

# Academic Writing 1 for Accounting, Economics & Psychology

## Session 8: Referee Reports

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# Agenda

1 Receiving Referee Reports

2 Writing Referee Reports

## From an author's perspective

- Congratulations! Submission is a key step towards publication.
- A submitted paper is better than a perfect paper.

→ What will happen next?

## If rejected...

- Do not get discouraged! Most papers are rejected, often multiple times.  
Akerlof's "The Market for Lemons", for which he received the Nobel Prize, was rejected by the AER, RES and JPE (by the first two: desk rejected), before it was published in the QJE.
- If you get referee reports, read them carefully and consider how much to change
  - ▶ You might get the same referee next time.
  - ▶ Some comments will genuinely improve the paper.
  - ▶ But: Comments are highly idiosyncratic—you rarely get the same comments multiple times.
  - ▶ Always make changes when comments indicate misunderstandings.
  - ▶ You lose time when changing too much.
- Carefully read the editor's letter. Does it have implications for your publication strategy (i.e. where to try next)?

## If R&R...

- Congratulations! Celebrate! This was the best possible outcome!

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- Carefully read the editor letter. She will decide—do exactly as she says!
- Then read the referee reports. Try to understand each point.
  - ▶ What does the referee want me to do: Change an expression only? Do some additional robustness checks?
  - ▶ If you're unsure, discuss with advisor and/or colleagues.
  - ▶ If you really do not understand a major point, you can contact the editor. This should be the exception.
- Make a plan what to do during revision. Sometime this plan can be discussed with the editor (if so, he will tell you in his letter).

## R&R: Responding to Referees

- Answer each comment (!) very carefully, no matter whether you agree (if you don't agree describe in detail why!). You can only get a pass on 1-2 items (much better: do everything!)
- Give the referee the feeling you take all her concerns seriously, thank for constructive comments.
- Try to improve your paper.
- Make a change *in the paper* for each comment, do not only answer it in your response letter.

# Resubmission after an R&R

- Your response letter comprises
  - ① A letter to the editor (thanking for the opportunity to revise your paper); potentially response to editor's own comments.
  - ② A reply letter, separately to each reviewer
    - ★ First part common to all referees, summarizing main changes
    - ★ Second part: Detailed response to each comment
- Since an R&R is the best you can get, a bad or insufficient reply letter will kill your paper!
- Sometimes an individual reply letter has > 10 pages!



# Example Response Letter

D. Langenmayr, xy: "Title" (JPUBE-D-19-00xxx)  
Revised Version, June 2020

## Response to Reviewer 2

### A. Outline of Changes in the Revised Version

In response to the very helpful and constructive comments by the two reviewers and the editor, we have thoroughly revised the paper. We first outline the main changes and then respond in detail to the comments made by each reviewer and the editor.

- 1 **Model.** In response to comments by the Editor and Reviewer 1, we have ...
- 2 **General changes to empirical analyses.** Following suggestions by Reviewer 1 and 2, we carried out several heterogeneity analyses ...
- 3 ...

### B. Detailed Response to Reviewer 2

In the following, we explain how we have dealt with each individual comment. For easier reference, we have numbered the comments and first reiterate the comment in italics before replying to it.

- 1 *With the current fixed effect structure, the instrument may be correlated with omitted spatial patterns ...*  
Thank you very much for this suggestion. We agree that the instrument could correlate with omitted spatial patterns within states. To address this, we follow your suggestion and have added county-year fixed effects in all specifications of the revised version. We find...
- 2 ...

## Some General Thoughts

- The system is not against you (as European/junior/etc.), it's just noisy.
- Good writing can reduce the noise.
- If your reviewer didn't understand you, you probably did not communicate well enough.
- Respect reviewers and take them seriously.
- Review a lot yourself.
- Don't take it personally! They evaluate your paper, not you as a person!

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## What to do?

- Don't panic! You are qualified to write this report, otherwise editor wouldn't ask.
- Accept or decline quickly. As a junior, you should accept all requests from journals where you might want to publish or when you know the editor (or want her to know you). Perhaps more to get practice and get additional insights into the publication process.
- If you have a potential conflict of interest, or have already reviewed the paper for a different journal, contact the editor before accepting to write the report.
- If you stay in academia, you will at some point write 10-20 reports a year.
- Return the report in time. Plan enough time: A report may take anything between a couple hours up to two or three days.

# Letter to the Editor

- Confidential—only the editor will read it
- Briefly summarize the paper and your judgement. Major problems? Sufficient contribution?
- Give an explicit recommendation (accept/(major or minor)revision/reject). Your recommendation should depend on whether you think that the author can address your main points in one round of revision.
- Your recommendation should be in line with the tone of your report.

# Referee Report

- Standard parts:
  - ① Summary
  - ② Assessment
  - ③ Comments
- Make clear if something is required for publication, or just a suggestion.
- If your vote is for rejection, list only the most important issues.
- Apply the golden rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- If you get the other reports/decision letter, try to learn from them.

# Different Reviewer “Types”

- ① Old, generalist, experienced: wants to see the big picture
- ② Young, specialist, up-to-date: wants to see the latest citations and methods
- ③ Type “PhD”: is sometimes overly picky on the details

# Strategies for Review

- You are providing feedback, you are not a coauthor!
- Main goals: Identifying fundamental problems, judging contribution
- Try to see the big picture (did you learn something from the paper?), but also pay attention to methodology and consistency of results.



## Further Reading

- Berk, Jonathan B., Campbell R. Harvey and David Hirshleifer (2017). How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 (1), 231-44.
- Harvey, Campbell R. (2012). Reflections on Editing the *Journal of Finance*. [Online here](#).
- Kachelmeier, Steven J. (2004). Reviewing the Review Process. *Journal of the American Taxation Association*, Supplement 2004.