
Referee Report Guidelines

The Basics of Referee Reports

Referee reports are a critical part of the peer review process in economics. When an article is submitted to a peer-reviewed journal, the editor will send the article to several economists familiar with the subject matter for feedback on the quality of the article. These referees evaluate the paper's technical correctness and its overall contribution to the field. This latter criteria is a crucial element: technical correctness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for publication in a journal. Better journals will only publish an article if it makes a novel and substantial contribution to economics. While authors will argue for why their paper is important within the text of the paper, referees provide a critical outside perspective. They offer the editor a candid assessment of whether the article should be published and provide the authors' of the article with comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the paper with suggestions for improvements.

A typical referee report consists of the following components:

- One paragraph written exclusively for the editor recommending that the paper either be accepted for publication, revised and resubmitted to the journal, or rejected. This paragraph needs to explain the main reasons behind the recommendation but should be concise.
- A brief summary of the paper written for the authors (but also read by the editor) highlighting the question posed, the methods used, and the conclusions reached. This summary should also discuss the overall contribution of the paper, evaluating the importance of the main question, the novelty of the paper relative to other related published work on the topic, and the extent to which the paper is convincing. It may seem odd to summarize a paper for the authors of that paper but authors can be a bit myopic when it comes to their own work. They often fail to see what others who have not been working on the paper for years will take away from it.
- A discussion of parts of the paper that were incorrect, unclear or otherwise in need of revision. As with the brief summary, this is written for the authors but will also be read by the editor. This discussion often takes the form of an enumerated list, with the first items being major flaws of the paper or suggestions for major additions or revisions and later items being smaller points.

The focus of a referee report will differ depending on whether the paper is primarily theoretical, primarily empirical, or a combination of the two. For an empirical paper, the type of paper we focus on in this course, there are a variety of things a referee will consider when writing a report. An excellent list is provided by Poterba and Werning in the handout on referee reports they prepared for their public economics course:¹

Is the model identified in a reasonable way? Are the results statistically significant at conventional levels? Are the results substantively significant, or has the author found statistically significant but small coefficients? Sometimes small coefficients have important consequences, so you need to decide whether the estimates, of whatever magnitude, are of some intrinsic interest . . . You should also consider whether the data are well suited to the problem at hand, and whether the data set has been used appropriately. Are there concerns about sample choice? Are there problems with measurement error or other aspects of data quality?

The reference list at the end of this handout includes several other guides to writing referee reports. Note that these are written for professional economists, not undergraduates. Therefore some of the suggestions in these resources fall well outside the scope of my expectations for your referee reports.

Contents of Your Referee Report

You will be completing a somewhat abridged version of a referee report. You do not need to write the traditional one paragraph response to the editor nor do you need to make a recommendation to accept, revise or reject. What you do need to do is write the report for the authors. Your report should be approximately three double spaced pages in length. It should include a summary of the paper that highlights the main question being posed, the methodology being used, and the conclusions reached by the author. Your summary should also contain a brief explanation of why the question asked in the paper is or is not important and should discuss whether you find the paper convincing. After this brief summary, should include an itemized list of concerns with the paper. These concerns could relate to the quality of the data, the empirical approach, sample selection issues, alternative explanations that are not fully ruled out, or any other weaknesses of the paper. Whenever possible, your criticisms should be paired with suggestions for improvement.

In class, we will briefly look at referee reports that I have written. These reports will also be posted on Blackboard. I do not expect and in fact do not want your referee report to exactly match the style of mine. Your summary section should be longer than my typical summary section and should constitute a much greater proportion of the overall report. Your itemized list of concerns should be shorter than my typical list, both with fewer points and

¹James Poterba, and Ivn Werning. 14.471 Public Economics I, Fall 2012. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT OpenCourseWare), <http://ocw.mit.edu> (Accessed). License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA

shorter discussion of the main points. Finally, I do not expect you to critique the details of the econometrics used in the paper. I do, however, expect you to critically evaluate the general empirical approach of the paper.

Submitting Your Reports

There will be two referee reports. This first report is due February 16th at 5pm. The paper you will be reviewing for this report is “The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation” by Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson. The second report is due March 30th at 5pm. The paper you will review for the second report is “Intergenerational Occupational Mobility in Great Britain and the United States since 1850” by Long and Ferrie. Bibliographic details for these papers are given in the reference list at the end of this document.

Referee reports should be submitted as pdf documents by email to me (jparman@wm.edu). Each report will be graded on a 20 point scale. If a report is turned in after 5pm on the day it is due, one point will be deducted from your score. This grade deduction penalty will increase by one point every 24 hours. A report turned in after 5pm the day after it is due will have two points deducted, a report turned in after 5pm two days after it is due will have three points deducted and so on.

References

- Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., & Robinson, J. (2001). The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation. *The American Economic Review*, 91(5), 1369–1401.
- Berk, J., Harvey, C. R., & Hirshleifer, D. A. (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>.
- Hamermesh, D. S. (1992). The Young Economist’s Guide to Professional Etiquette. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 6(1), 169–179.
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- Thomson, W. (2001). *A Guide for the Young Economist*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.