

How to be a bad referee?!

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Probably, one may see "bad" referees, those who bother others by an "unfair" judgment. Clearly, the adjective "bad" includes a variety of actions. On the other hand, one may respect a referee who rejects his/her paper, but based on a faithful and effective report. Also, it may happen that a paper was rejected by a referee and recommended for publication by another referee, that is, different referees may have very various views of point on a paper! ... So, the evaluation of the referee process seems to be too complicated.

Peer Review

Without doubt, every paper needs to be refereed in an agreed manner known as peer review. It means scientific evaluation of a paper for publication by at least one dependable, impartial and qualified expert. By the referee process the editors would like to recognize papers of appropriate quality and depth and help the authors to improve their papers as much as possible.

General Method for Refereeing

For refereeing of a paper in mathematics, a general method is that the referee reads the abstract, the introduction and only the statements of theorems to obtain the key ideas. He/she then thinks for about two weeks. If he/she thinks that the results are neither interesting nor significant, then he/she immediately rejects the paper. Otherwise, he/she reads whole paper as well as searches on the internet for more information about related works (for checking the novelty and originality of the paper) and reputation of author(s) (for checking how much he/she should serve energy on the details and for a plagiarism checking). After that he/she may provide a rigorous and constructive report including useful comments, helpful references, possible errata, possible suggestions and possible short or elegant approaches to the presented results. Brian Martin [6] believed that the report should be composed of comments on what's good and what should be done to improve the paper; nothing else!

Checking Details

We should note that a lot of tasks in writing "good papers" are the responsibility of the authors, not the referees. In particular, it is not the responsibility of the referee to find typos in English syntax or even rewrite the paper! A few years ago, I saw an effective 8-pages report for a 4-pages paper! The referee is expected to check the correctness of paper. If he/she does not check details, he should inform

the editor and let him/her of his/her impression about the paper. In other words, if a referee does not have enough time or does not like to follow all details, then he/she should try to have an overall view and "smell" the paper, if he/she is not coryza!

Selection of Referee

Almost everyone regards "proficiency", "responsiveness" and "fair judgment" as the main characters of a "good" referee based on which the editor should select the best referee(s). A referee should not be a family member of any one of authors of the paper, should have accurately and highly cited papers in the field and should do his task as prompt as possible according to the policy mentioned by the editor in an appropriately long report including (i) motivation of the work (ii) main contribution of the paper (iii) comments for the authors or editors (iv) final evaluation; otherwise he/she should decline to review the paper.

Criteria for Evaluation

Some criteria that may be considered by a referee in determining suitability (Poor-Average-Good) of publication of a paper in a specific journal are

- Correctness
- Novelty
- General interest
- Significance
- Originality
- Organization
- Historical overview
- Bibliography
- Language

The first three items are indeed deduced of the fundamental questions "Is it true?", "Is it new?" and "Is it interesting?" to which, Littlewood believed, a referee should respond.

Final Judgment

Based on his/her view, the referee should explicitly recommend one of the following items:

- (Unconditional) Acceptance
- Acceptance with minor revision (the revised paper will be checked by the editor)
- Acceptance with major revision (the revised paper will be checked by the referee)
- Resubmission of a revised paper (the revised paper will be considered as a new submission)
- Rejection

Before submitting the report, it is better the referee asks himself/herself whether he/she would be embarrassed if his/her name were appeared on the report. If the answer is yes, the referee should rewrite the report!

Bad Actions

Loqman the philosopher-the 13th century- being asked from whom he had learnt civility, replied: 'From those who had no civility because what appeared to me unbecoming in them I refrained from doing.'

Following him, you can act as a ``good referee" for a professional journal by knowing how you may be a ``bad referee". Following are some ethical and technical recommendation!

- Check the references and the text of the paper to see whether your own papers are cited approvingly. If yes, then immediately accept the paper.
- Ask one of your students to referee the paper and send the editor the student's report.
- Do not check internet (MathSciNet, Zentralblatt MATH and Google) for being aware of overlapping or similar works.
- Immediately accept a paper if one of the (co)authors is famous, and immediately reject it if none of the (co)authors is famous.
- Read only the portions of the paper in which your name is appeared or your papers are cited therein.
- Be much authoritarian
- Immediately reject the papers whose English are poor without noting to their consequences.
- Do not act against plagiarism.
- Be always an unreliable, vague or nonobjective when writing the referee report.
- Accept any paper for review even if it is out of your area of expertise, you are not interested in its subject or you are not able to referee it in due time.
- Reject a reasonable paper without stating any good reason.
- Use your referee report as an excuse to promote your own research agenda.
- Immediately accept the paper of your friends and immediately reject that of people whom you don't like.
- Do not write your review in a timely manner. Do your referee task as late as possible, and then do a rushed and sloppy job.
- Ask the author(s) to mention your name or to cite your irrelevant papers in their paper.
- Inform the author(s) that you are a referee for his/her (their) paper(s).
- Do not take care of losing the papers sent to you for review.

- Write a letter to the authors and give them some suggestion or comment improving the paper. Ask them to withdraw the paper, add your name to the paper as a coauthor and then submit it to the same or another journal.
- Give rude and unkind comments about the authors (especially beginning mathematicians) and their abilities.
- Pay lots of attention to small, technical faults and no attention to the overall quality and substance of the paper.
- Write to the editors what you do not believe or you act in contrary.
- Circulate the paper to your friends and colleagues.
- Promise to provide a report on a paper within a specified period, but do not respect it.
- Do not give the editor an accurate estimate of when to expect the report if your report will be delayed.
- Promote your own work and demean the work of others.
- Keep a paper for more than six months and then reject it on the basis of general interest, typos or appropriateness.
- Reject a paper containing new ideas which are not standard in the field.

Nothing brings people together like shared suffering, and refereeing is no exception.

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