

Editorial

Some useful tricks of the trade in reviewing articles

Considerable value is added to manuscripts during the reviewing process, due primarily to the “pro bono” contribution by referees. Harry Lonsdale, the founding editor of the “Journal” stated a useful rule of thumb: “About 90% of an editor’s time is spent on 10% of the manuscripts”. I will extend this statement to say that 90% of the papers we ask referees’ to review can each be handled “within a 2–3 h period”. Another 10% “challenging group” may each take 20 h to review properly, but these truly are rare. I do not include truly “bad” papers in this group—such problem papers still can be handled in the 2–3 h as noted. The “challenging group” oppose existing paradigms or contain extensive complex theoretical issues that need more analysis time than the “standard 90%”. I recommend the following refereeing rules of thumb to maximize efficiency. I find these rules help me “keep the decks clean while reviewing 6–8 papers for other journals per month.

1. Allocate a 2 h window of time for the primary review and stick to it. Read the paper “savagely”—underlining and annotating it within an hour or less. This leaves you with plenty of time in the 2 h time block to reconsider your comments and questions and to critique the overall work of the authors. Draft a referee report and within a day or so, review your comments, type the actual report and send it—3 h max!
2. If a particular paper turns out to be one of the “challenging 10%”, move it to the bottom of the stack

and work on another one instead. Contact the editor to request extra time to look at it. In reviewing, I find editors are delighted to be contacted to learn that they will receive a good quality review and when they will receive it.

3. In reviewing a paper, you are not co-authoring the paper. You are primarily pointing out things that are done well, things that are confusing, things that authors have overlooked or not cited and especially things that you have a suspicion “may actually be wrong”. Correcting grammar and spelling is not necessary and extends the time required greatly. We want a technical review; however, if the grammar or writing makes the technical message unclear, flag it.
4. For the “standard 90%” group, useful referee reports tend to be about one to three pages long and begin with an overall assessment of the paper. If the paper is “good” and you have no specific corrections, point out some of the things that are interesting and make the work worthwhile. This lets the editor and author know that you actually read the paper.
5. If the paper has deficiencies that need to be addressed before the editor accepts it, “make an actual list of items, 1, 2, 3, etc.” Clearly tell the editor what the concerns are: e.g. insufficient referencing of the work of others, insufficient description of procedures to allow the work to be reproduced, poor assumptions or theoretical bases for what was done, etc.

6. If you cannot complete a “standard” paper in 2 h using the above mentioned approach, it probably will need to be rejected or significantly rewritten. Provide the editor with guidance to assist in deciding which of these categories the paper belongs to. Lack of novelty, actual technical errors and obtuse reasoning not based on the scientific method are valid reasons to recommend rejection.

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