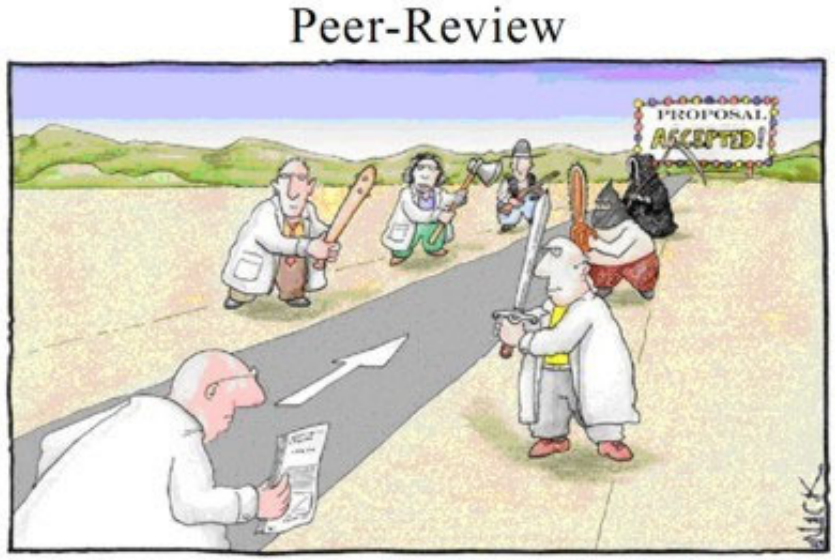
Writing and Responding to Referee Reports



References:

"How to reply to referees' comments when submitting manuscripts for publication", H.C. Williams, *J. Amer. Acad. Dermat.* **51**, 79 (2004).

How to Write a Referee Report

From Physical Review Letters:

ADVICE TO REFEREES

Physical Review Letters aims to publish papers that keep broadly interested physicists well informed on vital current research. Papers are expected to satisfy criteria of **validity**, **importance**, and broad **interest**. We seek your guidance regarding how well this paper meets these criteria, as revealed by your answers to the questions which appear below.

Your assessment is particularly important with regard to scientific soundness. If you advise the editors that the paper is unacceptable for scientific reasons, it will not be published without further review. Your advice on the more subjective aspects is also requested. These aspects require a subjective judgment by you and a subjective editorial decision. Amplification of your point of view is therefore important. It is essential to cite references if the work is judged not new.

- **VALIDITY**
  Is the work scientifically sound? If not, do you believe the paper can be revised to correct the scientific defects you find?
- **IMPORTANCE**
  Does the manuscript report substantial research? Is the conclusion very important to the field to which it pertains? Is the research at the forefront of a rapidly changing field? Will the work have a significant impact on future research?
- **INTEREST**
  Papers are of broad interest if they report a substantial advance in a subfield of physics or if they have significant implications across subfield boundaries. Is this paper of broad interest?

In some cases, the apparent importance and interest of a manuscript may be enhanced by stylistic revision. We welcome your suggestions and ask that you consider the following questions:

> Is there an introduction which indicates, to the interested nonspecialist reader, the basic physics issues addressed, and the primary achievements? Is the research placed in the proper context, e.g., are the references appropriate and adequately discussed? Are assumptions clearly presented? Is unnecessary jargon avoided? Do the title and abstract stand alone? Are tables and figures, if any, well used and effectively presented?

The fundamental criteria for publication are validity, importance, and interest. Over the years, various statements of criteria have been published, and many of these retain value if they are regarded as secondary to the fundamental criteria. With that in mind, we ask that you consider the following remarks:

> The focus of the journal is basic physics, and publishable Letters should conform to this emphasis. However, it is not our intent to exclude texts that might also contain important results in, for example, applied physics, biological physics, etc.
>
> The journal does not accept marginal extensions of previously published work. For example, when the discovery of a new effect in one system is published, reports of similar explorations in other systems are usually considered inappropriate for the journal's pages, as are confirmations of previous results.
>
> The journal declines publication of papers which appear to parcel research results into fragments for multiple publication.
>
> We welcome speculative ideas provided that their consequences and ramifications have been sufficiently well considered and, to the extent possible, have been spelled out.
>
> We hold the authors responsible for demonstrating adequate awareness of published prior research and for proper acknowledgment of colleagues. We invite the referees' comments on these issues, but we do not hold referees responsible for deficiencies, nor does the journal accept responsibility for them.

Journal editors have established criteria for the suitability of publications in their journals

These criteria vary and generally depend on the nature of the journal's readership

The role of the referee (you!) is to provide an opinion as to whether the paper satisfies the stated criteria of the journal for publication!

Refereeing vs. Reading Scientific Papers

When you read a refereed journal article you are more likely to presume that the details of the experiment or calculation are correct, and that the research is original and significant (although you are likely to form your own impressions about this, of course!)

As a referee, your job is to carefully evaluate the originality and significance of the work, the validity of the experiments/calculation, and the reasonableness of the conclusions drawn

In other words, no presumptions should be made about the quality of the work when you're serving as a referee…you should read the paper with an open and critical mind

The Essential Components of a Good Referee Report

(1). Briefly summarize the main points of the paper

- to educate the editor
- to convince the editor and other referees that you've actually read the paper (no joke!)

(2). Provide brief evaluations of the different criteria provided by the journal

These generally include:

(i) the quality/appropriateness of the methodologies and techniques used in the research

(ii) the quality of the logical arguments made to arrive at the key conclusions of the paper

(iii) the clarity of the presentation

The Essential Components of a Good Referee Report

(3). Provide a recommendation for or against publication

Your recommendation can be equivocal if you provide sufficient discussion of the pros and cons of publication

If you do recommend rejecting a paper, you can suggest alternate journals to which the paper might be more appropriately submitted

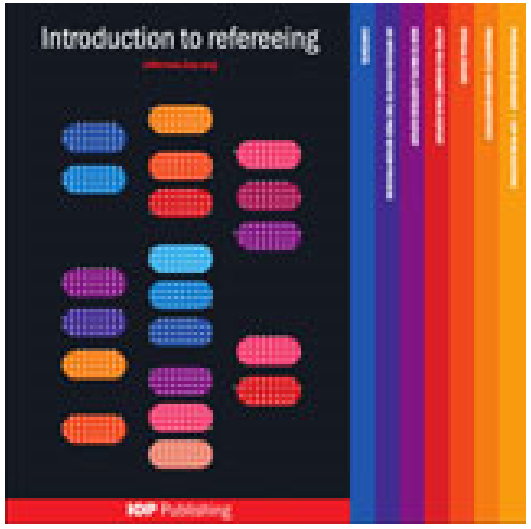
(4). List essential and suggested changes to the paper

This is an important component of a report even if you recommend rejecting the paper, as your suggestions might allow the paper to be published elsewhere, or even in the same journal after revision!

For More Guidance

For your future reference, the Institute of Physics has a great online resource on Introduction to Refereeing, which deals with all aspects of the refereeing process, including the ethics of refereeing!

http://images.iop.org/referees/ *



*Adobe Flash must be enabled in your browser to read this file. If you have trouble, go to http://download.iop.org/lat/supportMaterials/introduction_to_refereeing_english.pdf.

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

A Bad Example

ELSEVIER

The Journal of Systems and Software 54 (2000) 1

www.elsevier.com/locate/jss

Editor's Corner

A letter from the frustrated author of a journal paper

Editor's Note: It seems appropriate, in this issue of JSS containing the findings of our annual Top Scholars/Institutions study, to pay tribute to the persistent authors who make a journal like this, and a study like that, possible. In their honor, we dedicate the following humorous, anonymously-authored, letter!

Dear Sir, Madame, or Other:

Enclosed is our latest version of Ms. #1996-02-22-RRRRR, that is the re-re-re-revised revision of our paper. Choke on it. We have again rewritten the entire manuscript from start to finish. We even changed the g-d-running head! Hopefully, we have suffered enough now to satisfy even you and the bloodthirsty reviewers.

I shall skip the usual point-by-point description of every single change we made in response to the critiques. After all, it is fairly clear that your anonymous reviewers are less interested in the details of scientific procedure than in working out their personality problems and sexual frustrations by seeking some kind of demented glee in the sadistic and arbitrary exercise of tyrannical power over hapless authors like ourselves who happen to fall into their clutches. We do understand that, in view of the misanthropic psychopaths you have on your editorial board, you need to keep sending them papers, for if they were not reviewing manuscripts they would probably be out mugging little old ladies or clubbing baby seals to death. Still, from this batch of reviewers, C was clearly the most hostile, and we request that you not ask him to review this revision. Indeed, we have mailed letter bombs to four or five people we suspected of being reviewer C, so if you send the manuscript back to them, the review process could be unduly delayed.

What I Learned as a Divisional Editor (SLC)

My general impressions of peer review from this experience:

-- I felt that the vast majority of reviewers were trying to help the authors, although the authors often did not appreciate this fact

-- I felt that the reviewer critiques were generally reflective of the issues typical readers would probably have with the paper

-- I often agreed with reviewers comments about problems with the papers, but authors sometimes ignored critiques that might have helped them improve the paper at earlier stages of peer review

What I Learned as an Assistant Editor (cme)

Strategic mistakes to avoid as an author:

-- Failure to consider the readership of the journal to which you're submitting—interests and level of technical knowledge

-- Poor choice of title

-- Poorly written abstract

-- Inadequate introduction/references

-- Errors in technical emphasis/failure to position important information strategically

-- Failure to obtain constructive criticism from colleagues prior to submission

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

1. **Take the referee responses seriously…they may have a point!**

When reviewing both the referee reports and author responses, I often found I agreed with the referees, even when the authors vehemently objected, particularly on questions related to the **broad impact** and **importance** of the work.

-- Did you make your main points clearly enough?

-- Did your introduction emphasize the significance of your work relative to existing results?

Worth reading: "How to reply to referees' comments when submitting manuscripts for publication", H.C. Williams, *J. Amer. Acad. Dermat.* 51, 79 (2004).

"Overcoming the Myths of the Review Process and Getting Your Paper Ready for Publication," P.V. Kamat, et al., *J. Phys. Chem. Lett.* **5**, 896-899 (2014).
See especially Table I. Top Ten Unproductive Author Responses.

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

2. **Respond to referee reports completely**

Respond to all referee comments, even if you don't plan to make changes, no matter how annoying you think the comments are:

-- Clearly number your responses, using headings such as "Reviewer 1", then "Comment 1", then "Response", then "Changes Made"

-- Thank the referees for useful or complimentary comments

Responding completely to the referee reports in this way helps you

-- Think more clearly about the referee remarks

-- Show the referees and editors that you took the comments seriously

-- Separate different referee comments that may be mixed together in the referee reports

Top Ten Unproductive Author Responses*

The Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters

Table 1. Top Ten Unproductive Author Responses

	Author's Response to Editor	Editor's Reaction to Author's Response
1	The reviewer selected by the editor to review our paper is not an expert.	The reviewer is sometimes the one that was suggested as a preferred reviewer.
2	The editor chose a wrong reviewer. This reviewer has a strong bias towards our work.	The reviewers are selected from a general pool of physical chemists and chemical physicists. Editors attempt to avoid reviewers with obvious conflicts of interest, either pro or con. Furthermore, authors are encouraged in their submission cover letter to inform editors of any potential conflicts with researchers in their field.
3	The reviewer misunderstood our experiments/results.	If the reviewer misunderstood the results, the author needs to explain the results more clearly. Revising the text or presenting the results in a different format may help resolve the misunderstanding.
4	The reviewer is wrong, and their comment does not deserve an explanation.	This does not provide any useful information in terms of why the reviewer is wrong or mistaken. Explain in detailed scientific terms what is incorrect.
5	Only one reviewer has recommended rejection while the other reviewers have recommended revision. Why did you reject my paper?	Recommendations of the reviewers regarding publication are just that: recommendations. The final decision is made by the editor, based on both the recommendations and content of the reviews, as well as his/her own independent evaluation of the manuscript.
6	Similar papers have been published in your journal before. Why wasn't mine?	This can be an indication that the paper lacks novelty. Mature topics may not necessitate urgent processing.
7	I cannot find my coauthor's email. I do not know where he/she is.	All coauthors are required to read and approve the manuscript prior to submission. If a coauthor is deceased, sick, or has disappeared from the scientific scene, include a detailed explanation of why the coauthor cannot be contacted.
8	We cannot provide additional experimental/computational results since the postdoc/student has left our laboratory.	Another researcher will need to be placed on the project. Incomplete studies should not and cannot be published.
9	We have explained (or will explain) the requested/required results in a future paper.	Deliberate splitting of the work into two papers that cannot each stand independently is not considered an acceptable practice. One strong paper typically makes a better impact than two weak or partial papers.
10	I am not a native English speaker. You should not expect me to write well.	An effective and grammatically correct presentation is required since reviewers cannot comprehend and, therefore, adequately evaluate poorly written and/or poorly composed papers. Papers published in an English language journal must be written in proper English. Authors can seek assistance from language editing services or native English speakers to help address language difficulties.

P.V. Kamat et al., *J. Phys. Chem. Lett.* **5**, 896–899 (2014).

Example of a detailed, clear response to the referee:

Referee A Comment 2(i) *"what are the analogous discrete configurations in the case of…."*

Response: We thank the referee for this question, which helps us clarify our paper. The discrete molecular configurations represented by the pseudo-spin variable are believed to be different…. This interpretation is supported by…

Changes made in response to comment: Although we did mention this in paragraph 3 of the original manuscript, we have made this association more explicit by adding…

Referee A Comment 2(ii) *"I would say that the 'mode softening' (fig 1b) is not that soft. In standard cases, the energy of the phonon decreases by a few meV. In the present case (fig 1), the phonon energy decreases by about 1 meV between room and base temperature."*

Response: With all due respect to the referee, I don't think this criticism is justified. First, we don't make any claims that the observed mode softening is particularly dramatic…

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

3. **Respond to referee reports politely**

You will be more persuasive – not only to the original referee, but also to the editor and other referees that might review your paper later – if you respond to referee remarks politely and rationally.

Real Example of a Bad Referee-Author Exchange:

First Referee Response:

"I cannot recommend this paper for publication in Phys. Rev. Lett. because essentially all the results in the paper have been published before.

The authors should be applauded for their courage to show Fig. 4 in the paper. This figure shows what has been known for a long time."

Author Response:

"We do not understand why the referee cited two currently inconsistent results as his main ground for the rejection of the present paper.

Our result is not equivalent to the previous study. The referee ignored the fact that the previous study observed behavior different from ours. Such comments are misleading."

Second Referee Response:

"In the first round I refrained from using the term 'misleading', but since the authors accused me of being 'misleading', they left me no choice:

The authors did not cite 3 recent papers. These papers deal with almost the same subject and report essentially the same result. The authors did not cite these papers on purpose, with a clear intention to mislead the editor, the referees, and the readers, as to the novelty of their work."

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

3. **Respond to referee reports politely**

You will be more persuasive – not only to the original referee, but also to the editor and other referees that might review your paper later – if you respond to referee remarks politely and rationally.

-- Avoid antagonizing phrases, such as “we completely disagree with…”, “the referee obviously doesn’t know the field”, “the referee obviously didn’t read the paper carefully”, etc.

-- Try more conciliatory phrases, such as “we agree with the referee, however…”, “with all due respect to the reviewer, we don’t believe this point is correct”, “we thank the referee for making this suggestion, we have made the following changes…”

-- Even if the referee uses impolite or antagonistic language, respond collegially and rationally. The author/referee exchange will be evaluated by editors and other referees, and you’ll come across as the rational and persuasive person in the exchange.

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

4. **Provide evidence to support your responses**

Don't just dismiss referee comments with a terse "we disagree", in your response letter. Support your responses to the referees the same way you would support the scientific arguments in your paper, with logic and concrete evidence

-- Provide evidence presented in the paper. Consider whether you made your original point clearly enough in the first submission.

-- Provide additional evidence – in both the response letter and the paper – to support your claim

-- Sprinkle your response letter to the editor with positive remarks on your paper from the referees

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

1. **The terse negative referee report with little explanation or justification**

If you must get a negative referee report, this is a "good" kind of negative report to get.

- Respond politely to the report by reiterating your justifications for publishing.
- Point out to the editor in "Comments intended solely for the editor" that the referee didn't justify the negative evaluation, making it difficult for you to respond.

2. **Two referees of your paper give conflicting reports**

This is another "good" kind of negative report to get.

- Respond politely and completely to the negative referee's critiques.
- Mention in your response letter the supportive views of the "positive" referee
- Point out to the editor in "Comments intended solely for the editor" that the "positive" referee didn't share the negative views of the "negative" referee.
- However, make sure the critical comments of the "negative" referee don't have some merit, because sometimes these comments are justified and can help you improve your paper!

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

3. **The referee offers distinctly different criticisms in different rounds of the review process**

Such "moving target" reviews can be very frustrating, however…

- Don't assume the referee is out to get you…maybe they just saw new problems after reading your revised manuscript. Make sure the new critical comments don't have some merit.
- Politely and thoroughly respond to the new comments, making suitable changes to the manuscript if appropriate.
- If you don't agree with the new negative comments, point out to the editor in "Comments intended solely for the editor" that the referee is raising new criticisms not raised in the first-round review and why you disagree with those critiques. Point it out if additional referees didn't raise the same criticisms.

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

4. **The referee missed some "obvious" points you thought you made**

Don't assume the referee is just an idiot and/or didn't read your paper

- Consider the possibility that you didn't make your points clearly enough
- Ask a trusted colleague to read the paper to see if you can make any points more clearly
- Respond politely to the referee, indicating how you clarified your points in the revised manuscript

5. **The referee is just wrong**

Address the criticisms politely but with logic and supporting evidence

- Again, consider the possibility that you didn't make your points clearly enough or didn't provide enough supporting evidence
- At this point, you are probably trying to convince the editor and future referees that you're right, so be collegial and persuasive and avoid criticizing the negative referee

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

6. **The referee is rude**

Don't respond in kind.

- Respond to the criticisms politely and completely…ignore rude comments
- Again, in this case you are trying to convince the editor and future referees that you're right, and when the editor and other referees review the record, you want them to see you as the collegial and rational one
- Point out to the editor in "Comments intended solely for the editor" that you found the rude comments inappropriate.

Summary: Responding to Referee Reports

Take the referee comments seriously: they are probably trying to help and their uncertainties about your paper may indicate weaknesses in your presentation

Respond to referee comments politely and completely: persuasive logical argumentation with evidence is far more effective than angry retorts when responding to referee comments.

Make sure your Introduction, Abstract, and Conclusions convey the motivation for and punchline of your work: this is important not just for the external reviewers, but also for the internal editorial review process

Questions? slcooper@Illinois.edu