

# The referee's ABC

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## A The refereeing process and how to think about it

- Writing good referee reports requires time and effort and learning how to do it takes even more time. Yet, there are several important reasons why it makes sense to do it: Writing good referee reports helps an editor evaluate a paper and the paper's authors improve their work, but also makes you a better researcher. Why? Because refereeing helps you see how others will view your own work and thus enables you to improve your research process and communication skills. In addition, the editor will form an opinion about your abilities. You want that opinion to be good.
- The less experienced you are and the less you know the related literature, the more work and time writing a decent report will take.
- Important points to keep in mind to provide good referee reports are
  - Be direct and clearly explain a) What is being done in the paper and why, b) What are the key steps to achieve the results, c) How well this is done, d) What you think still needs to be done, e) Evaluate whether the paper has a chance of being publishable.
  - Be as objective, constructive, clear, concise, and well organized as you can. Explain things thoroughly. Avoid repetitions.
  - Suggest possible ways to address the paper's weaknesses but remain open minded that other solutions might be possible.
- Read the paper carefully a minimum of two times. Write out notes for yourself as you read. What is clear, what is unclear, what do you like, what don't you like? As you iterate reading the paper, update your notes. Look at some of the related papers if you do not know them. If the paper does not clearly put its contribution in the context of previous work, or you think that this is not done well or fairly, ask the authors to clarify it. Similarly for the methodology and discussion of findings.
- Make sure you get to the bottom of your ideas. Do not make sweeping and superficial statements.

## B The building blocks

You have to prepare **two separate** documents:

1. A letter to the editor.

2. A referee report with no editorial recommendation.

## C Filling in the building blocks

The **letter to the editor** should a) briefly summarize the paper's main contribution and its strengths and weaknesses and b) express your editorial recommendation and explain its rationale.

The **referee report** should be self-contained in the sense that the editor should understand the main features of the paper based on your report. It should also clearly express all of your points.

- To make your report self-contained, it should, for instance, include the key equations or results that you want to discuss. For example, if you have comments on a particular regression, write out the regression equation. If you are criticizing a point or procedure, explain what is done first. Do not write "The procedure done at page 17 is wrong because..." Rather, state "At page 17 the paper does xyz with the goal of achieving abc. However, in this context, this procedure has the following problems because..."
- Do not use emotional or accusatory language. Do not be mean. Avoid sarcasm and humor. This is not the place to be funny, nor to vent any frustrations you might have regarding the paper and life more in general.
- If the paper is hard to understand or you think is wrong, be factual and respectful.
- Whenever possible, stress the positives and comment on what you like/is novel in the paper.
- Include the following sections:
  1. **Paper summary**
    - Clearly describe the paper's question, methods, and contributions. Just rewriting the paper's abstract is not enough. You should fully understand the paper and explain it well.
  2. **Major comments**
    - Discuss the paper's strengths and weaknesses.
    - Order your comments in order of importance and be systematic in how you expose them. Structure each of your comments well.
    - The reasoning behind your criticism should be clear.
  3. **Minor comments and typos**
    - List typos and mistakes in the paper. This helps the author and also helps show how carefully you have read your paper. For example, here you could describe issues with notation or make suggestions to make a graph clearer.
  4. **Reference list**
    - If you refer to other papers, cite them.