

A Guide to Peer-Review

A handout created by Matthew Baxendale, as part of the 2015 CEU Philosophy R&P Lab sessions. (Source: <https://ceurplab.wordpress.com/>).

The primary purpose of a peer-review is to recommend either the acceptance, revise and resubmit, or rejection of a paper to the editor of a journal. However, a good peer-review should make this recommendation on the basis of comments and constructive criticism that will concurrently help the author of the paper develop the central argument and ideas of the paper. Taking part in the peer-review process is not only a service that is expected within the academic community, it is also a good opportunity to keep up-to-date with contemporary research and literature.

Before you get started

- Make sure you are comfortable enough with the topic area to review the paper.
- Make sure that there are no conflicts of interest, most importantly that you cannot identify the author of the paper.
- Familiarise yourself with the requirements of the journal, what are their goals, scope, and target audience (or for the issue, if it is a special issue).

The basic structure of a Peer-Review

Often a peer-review consists in writing a report based on the submitted paper.

- (1) It is always a good idea to begin by outlining the basic structure of the main argument of the paper. This shows you understand the author's intentions in the paper and gives you a clear basis to begin discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the argument. It also shows to both the editor and the author that you've read and understand the paper. Additionally, if the argument you present is, in fact, not what the author intended, this might go to show that the author needs to present their argument more clearly and precisely.
- (2) You might then outline some of the strengths of the paper. Your report is a recommendation to the editor, not a final verdict on the paper, so highlighting the strengths of the paper is important in giving a balanced recommendation.
- (3) Next you need to outline the weakness of the paper. This is the most important section for giving constructive and precise criticism. Take each criticism in turn and discuss how this point relates to the overall impact of the author's argument. Perhaps there is an obvious counter-example available to one of the author's points. Perhaps a point seems interesting but needs further development to be convincing. There could be an inconsistency in their overall line of approach, maybe the author stated that they would address issues that they did not, or maybe there are issues that they really need to address in order to make the argument convincing.
- (4) Conclude by summarising your points, on the basis of which provide your recommendation.

Key Questions to Consider

You should be making your recommendation and structuring your report based on some key questions:

- Is the argument clear, coherent, and precise?
- Does the author(s) do what they stated they would in the introduction to the paper, do you feel convinced that their proposed task has been completed?
- Is the argument well motivated and well defended?
- Do the authors make reference to key literature in the topic area that is salient to their own argument?
- Does the argument, or position of the paper, fill (or perhaps create) a gap in the literature?
- Is the paper well-structured and well formulated, is it clear to follow?
- Where could the weaknesses in the argument be, could there be obvious counter-examples or clear cut objections to some of the author's main points? If so, what are they?

Some General 'dos' and 'do not's' for Peer-Review

- In general it is not advisable to spend time on minor stylistic or grammatical issues – your job is not that of the copy-editor.
- The journal (or target publication more generally) is very important to the review of the paper, particularly to the scope, accessibility, and literature included. Rejecting a paper, or suggesting revisions may not merely be because of the strength of the argument, considerations of the appropriateness of the paper for the journal are also important.
- Don't merely list objections, you need to explain why these objections make the paper unpublishable, or why these objections are problematic for the paper as a whole.
- Tone is important! If you go into academia you will have papers rejected or subject to criticism, there is an important distinction between being critical and being offensive. Imagine you are receiving the report you are currently writing – would you feel that the report falls on the right side of that distinction? Be supportive and constructive in your criticism.

Additional Resources

Berk, J., Harvey, R., and Hirshleifer, D. (2015). 'Preparing a Referee Report: Guidelines and Perspectives', Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2547191> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2547191>

Caligiuri, P. & Thomas, D. (2013). 'From the Editors: How to write a high-quality review', *Journal of International Business Studies* 44: 547-553

Lucey, B. (2013). 'Ten Tips from an Editor on Undertaking Academic Peer Review for Journals', Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2331281> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2331281>

Sometimes publishers have guidelines on their websites about what they expect from peer-reviewers. Elsevier's is particularly good, including an outline of the structure of the report: <http://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/how-to-conduct-a-review#youve-been-asked-to-review>