

Things to Remember When Reviewing and Refereeing Papers

Thanks to the roughly two dozen people who responded to the ISWORLD listserv in February and March 2001 with citations and advice on giving good reviews. I also received a number of interesting messages with examples of "what makes a bad review." I found the collective input and discussion both interesting and educational (and hope others did too). I have loosely compiled the responses into two parts. This message contains a list of references/citations provided. The next one will contain excerpts from several of the messages received or posted to the list. (Mark Nelson).

References

1. Lee, A.S. (1995) "Reviewing a Manuscript for Publication", *Journal of Operations Management* (invited note), Volume 13, pp. 87- 92. You can access the text of the paper at: <http://www.people.vcu.edu/~aslee/referee.htm> Allen requests that if you copy, download, or circulate this paper, you should inform him at AllenSLee@alum.mit.edu.
2. Bem, Daryl J. 1995. "Writing a Review Article for *Psychological Bulletin*." *Psychological Bulletin* 118 (2): 172-177.
3. Daft, R. (1985). "Why I recommended that your manuscript be rejected and what you can do about it." In L. Cummings & P. Frost (Eds.), *Publishing in the organizational sciences* (pp. 193-210). Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc.
4. L L Cummings and Peter J Frost, Paperback (0803971451) 4/6/95 \$36.00 This book delves deeply into the role of reviewers and editors in shaping academic papers. It is published by Sage (<http://www.sagepub.com>):
5. Hyman, Ray. 1995. "How to Critique a Published Article." *Psychological Bulletin* 118 (2): 178-182.
6. Benbasat, I., "Memo to MIS Quarterly Doctoral Student Reviewers", 1993
7. Straub, Detmar, Soon Ang, & Roberto Evaristo, 1994: "Normative Standards for MIS Research," *DATA BASE* (25:1, February), 1994, pp. 21-34. You can download an html version of this paper by going to: <http://www.cis.gsu.edu/~dstraub/Papers/Resume/Straubetal1994.htm> or downloading paper #13 from <http://www.cis.gsu.edu/~dstraub/>
8. Michael Bieber, "How to Review" at: <http://www-ec.njit.edu/~bieber/review.html>
9. <http://paideia.cortland.edu/FWG/FWGbib.htm>
10. <http://www.siop.org/TipTopicsGuide.htm>

For additional thoughts on reviewing, have a look at these two archived editorial statements from Bob Zmud and Blake Ives, former editors in chief of the *MIS Quarterly*...

<http://www.misq.org/archivist/vol/no22/issue3/edstat.html>

<http://www.misq.org/archivist/vol/no16/issue2/edstat.html>

And some interesting references on an open reviewing model being adopted by the *British Medical Journal*: <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/319/7213/861>

<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/315/7111/759>

<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/318/7175/4>

The World Association of Medical Editors (www.wame.org)

Other Recommendations and Observations (Excerpts):

1. The reviewer's first responsibility is to the potential readers of the article. Is this article one from which a significant number of readers might find valuable? Is the topic relevant to those readers? Does it provide new information, new evidence to support or reject a theory, new insights about systems or technologies? If so, it should be published, but not necessarily as written. If it is poorly constructed, confusing, misleading intro, inadequate analysis or unwarranted conclusions it may be salvageable, and a skilled reviewer might guide the author and encourage them to make major revisions or a complete rewriting.
2. Consider the following outline: (Trevor T. Moores)
 - a. State the aim and scope of the paper, e.g., "This paper sets out to ..." This shows that you (as a reviewer) have understood the paper. Misunderstandings here might help an AE judge the rest of the comments.
 - b. Outline the strengths of the paper. There must be something positive you can say about the contents of the paper.
 - c. Outline the weaknesses of the paper. No paper is perfect, but that must be tempered by the fact that a good paper engages the reader, has sufficient merit for publication, and, if its a particularly good paper, will open up areas of further research that the paper did not, or could not, address.
 - d. Suggested areas of improvement. This is an area must often missed by reviewers (in my experience). By jumping onto a weakness of two, they fail to provide the constructive criticism that could lead to a better end result.
 - e. Recommendation. But, of course, it is still down to the AE to look at what the reviewer has written before deciding whether the paper deserves publication. I would hope that AEs do not simply add up the recommendations to make a final decision. But I could be wrong?!
3. E. Cohen and P. Palvia wrote an article entitled "Ten Tips for Journal Manuscript Reviewers" which included the following:
 1. Review the manuscripts on schedule.
 2. Avoid bias.
 3. Conduct a thorough review.
 4. Return any manuscript not in your field.
 5. Be mindful of egos (authors').
 6. Provide constructive criticism.
 7. Recognize the various epistemological approaches to research.
 8. Look for the contribution to the field.
 9. Follow the journal's standards and criteria.
 10. Err on side of the author when in doubt.

4. One of the hardest things to learn how to do is to communicate to the author what is wrong with the paper without re-writing it. Here are a couple of ideas for dealing with the problem
 - a. length problems. The most common approach is to identify a couple of different cutting strategies -- boil the literature review down to 3 pages, just present a single analysis of the data, move complex discussions of measurement development to an appendix, etc. It's up to the author to figure out what to boil away, which analysis to select, and what to downplay.
 - b. If the problem is just overall verbosity, I have on occasion actually taken one or two pages of text and actually cut them to the bone, as an example of what can be done with a sharp pencil.
 - c. An alternative approach, which usually takes me longer, is to take a couple of paragraphs (my favorite is the literature review section) and to identify what is extraneous and why, where and why synthesis is needed, how tangents distract the reader, etc. This takes a lot longer, but seems to stick better.
 - d. A third approach is to point the author to an article with similar objectives that you think makes efficient use of journal space, and suggest that they model the paper more on that one -- I have pointed out, for example, that the authors of the "exemplar" paper figured out how to make their point with (for example) less than 5 paragraphs of introduction, 20 on theoretical development, 10 on research design, data and measures, 10 on analysis, 10 on discussion, 15 on implications and conclusions -- that is, less than 70 paragraphs, instead of 70 pages. Novice authors often just need to get a sense of the journal article genre, and then they can take it from there.
 - e. Bottom line: If I have to make a choice between, on the one hand, being clear but risking over-investing in the paper and being succinct but risking not being clear, I lean towards the former. I try to allocate my reviewing time and energy to journals that I believe in and topics that I'm interested in. I assume that authors have done their best to submit a good paper, and need, as you said, specific advice to move the paper forward. I know from experience that authors are more likely to revise papers if the reviewers have been able to provide constructive, specific suggestions, so, again, I thank you for your efforts.

5. One reviewer/editor wrote: My own instructions are fairly general. Solicit reviews to address these issues:
 - a. Is there news or potential news? Is there good theory or new ideas? Does it have adequate grounding in current literature? Is it well organized? And, is it well written?
 - b. If the paper has too many problems up front I send it back to the author saying it is not ready or appropriate but I welcome their future versions or other work. Two paragraphs as to what I like about it and what it needs. Maybe some references to give an example or fill out the background.
 - c. Big things are not enough theory development, inadequate illustration through data or case description. I say why these are a problem. It is up to the author to figure out how to fix. Many of my reviewers do more than this, but if the author is a good candidate for the journal she/he will figure it out.

- d. Main thing to remember: everyone has feelings. I have forgotten this once or twice but I apologize in case anyone reading this has been a victim. Some things are better off in another journal, so I suggest an outlet. The point is the same as with a student: there is an idea in there somewhere, how can the person express it. If there is a misconception, what materials will help to address it?
6. And a nice reminder that it is not just the reviewer's responsibility for good reviews: Authors expecting a thorough review should make every effort to craft a well written paper. If one has problems with grammar, sentence structure and such, one should seek out a co-author capable of cleaning up the paper prior to submission.
 7. Mimi Hurt provided an interesting analysis of the review process -- identifying its strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for its improvement.

Strengths:

- a. The process is intended to ensure work of "good" quality, that is relevant and meaningful gets disseminated to the wider pool of academics and other interested parties. In other words it is the process that is supposed to separate the wheat from the chaff.
- b. The process is supposed to catch theoretical and/or methodological flaws in papers, and based on this assessment and the perceived value of the topic /paper, recommend "revise" or "reject."
- c. The process is supposed to provide added insight to both the authors and the reviewers: the reviewers get to read "new" "stuff" about areas of interest to them, and the authors get thoughtful, insightful feedback from those who supposedly are familiar with the issues contained in the paper.

Weaknesses of reviewing process:

- d. The process is extremely time-consuming - it can be years between the initial submission of the paper and its ultimate publication. (As noted by others, I'd make a connection to the earlier discussion re: relevance of IS research and the speed with which papers get published.)
- e. Good, thoughtful, enlightening reviews take considerable time to write - yet little credit is received by reviewers (e.g. merit and promotion decisions) for doing this beyond good citizenship feelings and perhaps some publication of your name on a list of reviewers.
- f. Too many authors' seem to take advantage of the review process to catch (and potentially correct) problem that should have been caught and addressed via a good editing BEFORE submitting the paper for publication consideration. It helps them get things in the pipeline faster, but also bogs down the pipeline, consumes reviewer's time and tests the reviewer's tolerance and patience.
- g. The process assumes that all reviewers know how to review a paper (and write one) because they have supposedly learned critical thinking skills as a result of their doctoral training. Unfortunately, many of the reviews that I have seen seem to equate "critical analysis" with "find everything that is wrong with this paper;" and "you didn't reference and account for

these in your research (cynical perspective: typically its the reviewer's publications), hence your work is flawed."

- h. There is little guidance or understood "rules" regarding how a paper should progress through the review process; and vague understanding of what "good enough" is or what "there" is when a paper has reached that point. For example, I've seen papers on the third round of revisions where the reviewer(s) is (are) requesting material be added to the paper that was suggested should be removed in the first round.

Suggestions for improvements:

- i. If a paper has merit and is of interest such that reviewers recommend "revise and re-submit," then after the 2nd version of the paper is submitted for review, both the 2nd version AND the reviewers' comments of that version be published. Leave it to the reader to read the published paper and the published critiques and draw their own conclusions.
 - j. This way the process is speeded up; major flaws are caught and addressed, reviewers' can get publication credit for their work (the confidentiality issues would need to be worked out, however, personally I think reviewers should be willing to publicly stand behind their opinions), and because the reviews are to be published for all to read, this might improve their quality and tone, as well.
 - k. Include training regarding how to be a reviewer and write reviews, as well as how to address reviewers' comments as part of doctoral training; alternatively these could be offered as workshops in conjunction with some of the major conferences. Perhaps the major journals won't accept people to be reviewers unless they have been appropriately "certified". At the very least, provide links to some of the references cited by Dan Robey and Cynthia Beath.
 - l. Provide clear guidelines as to what constitutes acceptable quality for the publication / conference. We all know there are "tier 1 / tier 2" type publications /conferences but when you read their respective submission guidelines, they all read as if they accept essentially the same quality of work with perhaps variation in focus and style. So, if I'm reviewing for a tier 2 journal versus a tier 1 journal, what and where am I supposed to lighten up my application of standards/guidelines? Which ones do I relax and to what extent? If I am reviewing for a conference instead of a journal, what sort of standards should I apply?
 - m. Ask authors' to evaluate the quality and helpfulness of the reviews they received, and use these evaluations in selection of reviewers in the future, or perhaps use it for determining how to reward the reviewer. Yes, I know this is fraught with potential problems, but it relates to the "service quality" and "customer/user satisfaction" issues.
 - n. You get what you pay for, hence consider paying for good quality reviews. This could be in the form of actual money, or perhaps discounts at conferences, reduced subscription / membership rates, etc.
 - o. Perhaps some of the associations / journals could create an editing resource that authors could submit papers to for a fee, and receive help with the editing of the paper before submitting it for publication consideration.
8. There was an emerging thread/discussion in the last few postings regarding an underlying problem in poor reviews that being that the volume of outlets journals and conferences) is increasing, resulting in decreasing quality. Merit demands based on numbers of publications leads to quantity versus quality