How I Referee

Andrew Little

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Background I referee around 25 papers a year; roughly half are primarily formal theory and half are primarily empirical, with maybe a third purporting to make a serious contribution on both ends. This probably puts me on the high end, but bear in mind that most refereeing is done by people who do lots of refereeing. About 90-95% of my reviewing is for political science journals, but I referee a bit for economics journals as well.

Process Given other obligations, I need to make the process as efficient as possible. Here I lay out a process which has helped me do reviews faster, both to provide guidance to those new at refereeing and to give some insight into what those on the other side of the process are thinking.

1. I read the introduction and skim through the rest of the paper, primarily asking myself the question (Q1) "assuming they get everything right, could the paper plausibly be a good enough for this journal?" For empirical papers, the questions I am asking myself are "Are the data new / interesting / appropriate for the question? Do the findings give us different (or more precise) beliefs about a question of interest? If the authors are making a causal claim, is the research design reasonable? Is it, to my knowledge, different than past work on the topic?" For theory papers, I am asking related questions like "Broadly speaking, is there an interesting argument? Is there a theoretical innovation, either in thinking about a question/empirical finding in a different way, or on the technical front? Does the model seem to plausibly deliver on what it promises?"

   - About 50% of the time, the answer to Q1 is "no". In this case, I generally don't give the whole paper a very close read. If it is clearly majorly flawed or narrow I just quickly write up a review explaining why I think the paper is not high enough quality for the journal, and provide a handful of concrete suggestions for how to improve the manuscript/what outlet might be more appropriate. Often for top journals the paper

looks reasonable but just not enough for the outlet in question. In this case I typically give a moderately close read so I can give some suggestions to the authors about how to improve the paper and where to send it.

2. If the answer to Q1 is "maybe" or "yes" I give the post-lit review section a closer read, primarily asking myself (Q2) "am I persuaded by the evidence (or, for theory papers, the model)". At this stage what shows up in the intro/lit review doesn't have a huge impact on my evaluation. There is a continuum of possible outcomes here, but they can broadly be lumped into:

   - About 50% of the time (conditional on the answer to Q1 not being "maybe" or "yes), the answer to this is "no". This could mean that my initial reaction to "could this be good enough" was "maybe", and upon a closer read I think that (even if the analysis is sound) the answer is actually no. If my answer to Q1 was "yes", for an empirical paper, this usually means finding some major problem in the research design or what inferences we can draw from the data/analysis. For a theory paper, this is typically because the model does not really support the authors' assertions, or the model is clearly fragile to a realistic perturbation, or is just not solved properly. Most of the time, from this point I will either write a report suggesting rejection which primarily focuses on why I am not convinced by the evidence/model. Occasionally if I see a way to fix the problems which would plausibly support the authors' claims, or if I think a weaker version of the authors' versions of the claims is still worthy of publication in the journal, I'll recommend an R&R, say why I think there are major problems but the potential is high enough/the analysis is fixable enough, and suggest the path forward.

   - Around 40% of the time (conditional on passing Q1), the answer to Q2 is "kind of." If I see some moderate problems but they generally seem fixable either with some changes to the analysis or softening of claims, this typically leads to an R&R recommendation where I say why I think a moderate revision would be a good contribution to the journal, and make my suggestions for improvement

   - About 10% of the time (conditional on passing Q1), the answer to Q2 is an unqualified "yes". If a paper is already convincing, I make sure to make this case to the editors, and typically make some minor suggestions for improvement.

A few other notes:

- I rarely read much in the appendix of an initial submission. For empirical papers I do this only if there is something which I am curious about or think will affect my final decision. For theory papers I only do this if I don't follow the logic of a result from the main text, and think that whether the claim is correct will be pivotal in my final decision. (For theory papers, I typically read appendices/proofs at the R&R stage. I'm not a particularly fast reader of math, and if I were to carefully check the proofs of every submission I review it would approximately triple the amount of time it takes me.)

- I don't try super hard to hide my identity as a referee, but try and not make it too obvious. I'll sometimes make reference to my work, though almost always "garble" this by pointing to other papers that make a related point or could also be cited for the same reason.

- I pretty frequently know the identity of the author when refereeing, and try to not let that bias my evaluation. On occasion I will look up the identity of an author after deciding the main recommendation but before finishing up the report. Typically this is because I try to be a bit softer/more encouraging to junior authors, and sometimes the identity of the author will affect how I discuss related work.

Implications I suspect that others follow a generally similar workflow. Here are some implications to think about when writing papers and reacting to referee reports:

- A lot of other sources say this too, but it bears repeating: referees are busy and rushed, and you have to write in a way that a busy and rushed person knows what you are doing and is persuaded to read carefully.

- Writing an introduction that convinces the reader that the paper deserves to be in the journal is important not only for getting positive outcomes, but for getting the referee to give the paper a careful read in the first place. *Occasionally* I'll see a paper which undersells itself in the introduction and is in fact good enough for the journal, but you can't put the onus on the referees to figure out how to package the paper. Overselling the paper in the introduction can lead to referee annoyance (and, if it makes it into the final version, is intellectually problematic), but from an instrumental perspective is generally not as bad than the opposite mistake at the draft stage.

- It is tempting to point to one incorrect claim that a referee made and say "this sucks, I got rejected because the jerk R2 doesn't understand the method/misread the argument/didn't read footnote 12". There are three related reasons why this is often a bad reaction. First,

it is extremely rare that one critique of an article is pivotal: usually there are several things going wrong in papers I recommend rejecting. Second, when a paper is clearly flawed, the referees are less likely to read even the whole main text carefully (let alone the footnotes). Third, if the referees missed something, there is a good chance that it wasn't clear enough in the manuscript. Of course referees are sometimes derelict in their duty, but in general when referees give incorrect critiques you share some of the blame and that isn't why the paper was rejected anyways.

- Trying to figure out the identity of referees is almost always a waste of mental energy. I have heard from editors that when people think they know the identity of referees, they are frequently if not usually wrong. Just because a mean referee cites an author a lot, it does not mean they wrote the report: they may be a student/friend/colleague of the person they cite, they may be trying to make that person look like a jerk, etc. In fact, when writing a mean report, most of us are probably *less* likely to self-cite.