
Being a Good eferee



General Guidelines

- You are performing a valuable service to the profession. It is worth doing well. It also is good for your spirit when you have done something worthwhile for society.
- As soon as you receive a manuscript, make sure it is something you are qualified to judge. If you had agreed to review because of a misleading title and you are not qualified to do the job, return the paper to the editor as soon as possible.
- A referee report consists of two parts:
 - a cover letter with the manuscript number/title and your opinion, and
 - the report itself intended to be transmitted to the author(s).
- E-mail reports are acceptable to most journals. If the editorial office is modern and the journal is well-managed, e-mail reports should be preferred to reports by fax or snail (regular) mail, because snail mail often unduly retards the editorial process and fax reports often are difficult to read because of low resolution and small letters.
- Consider sending the report via e-mail or fax particularly when the editor is on a different continent. International mail is generally less reliable than its domestic counterpart.
- To expedite the refereeing process, you may fax your cover letter and comments. Use high resolution mode, if possible. Just in case, also mail the report.

- If regular mail is chosen, include two or three copies of the report.

Lost the manuscript?

- If you lose the manuscript, apologize and ask the editor to send you another copy. Editors understand that referees who travel frequently lose manuscripts occasionally.
- Do not wait six months to ask for a replacement copy or to tell you never received the manuscript.

If you do not receive the manuscript

- If within four weeks (six weeks for international mail) you do not get the manuscript you agreed to referee, contact the editor. The manuscript is either lost or has not been sent out.

How Does One Become A Referee?

Here is a brief answer in response to this frequently asked question. If you are well established, you will probably get a fair share of articles to referee. If not, there are two ways to become a referee:

- Submit articles to journals. If you write an article on a given subject, editors often assume you are an expert in that area. You might become a referee for papers on similar topics.
- Write a letter to the editors. You can express your willingness to serve as a referee in the areas of your choice. It is a good idea to enclose your curriculum vitae.

1. Do it promptly

- Nothing is more appreciated by the editor and the authors than a prompt referee report. The future career of the author depends on your timely service.

- Do it in 4 to 6 weeks.
- Don't be too prompt! Otherwise, you may get too many requests.
- Prompt and sincere reports are your line of credit. You may need it when you submit a paper to that journal.
- Hard copies are acceptable, but you may e-mail the report.
- If it would take you more than **three months** to complete the review, inform the editor about the delay.

2. Be a fair and constructive referee

- Do not react even if the author attacks your previous contributions.
- Remember the days when you were a tadpole and the referees were gentle to you.
- Focus on the merits, not on the immaturity of the writer. Science advances because the next generation is immature and willing to experiment.
- If you are unfair or sloppy in a referee report, the authors may strike back. The editor will remember the incident, even if the decision is not reversed.
- If it is outside your area of expertise, promptly return the paper.
- If the topic is in your area, studying the paper carefully may lead you to write another paper.

3. Do not plagiarize

- Make sure that you do not plagiarize and steal the ideas in the paper, either consciously or subconsciously.
- For instance, examine the motive of a referee who says to himself: "Hm.... I can do better than this author without making all these stupid mistakes. In fact, I am going to do it."
- If you want to borrow some ideas from the paper, even if it is badly written, make sure you recommend its publication and explain how to revise it. If the author gave enough ideas to you to write a related paper, perhaps you should recommend its publication. Ask the editor when the paper will be published so you can cite it.
- It is unethical to recommend rejection of a paper which gives you creative ideas to write another paper.



Cover Letter

You can reduce untold amounts of frustration you may impose upon authors and help the profession immensely if your cover letter includes:

- the manuscript number (it takes extra time to locate the manuscript without it).
- the title (in case there is an error in the manuscript number, this ensures that the editorial office locates the manuscript).
- your postal address
- your permanent e-mail address
- your summary opinion
 - A. Accept in present form or with slight changes.
 - B. Accept for publication after minor revision, with a suggestion about the length.
 - C. Reconsider for publication after extensive revision.
 - D. Reject, with suggestions for possible submission elsewhere.
- If you did not recommend one of the above, your letter is not well written.

4. Cover letter should be brief, not technical

- Explain the reasons why you recommend that the paper be accepted, rejected, or revised.
- If you would like the editor to accept the paper, your recommendation must be strong.
- If you consistently recommend rejection, then the editor recognizes you are a stingy, overly critical person. Do not assume that the editor will not reveal your identity to the authors. In the long run, there are no secrets.
- If you recommend acceptance of all papers, then the editor knows you are not a discriminating referee.



Report

- Prepare your comments that include your reasons, suggestions, and concerns.
- Comment on the manuscript's originality, clarity, contribution to the literature, and relevance to real world problems.
- Make suggestions about its length, organization, tables, and figures.
- The bottom line is this: If there is an important idea in the paper, make constructive comments (e.g., how to streamline the arguments, what parts should be cut) and help the authors publish the paper.
- If not, say so frankly. There is no point in beating about the bush. If the paper is clearly below the journal standards, detailed comments are unnecessary.
- If you e-mail your report, go to Document Property and delete your name. Your computer may automatically record your name as the author of the report, which may be accidentally transmitted to the author.

5. When you write a negative report, avoid citing your own papers

- Like animals, referees often leave their marks in their reports.
- If you vote against publication, do not cite your papers. Someday the author will become a referee and return the "favor" in the next round.
- The paradox of refereeing is this: When you are a referee, you are the expert. When the other person becomes a referee of your paper, he or she becomes the expert. Circumstances can change.
- Do not say in the report whether the paper should be accepted or rejected. This belongs in the cover letter.
- Be careful with your negative reports. Do not demoralize the authors.
- If you consistently recommend rejection of all papers in your area, people will stop doing research in your area. Soon the topic becomes obsolete and so do you.

- Moreover, soon the negative word gets around and people in the profession might figure out who you are.
- If your published paper is relevant, you may cite it, but it should be done without hinting at the identity of the referee. Do not cite your unpublished papers.

6. Write more than one paragraph

- If you do not, you are not a sincere referee, whether you are famous or not. You should have given the job to others who would devote more time and care to the review.
- Remember the authors have spent several months to years to complete the paper. They deserve more attention.
- Remember the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

7. If there is a new important idea, help the author to publish it

- Your recommendation should be independent of whether the authors have cited your papers or not.
- Do not use the report as an opportunity to force the author to cite your paper if it is tangentially related. This is unethical.
- Divine beings don't write papers (What would be the point?) All papers written by mortals have problems. Your role is not in finding all the faults in the paper.
- If the author can fix the problems with reasonable effort, do not overemphasize the faults. Then recommend publication (in the letter).

8. Write something good, something bad

- Mortals cannot write "perfect" papers. Even the best paper has some problems, and you can ask the author to make improvements.
- You also can say something nice about the worst paper. Remember you are dealing with a person, and your report should not inordinately demoralize the author.
- Remember the days when you were a tadpole before you write a nasty report.

- You can recommend rejection for good reasons and still be kind to the author.

9. Reports should be based on the ideas in the paper

- The first paragraph should be a summary of the contribution. The editor is not knowledgeable in all areas.
- Your evaluation should be based solely on the merit or ideas contained in the paper,
- And not on who wrote the paper.
- Do not make comments demoralizing the author in the report. Thomas Edison's mother was reportedly told by his teacher that Thomas was "addled" and will never amount to anything.
- If there is a writing problem, it should be noted.
- Remember that English is spoken by only 8% of the world population.
- A righteous referee shows no favoritism. There is no justification for favoritism.

10. Avoid pointing out mathematical errors

- Unless you are absolutely sure.
- If you are wrong, the author will protest, and the second referee might agree.
- If you lose credibility, your future papers also are suspect.
- Instead of saying the authors made a mistake, you can say you cannot obtain the same result.
- But if you are certain, say so and explain why.

11. If it is hopeless, say so, and save the authors from further misery

- Don't try to be too nice in order to salvage an unpublishable idea.
- Being a good referee does not mean you try to help everybody publish in that journal.
- Inherent capacities cannot be exceeded. Regardless of your suggestions, the author cannot improve the quality of the paper more than 50%. Remember this when you recommend revision.

- Positive recommendations should be based on the quality of an anticipated revision.

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