

Writing and receiving reviews

Shigeto Kawahara
Keio University
kawahara@icl.keio.ac.jp

1 Elements of a review

As a student, you may be asked to review a paper. And you should probably grab a chance to do so to build up your CV. Writing a review yourself will also probably make you better prepared when you receive reviews yourself (for which, see below).

The following are the elements of a review.

- (1) A short summary of the paper
 - a. This summary shows that you read the paper properly.
 - b. It does not have to be long (a few sentences).
 - c. You do not need to repeat the content of the paper back to the author.
- (2) Recommendation (some reviewers skip this, but this is very helpful information both for editors and authors)
 - a. Accept as is: People rarely give this recommendation.
 - b. Accept with (minor) revisions: The paper is recommended that it should be “conditionally or provisionally accepted” or “accepted pending revisions”. After revising the paper, the author writes a cover letter explaining what has been done, and the editor makes the final decision. (Some editors do send the revised version back even with this decision; see below.)
 - c. Revise and resubmit (also known as Major Revision): A lot of reviewers often choose this option. The paper shows some promise, but rather major revisions are required before the paper can be accepted. If the author decides to resubmit, he/she will include a cover letter. The revised paper is likely to be sent to new or the same reviewers.
 - d. Reject: The paper is hopeless. The paper has to be entirely different to be published. The journal is not suitable.
- (3) General comments
 - a. General description of what is wrong with the paper.
 - b. More importantly, suggestions about how it may be fixed (some reviewers skip this! don't).
 - c. Both substantial and stylistic suggestions are usually welcome.
- (4) Minor comments

- a. Smaller line-by-line comments.
 - b. You do not need to worry about small typos, but they are certainly helpful.¹
 - c. If your decision is “reject” you may as well skip this step, because the paper will have to be significantly revised anyway.
- (5) Other advice
- a. You can remain anonymous, or choose to reveal your identity. I personally like signing my reviews for several reasons; (i) I find myself being more fair when I reveal my identity; (ii) I would like my time and effort to be openly acknowledged; (iii) I like to receive signed reviews, etc. In fact, some journals encourage you to sign your review. It is ultimately up to you, though.
 - b. Be on time. You do want to make a good impression to the editors.
 - c. But, be careful about being too efficient. If you return your review on the next day, the chances are that you will be asked again. But you should not spend too much time on reviewing papers.
 - d. You probably won’t have this problem as a student; but sometimes you may be asked to review too many papers.
 - e. Learn how to say no, but try to suggest alternative reviewers.

2 Receiving a review

You may get reviews yourself.

- (6) Do not give up immediately when you get “revise and resubmit”.
- a. This decision is often the default option.
 - b. “Revise and resubmit” can often mean “the paper is good enough, but in order for you to take the reviews seriously, we ask you to revise and resubmit”.
 - c. This kind of “revise and resubmit” is almost “accepted with revisions” because if you respond to the reviewers’s comments properly, then the paper will be accepted.
 - d. Write a good coverletter—for each point raised by a reviewer, say how you responded in the revised version.
 - e. There is a chance that, if the editor is good, with a good coverletter, the paper will not be sent back to a reviewer, which expedites the process a lot.
 - f. The reviewers are not gods—if you think some comments do not make sense, you can explain why in a coverletter (I have to admit, though, that there are reviewers who are “overly insistent”).
- (7) Choose a good editor
- a. Some editors will just send you the reviewers comments and tell you the final decision.
 - b. Other editors will tell you which comments to attend to and which to ignore.

¹If the English is not good enough—to the extent that it prevents the proper understanding of the paper—you should say that as one of your major comments. Personally, I have done this a few times when I reviewed papers for Japanese journals.

- c. Try to find the second type of editors, because you get clearer directions for revisions.
 - d. Ask around who is helpful as an editor.
 - e. For this reason, you may avoid a journal whose editor is not familiar with your area.
 - f. There is nothing wrong with telling the editors a list of reviewers you want, and a list of reviewers you do not want. The worst thing that can happen is that your requests will be ignored. Some editors actually like to hear your requests. No editors will be upset just because you make these suggestions.
- (8) Other comments
- a. You will sometimes get a rejection. I get a rejection. Do not take it personally, although I am sure you will. If anything the reviewers are attacking your idea, not yourself.
 - b. No matter how good the reviews are, let them sit for a while (from a few days to a month). Nobody I know can take the reviews rationally on the day they received them.
 - c. There are lousy reviewers out there. Bear with it.
 - d. Discuss your reviews with your teachers and friends. They will put the reviews into perspective.
 - e. Try to get reviews while you're a graduate student—you want to practice this process with your advisors.
 - f. Try to get a sample coverletter from your advisor. Email me if you want a sample from me.