the bulk of it.

3 The cover letter to the associate editor

Is there a use for a cover letter to the associate editor (apart from “Please find enclosed my report on so-and-so’s paper. Sincerely.”)? Sometimes yes. First you may want to discuss some concern you have about possible conflict of interest. Again, if you feel sufficiently strongly that there is such a conflict, you should decline the job.

Another reason is that you have harsh things to say and you fear being identified. The difficulty of remaining anonymous is all the greater if you need to mention work by yourself that the author failed to properly take into account. Such situations are of course not rare, and they will be more and more frequent as your CV lengthens: as noted earlier, in many cases, the associate editor called upon you as a referee because you have contributed to the literature. Keep in mind though that complete anonymity is impossible, and that one of the first things that many authors try to do when receiving a report is figure out who wrote it. It is something that you have to accept.

If some issue of integrity, such as plagiarism, has to be raised, the cover letter may be where you should do it. On these occasions however, it might be a good idea to first seek the advice of experienced colleagues in your department.

On the other hand, your overall assessment of the paper does not belong in the cover letter. You may want to include a short summary of your report, or phrase in a different way various points that you have made there, but I object to explicit requests of some editors that the recommendation whether to publish appear in the cover letter, and *not* in the report that is sent to the author. When a paper is turned down, the author is entitled to know on what advice the decision was based.

Two or three weeks after you sent your report to the associate editor, and if you have not yet received an acknowledgment, check with his office to make sure that it did not get lost in the mail.

4 General recommendations

4.1 On expressing judgment

Like many first-time referees, you may not feel confident about expressing your subjective opinion about the suitability of publication, but it is impor-

tant that you go beyond an enumeration of objective statements about the paper. Keep in mind the following:

First, the associate editor will also look at the paper, in some cases study it, and there may be other referees. (This, however, is often not the case.)

Subjective judgment has to be part of the evaluation process. Some referees, probably feeling uncomfortable about rejecting a paper for such reasons, end up making poorly substantiated arguments against objective features of the paper to support their recommendation: they emphasize errors in a proof when the imperfections in it (there are always some, and some may invalidate the proof) could be fixed; or they assert that a result is a special case of someone else's previous theorem when it is not, (although it may well be true that the result is closely related to a known theorem). Altogether, they are seriously undermining the usefulness of their reports. If your judgment is that the paper does not deserve publication for not being sufficiently important for the journal, state that as the reason for your advice to reject. Imperfections in proofs do not necessarily invalidate a paper. Ask that they be eliminated. Also, if the relation between the results reported in the paper and previous literature is unclear, demand that it be clarified. By itself, the fact that the author may not have understood this relation well, or may not have presented it well, is not sufficient ground for rejection.

What is very helpful to the associate editor is for you to separate in your report statements of fact from expressions of judgment. Here is an illustration: "The theorem as stated is incorrect. However, it would be correct if preferences were required to be strictly convex" (this is a comment about an objective aspect of the paper whose validity is not a question of judgment). "Unfortunately, when strict convexity is imposed, the enlargement of the class of economies for which the author shows existence of equilibria is not of sufficient interest to justify publication in this journal" (this is your opinion, and other readers could differ).

4.2 When withholding judgment is appropriate

There are situations where the decision to publish seems primarily a matter of general editorial policy. For instance, the paper is much longer than the articles that are commonly published in the journal. Or it deals with a subject that does not seem to match well the statement of purpose of the journal. Or its technical level is significantly higher or lower than that of the standard article published there; perhaps it is more in the nature of a

didactic or conceptual contribution, whereas the emphasis of the journal is on techniques, or conversely. In each of these cases, point that out in your report and let the associate editor and the editor decide. In principle, they have sent you the work because they do not object to the paper being considered, but in fact they may not have looked at it in great detail.

4.3 On your responsibility to the journal and the author

Your main responsibility is to help the journal decide whether to publish, but you should also consider helping the author produce a better paper.

Be generous with your advice. Even if you recommend rejection, your comments will be useful to the author in revising his paper for a different journal. Also, the other referees and the associate editor may disagree with you, and be in favor of publication, so that your comments may be helpful for this journal too. Almost every paper has something that is useful and publishable if properly reformulated and targeted at the right audience. Therefore, and even if you feel that the paper does not deserve to be published in the journal for which you are evaluating it, why not have the author benefit from the efforts you have expended in order to evaluate it? Advise him on how to best bring out what it has to offer for a resubmission somewhere else. After all, you are probably one of the first readers, sometimes the only reader, to have studied the paper so carefully. Admittedly, in some circumstances, and in particular when the author's objective seems to have been to violate all the standards of scholarship, it is difficult to motivate oneself to make suggestions for improvements.

Being generous with your advice does not mean that you have to correct major flaws in his logic, or supply him with the proof of a conjecture he made. Although some of your comments might end up permitting the author important improvements, producing such comments is not your responsibility: you are not a coauthor.

Conversely, very few papers are acceptable without any revision. Be tough. You do a disservice to the journal, and to the field (remember that it is probably your field too) by being too lenient and you are not doing the author any favor by not mentioning *all* of the problems with his work that you noticed. Also, it is easier to be a little tougher than needed at the first round and slightly more permissive at the next round, than lenient at the

first round and then to discover when evaluating the revision that you should have brought up certain issues in your first report that definitely have to be addressed before you can recommend publication.

However, being tough is not the same as being mean. There is no pleasant way to tell an author that his work should be rejected but that is absolutely no reason to be insulting. Do not make disparaging comments about his intelligence.

I have heard the argument that because in most cases the work could be submitted to other journals, we should not worry too much about rejections that should have been acceptances. Certainly, we all make mistakes, but the argument comes dangerously close to condoning sloppy evaluations. Moreover, it is not very convincing given the hierarchy that exists in the way journals are perceived. In some areas, there are no more than three or four possible outlets for a given work, and they are rarely equivalent in terms of the visibility they would give to the work and its author. Also, you may be the only referee and the weight placed on your report may be quite important. Finally, this may already be the author's second or third attempt. For a young author being considered for a promotion, an additional acceptance by a prestigious paper can be critical.

5 The benefits to you of your refereeing work

Take your job seriously. Refereeing appears to be a very unrewarding activity. Essentially only one person, the associate editor, knows who it is that produced this beautiful report. However, the job is part of your service to the profession. It does have a cost, but your turn will come to be the beneficiary of thoughtful reports. And even from the narrow viewpoint of selfish preferences, you will derive some benefit from your efforts; by repeatedly doing a good job, you *are* helping your reputation. Editors talk to each other and to other members of the profession. Quality of refereeing is often mentioned in recommendation letters.

Another benefit of refereeing is that it will help you keep up with the literature. Next to having to present a paper in a class, there is nothing like refereeing it to become really familiar with it. This in-depth work will be useful to you in our own research.

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