

Referee Reports: An Beginner's Guide

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A Note On This Document

It is impossible to create a comprehensive, succinct, clear, and uncontroversial guide to writing referee reports. This handout describes some basic guidelines to help you calibrate your understanding of referee reports, but there is non-trivial disagreement on many of the points contained herein. Talk to your mentors and colleagues to adjust for the idiosyncrasies of this particular document.¹

The Purposes of a Referee Report

Throughout your career, you will be asked to referee papers for journals. The most substantive component in refereeing is writing a referee report. This report serves two purposes:

- A) Conveying a recommendation and rationale to the editors.**
- B) Providing useful feedback to the author of the article.**

These two functions straightforwardly inform the norms for how to properly author a referee report, and for a variety of reasons, you should think of (A) as the primary purpose. One important reason for this is that refereeing is a service you are performing at the journal's request, in service of helping make a determination about whether the paper should be published. Feedback for the author is a valuable side-effect of this process.

The Format of a Referee Report

General Format:

A referee report typically contains a clearly stated recommendation or verdict on whether the paper should be published, a brief summary of the paper's core thesis and argument, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, followed by more detailed comments, concerns or questions relating to/supporting that assessment. Unless the form provided to you indicates that portions of the report will go to the editors only, you should assume that everything you provide may be seen by the author.

Length

There is no fixed standard for length of a referee report. However, there is such a thing as a report that is too long. If your referee report is longer than 4 single spaced pages, it is almost certainly longer than it needs to be. While some authors may appreciate receiving notes that extensive on their paper, it risks obscuring your most important feedback, and making it harder for the editors to understand the core of your assessment.

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The Verdict

A referee report typically begins with a **verdict** or **recommendation**. This component is often for the editors eyes only. Different journals sometimes have their own variant categories (and standards for how strict to be in applying these categories), but the standard categories to familiarize yourself with are:

- 1) **Outright Accept:** For papers that are publishable without alteration other than trivial corrections.
- 2) **Conditional Accept:** For papers where some non-trivial revisions are required, but you are comfortable saying, effectively: if this change is made, the paper would definitely be publishable. If recommended appropriately, evaluating a revision of a conditionally accept does not involve re-refereeing the paper, but merely checking that the needed change has been made.
- 3) **Revise and Resubmit:** Sometimes (and more accurately) labeled “Reject with the possibility of resubmission” this option is for papers that *might* be publishable after substantial revisions. Unlike a conditional acceptance, which says that making said revisions is sufficient for publication, this verdict says that making those changes is sufficient for *reconsideration*.
- 4) **Reject outright:** For papers that are highly unlikely to be publishable, even with major revisions, or perhaps which would have to effectively be different papers entirely, in order to be publishable.

Some Specific Notes On Revise and Resubmit:

- R&R is a tempting verdict many times because it is “nicer” than outright rejection. To prevent yourself from defaulting to R&R, you should ask yourself whether the paper is effectively one substantive round of revisions away from being publishable, before issuing an R&R.
- You will be expected to referee the paper if and when it is resubmitted. It is unfair to the author for you not to make genuine effort to serve as the referee of the resubmission.
- It is inappropriate to introduce criticisms relating to material that was present in the earlier drafts, when refereeing the R&R. You are assessing whether the revision addressed the concerns that were raised in the original report.

The Summary

The next section of a referee report is the summary of the piece. This should be a succinct statement of what the paper is arguing for, and the strategy employed for making that argument. It need not (and typically ought not) extend beyond a single full paragraph. It is good practice to avoid editorializing in the summary itself.

The summary is useful for the editors because journal editors typically do not read every submission themselves. The summary is useful for the author because it is often extremely helpful to see what impression a reader has of the argument made in one’s paper, and whether it differs from how one conceives of the argument they are making in that paper.

The Format of a Referee Report (cont.)

The General Assessment

After summarizing the paper, you should provide an overarching assessment of how well the paper is achieving its goals. These should be bigger picture statements of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. Bear in mind that you are typically trying to communicate effectively to both the editors and the author with this assessment. Clarity is important, but some ways of framing the point may be easier for the author to appreciate than others.

It is also important to illustrate your assessments here. Note that you are not arguing a case in front of a judge. The goal is to help someone understand what you mean, not to prove your point beyond a shadow of a doubt. Editors will typically be deferring to your judgment of the paper, and authors can't respond to your argument. Your goal is to make clear your thinking, and you should write the assessment in a way that does so. This section should be three to six paragraphs, depending on the details of your assessment.

Point-by-Point Feedback

In addition to your big picture assessment of the paper, it is good form to provide some more detailed feedback on the paper. The point here is not to exhaustively offer every piece of feedback you can on the paper, but to provide more detail supporting and expanding on the major elements of your assessment, or raising any issues which were not "big picture" but which merited consideration by the author. Importantly, if forced to choose between returning a report on time, and being thorough here, opt for the former.

Some Important Guidelines

The Value of Refereeing

Service work is systematically undervalued in our profession. No one will adequately thank you for your refereeing service. No one will chastise you for failure to referee a sufficient amount of work. It is unlikely that any professional opportunity or advantage for you will ever hinge on the quality or extent of your refereeing. Nevertheless, it is an essential, and integral part of our system of research publication, as well as the professional assessment and credentialing that derives from it. You should take this work seriously not only because you participate in that system, but because it is, in fact, valuable work.

Do your part, whenever possible, to make sure our discipline is a place where work that is valuable is actually valued.

Anonymity

Most journals in our discipline, at least nominally, practice some form of anonymous review. This typically means that you are assumed not to know the identity of the author, and ought to alert the editor if you do know who authored the piece. The various biases that can be introduced by knowledge of who authored a paper are not ones we are good at recognizing or avoiding, so you should not attempt to learn who authored the paper while you are a referee for it (including if you issue an R&R and may need to re-referee it later).

Some Important Guidelines (cont.)

Conventions of the Genre

You typically are writing a report without knowledge of the author's identity. It can be helpful to introduce a means of reference for the author. A common one is to say "The author (hereafter 'AU')" and then use AU as a name for the author. Relatedly, do not presume to know the gender of the author, use neutral pronouns when writing the report.

Different Journals, Different Standards

Not all journals have the same bar for a paper to clear in order to be considered publishable. In some cases this is due to the types of papers or areas of work that the journal publishes, in other cases this has to do with prestige and selectivity. Sometimes it has to do with the magnitude of the point being made by the submission. Often the editor will give you clear indicators when they want you to use heightened standards. If you are unsure, your best bet is to consult with colleagues or mentors, or, perhaps with the editor.

Timeframe

You will typically be asked if you can get a referee report back in 4-6 weeks, or something similar. Academics are systematically optimistic about what they will be able to get done three to six weeks in the future, and systematically bad about meeting such deadlines.

Refereeing work will generally never be at the top of your priority list. There are many, many things making demands on your limited time and energy, and it is very easy for other things to acquire urgency and centrality that refereeing a paper seems to lack.

With exception for those who are good with time management and distant deadlines: if you cannot realistically and concretely plan to start on the referee report within the week you accept the invitation you should strongly consider declining. **Respond to the request itself as soon as possible**, and if you declined, provide recommendations of at least two other candidate referees to the editor whenever possible. This is how you can do your best to avoid being the bottleneck in the refereeing process.

Referee Hours

One way to try to ensure that you don't let refereeing work fall off your radar is to establish weekly refereeing hours (much like office hours for meeting with students). Just as your office hours get used for any work you wish, unless students show up, in which case, they are the top priority, referee hours are time used for normal work, unless you have refereeing to do, in which case, the refereeing is your top priority. This gives you an excuse to put refereeing on the top of the to do list at a specific time during the week, rather than waiting for the mythical day when you have nothing else to do. Other strategies may work better for you.

Referee Report vs Stealth Co-Authorship

Your job is not to determine how you think the paper ought ideally to have been written, but to assess whether the paper meets the standards for publishing. Do not impose demands on the author for them to write the paper as you would have written it. Ask yourself whether the paper works in its current form, rather than whether it is how you would have done it. If you are unsure, consult with colleagues or mentors.

Referee Report vs Response Paper

Note: This is one of the more controversial pieces of commentary in this document.

One of the most important things for you to distinguish between is objections to the author's position, and reasons to recommend against publishing the paper. The mere existence of objections to a view (or an argument) simply is not a reason against publishing that paper.

If you find yourself making a substantive case against the author's position in your referee report, that actually suggests the paper might well merit publication.

Ask yourself questions like: does this paper advance the debate to which it is contributing, or does it rehash things that have already been well said? Does the paper present a clear argument for the thesis the author purports to be arguing for? Does this paper sufficiently engage with the relevant literature? **Do not** ask yourself questions like: am I personally convinced by this argument? Do I think there are good ways to resist this conclusion?

Tone

The most common form of written feedback graduate students are accustomed to giving and receiving is in the context of a student-teacher relationship. Whether they are getting feedback on their papers from professors, or offering feedback to their students, there is a mutually recognized imbalance of authority in most exchanges. The refereeing system, in contrast, is peer review. Though you do not know who is refereeing your papers, nor, typically, whose papers you are refereeing, you should assume they are at least as established in the profession as you, if not more.

So, modes of communication that are perfectly normal for an instructor to engage in when giving feedback to a student can (and will) come across as rude or presumptuous when read by a putative peer.

If you are going to take the time to give someone feedback on their paper, in order for that time not to be wasted, it is useful to make sure you are doing your best not to come across as condescending or dismissive, in your tone, or else, you will have spent a lot of time and energy on a document that will not be read. (Additionally, there are other very good reasons that one should strive not to be condescending and dismissive of one's peers).

Quantity

You cannot easily directly control the quantity of refereeing you do, especially early on. You need to be invited, and you can't generate invitations on your own. However, you should keep in mind that every paper you submit to a journal needs to be refereed by at least two people, typically, you should attempt, in general to be more of a boon than a drain on the general resources of the referee pool, over the course of your career. This may mean you incur some "referee debt" early on, which you need to pay up on later. Just make sure you do so.