The Task of the Referee

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There is an endless stream of research papers submitted to conferences, journals, newsletters, anthologies, annuals, trade journals, newspapers, and other periodicals. Many such publications use impartial, external experts to evaluate papers. This approach is often called peer review, and the reviewers are called referees. Refereeing is a public service, one of the professional obligations of a computer science and engineering professional. Unfortunately, referees typically learn to produce referee reports without any formal instruction; they learn by practice, by feedback from editors, by seeing referee reports for their own papers, and by reading referee reports written by others.

This article tells you how to evaluate a paper, write a referee report, and apply common standards and procedures. It is intended to replace Forscher's rules,¹ which are distributed by some editors but do not reflect the procedures used in computer science and engineering. This article focuses on research papers in applied areas of computer science and engineering, such as systems, architecture, hardware, communications, and performance evaluation, but most of the discussion is generally applicable; separate sections consider research proposals and survey and tutorial papers. Authors might find this material useful for preparing papers for publication. Another recent paper discusses refereeing in theoretical computer science²; there are some differences between theory and the applied areas considered here.

The referee's task

Your role as referee is to decide whether a paper makes a sufficient contribution to the field. The contribution can be new and interesting research results, a new and insightful synthesis of existing results, a useful survey of or tutorial on a field, or a combination of those types. To quote a referee for this article:

Small results which are surprising and might spark new research should be published; papers which are mostly repetitions of other papers should not; papers which have good ideas badly expressed should not be published but the authors should be encouraged to rewrite them in a better, more comprehensible fashion.

Reading a paper as a referee is closer to what a teacher or professor does when grading a paper than what a scientist or engineer does when reading a published work. In the latter case, the reader presumes that the paper has been checked (refereed) and is thus correct, novel, and worthwhile. As a referee, on the other hand, you must read the paper carefully and with an open mind, checking and evaluating the material with no presumption as to its quality or accuracy. The result
How to become a referee

Editors are always looking for qualified and responsible referees. The easiest way to become a referee is to write a paper, thus bringing your name and expertise to the attention of the community. You can also become active in professional activities, such as local IEEE or ACM groups, IEEE Technical Committees, ACM Special Interest Groups, and conference-organizing committees. Participating in these activities will help you meet editors and program chairs. Also, editors sometimes actively solicit referees.

of your reading should be a referee report that recommends for or against accepting the paper and lists necessary and suggested changes.

It is important that you walk the uncertain line between being too permissive ("publish everything") and being too restrictive ("nothing is good enough to publish"). If you are not critical enough, you encourage poor research, recognize and honor those who don’t deserve it, mislead naive and inexperienced readers, mislead the author as to what is publishable, encourage disrespect for the field, distort commercial development, hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions, and perhaps actually subtract from the general store of knowledge, consider the Pithdown man fraud, which misled anthropologists for years. As has been noted by Thompson and others, unrestrained publication buries the professional under mounds of paper, only a very small fraction of which can be examined, let alone read.

If you are too critical, you block or delay good research from publication, waste the time of authors, damage careers, and perhaps leave journals with nothing to publish and conferences with nothing to present. It is particularly important not to reject new and significant work that runs counter to the prevailing wisdom or current fashion.

If you want to be taken seriously as a referee, you must have a middle-of-the-road view — you must be able to distinguish good from bad work, major from minor research, and positive from negative contributions to the literature. A referee who always says "yes" or always says "no" is not helpful.

The referee report

A good referee report should have several parts. First, you should briefly state your recommendation and the reasons for it. Second, you should summarize the point of the paper in one to five sentences, both for the editor’s use and to ensure that you actually understand the paper. Third, you should evaluate the validity and significance of the research goal. Fourth, you should evaluate the quality of the work (methodology, techniques, accuracy, and presentation). Finally, you must provide an overall recommendation for or against publication. If you recommend against publication, you should clearly state why. You should also make the strength of your opinions clear: an equivocal ("maybe") recommendation is acceptable if your reasons for it are clearly documented. In any case, your report must contain enough discussion and information to justify your recommendation.

If your recommendation is favorable, you must list both necessary and suggested changes. If your recommendation is negative, but you think the paper can be salvaged and either submitted elsewhere or resubmitted, then you should provide a similar (but perhaps less detailed) list. Suggestions for alternate places to publish are always welcome.

Refereeing a paper can require considerable time and effort; don’t waste that effort on a detailed critique of a badly flawed paper that can never be made publishable. Finding one or more fatal and uncorrectable flaws excuses the referee from checking all subsequent details.

Typically, the author receives the text of the referee report stripped of all material identifying the referee. Thus, while it is important to be clear and explicit, your report should not be insulting. Don’t refer to the author as a "fool" or an "idiot" nor to the paper as "trash." Your review should be directed at the paper, not the author. The review of a proposal, though, is also a review of the investigator. In this case, it is appropriate to evaluate the author’s abilities as well as the research proposed. In all cases, however, the evaluation should be objective and fair. The more psychologically acceptable the review, the more useful it will be.

Evaluating a research paper

As a referee, you must evaluate a paper’s novelty, significance, correctness, and readability. This general set of goals can be broken down into a much more specific series of questions.

What is the purpose of the paper? Is it clearly stated? Does the author make the important issues clear? Does the author tell you early in the paper what he or she has accomplished? For example, if the paper is a system description, has the system been implemented or is it just a design?

Is the paper appropriate? Does this paper have anything to do with computer science or engineering? If so, is the research appropriate for this forum? (Authors should not submit papers on queuing theory to Datamation or market analyses of the latest MVS release to the Journal of the ACM or the Proceedings of the IEEE.)

Is the goal significant? For that matter, is the problem real? Does it contradict any physical laws (as do perpetual motion machines) or widely reported measurements?

Is there any reason to care about the paper’s results, assuming they are correct? In other words, is the problem or goal major, minor, trivial, or nonexistent? Keep in mind what the Walrus said:1

1. The time has come.
2. The Walrus said.
3. To talk of many things:
   Of shoes — and ships — and sealing wax —
   Of cabbages — and kings —
   And why the sea is boiling hot —
   And whether pigs have wings.

Is this a careful analysis of how the sea became boiling hot or an elegant study of the flight characteristics of pigs? Sophisticated mathematical analyses can be applied to models so unrealistic that the effort is useless and the results of no interest.

Is the problem obsolete, such as a reliability study for vacuum tube mainframe computers? Is the problem so specific or so applied that it has no general applicability and does not merit wide publication?
Unrestrained publication buries the professional under mounds of paper, only a very small fraction of which can be examined.

Is the presentation satisfactory? Is the paper written well enough for you to evaluate the technical content? A paper that is incomprehensible is not publishable. A paper that requires extensive revision is not publishable in its present form and might never be. If the paper is readable at all, you must evaluate the presentation as well as the technical content. (Refer to articles such as that by Day1 to learn how to write a paper.)

Does the abstract describe the paper? Does the introduction adequately explain the problem and the research framework? Are the remaining sections clear, and do they follow in a logical order? Is there too much or too little detail? Are the grammar and syntax correct? Are the figures and tables well labeled, legible, and meaningful? Are there too many or too few tables and figures? Are explanations poor or even nonsensical? Is the author too verbose or too terse and cryptic? Is the paper sufficiently self-contained that someone knowledgeable in the field can understand it, or does the reader need detailed knowledge of results published elsewhere? If the author refers the reader to other papers for crucial details, do you believe him or her?

If sections of the paper are missing or incomplete due to a deadline, do you believe they will be filled in as promised? Is the paper too colloquial or too formal in style? Is the formalism useful or necessary? Are there many typographical errors? Is the paper too long? If so, does it contain too much material, or has the author been too wordy? Could the paper be split into two or more papers without losing coherence? The paper should be long enough to present the necessary material and no longer. Within reason, let the editor or program committee chair worry about specific page limits.

Does the paper contain typographical errors or problems in grammar, punctuation, and wording? You should identify all such problems you find. Such errors can be a serious problem when an author’s native language is not English. It is not your job, however, to rewrite the paper.

What did you learn? What did you, or what should the reader, learn from the paper? If you didn’t learn anything, or if the intended reader won’t learn anything, the paper is not publishable.

Making recommendations

After comparing the paper to an appropriate standard (not your own standards, which may be high or low), to the average of the papers that you write, or to the average of the papers that you find worth reading, you should be able to put it into one of these categories:

1. Major results; very significant (fewer than 1 percent of all papers).
2. Good, solid, interesting work; a definite contribution (fewer than 10 percent).
3. Minor, but positive, contribution to knowledge (perhaps 10-30 percent).
4. Elegant and technically correct but useless. This category includes sophisticated analyses of flying pigs.
5. Neither elegant nor useful, but not actually wrong.
6. Wrong and misleading.
7. So badly written that technical evaluation is impossible.

The next question is: What are the standards of this journal or conference? Is this the Proceedings of the IEEE, ACM Transactions on Computer Systems, or the ACM Symposium on Operating Systems Principles (all quite selective), or is it the Tahiti Conference on Beach Ball and Computer Systems (fictional, but a presumed boondoggle)? You should compare the paper with the average paper in that specific journal or conference, not with the best or worst. Of course, in some cases the average is too low and needs to be raised by critical refereeing. Note that you cannot tell how selective a conference or journal is by the percentage of papers it accepts; far fewer bad papers are submitted to the best conferences and journals.

You should then make a recommendation, whether favorable (“publish”) or unfavorable (“reject”). Your recommen-
Proposals

A proposal is a request to a funding agency, company, or foundation for financial support, supposedly to do the research described in the proposal. Reviewing proposals is quite different from reviewing papers, and some special considerations apply. Reviews of papers address only the science; reviews of proposals must also consider the investigator.

The primary difficulty with reviewing a proposal is that the investigator is supposed to tell you what he or she plans to do.

Surveys and tutorials are similar but not identical. A pure tutorial explains some body of material to nonexperts, usually novices. It might not cover the entire field, and it might have a specific point of view. A survey provides broad and thorough coverage of some field or body of knowledge. It can be aimed at readers ranging from the novice to the near-expert.

In reviewing a tutorial, there are specific issues to address: Does the paper cover the material promised by the title or abstract? Is this a reasonable body of knowledge to cover in a tutorial? Is the scope too wide, too narrow, or too bizarre to be useful? Does the paper have a consistent theme? Is the material correct? Is the level of coverage too simple-minded or sophisticated, given the likely audience? Is the paper well written and clear? This last is crucial for tutorials, but journals that publish tutorials, such as Computer and ACM Computing Surveys, often have editors and a professional staff to help with revisions.

For a survey, many of the same questions apply. Does the paper cover the material promised by the title or abstract, and is this a reasonable body of knowledge to survey at one time? Is the material correct, and is the author sufficiently expert on the subject to interpret results correctly and provide perspective on the field? Has the author integrated the material in a consistent manner, or is this just an annotated bibliography? Is the author’s coverage balanced and thorough? Does he or she cite all important relevant literature, or is the presentation biased, slanted, or unevenly selective? Controversial opinions and evaluations should be identified as such. If the survey includes new research results, do they meet the validity and correctness criteria given above for research papers? (A survey does not have to stand on its own as a research paper, so the research does not have to be so significant as to justify publication as a research paper.) Finally, is the paper well written and clear?

Surveys and tutorials differ from research papers in that most or all of the work reported is not new. Such a paper, however, might include a variety of minor research results that would not stand on their own in separate papers.
Guidelines for referees for Computer

The following are excerpts from Computer's referee guidelines.

It takes a good deal of time and effort to develop a manuscript that is technically relevant and readable. A detailed review of a manuscript can be an invaluable aid to the author(s) in improving its overall technical quality, utility, and readability. Please provide constructive comments that will help the author(s) to:

1. correct errors and misconceptions;
2. state appropriate, accurate, and relevant conjectures and results;
3. employ better definitions, diagrams, tables, graphs, and examples;
4. make the article technically consistent and complete; and,
5. organize the material to help the reader understand the issues presented.

If major revisions are recommended, you should point these out as specifically as possible and should differentiate optional changes from those you judge mandatory. If the revisions required are extensive, it is perhaps best to reject the paper and recommend preparation of a new, heavily revised manuscript for resubmission to Computer. If you reject the manuscript mainly on the basis of reader interest, please suggest a more appropriate journal to the author(s). Manuscripts with little or no salvageable material should be rejected outright and later submission discouraged.

[See Computer Editor-in-Chief Bruce Shriver's message on page 10 for the full text of the referee guidelines and the review form.]

a researcher noted for poor-quality work has decided to do better work.

It is important that you do not discriminate against newcomers who have no reputation, either good or bad. In this case, you must rely much more heavily on the text of the proposal and such information as the investigator's PhD institution and dissertation, academic record, host institution, and comments by his or her advisor or others.

Reviewers are asked to comment on the proposed budget. Keep in mind that many factors affect the size of the budget other than the proposed scope of research, such as the agency providing the funding and the availability of facilities and staff. Also note that for a new investigator, there is a major difference between no funding and minimal funding (two months summer salary plus amounts for travel, supplies, and computer time). Funding a new investigator at a low level is often a good gamble; two or three years later the investigator will have a track record and, if it is a good record, higher levels of funding can be justified. Such small grants are often called "initiation grants" and should be much easier to get than regular grants.

Other issues

Simultaneous submission, prior publication, and unrevised retractions. If an author submits a paper simultaneously to two or more places, he or she must have the approval of all editors or program chairs.

All referees should also be notified. Submitting a paper simultaneously without notification is unethical and a sufficient basis for rejection. There is a good chance that a simultaneous submission will be detected through the review process.

If a paper has already been published (in conference proceedings, for example) and is submitted for republication (perhaps in an archival journal), the editor and referees must be notified. Some associations such as the IEEE and ACM permit republication in their journals, but the paper generally must meet a higher standard than if it had never been published. Significant extensions or major revisions are often a sufficient reason for republication. As a reviewer, you should be alert to the author who tries to publish the same work in all its various combinations, permutations, and subsets, and to the author who adds the "least publishable unit" of new material to each paper. Also note that if the first version of the paper was published elsewhere, copyright restrictions might require the first publisher's explicit permission to republish the paper.

You will sometimes receive a paper to referee that you have previously recommended for rejection by some other publication. If the paper has not been rewritten to comply with your previous review, it is appropriate to return a copy of that review along with a blunt note suggesting that the author comply with referee reports.

Acknowledgments and plagiarism. Authors must not plagiarize, and they must fully acknowledge joint work and the contributions of others. You should explicitly point out any such problems.

Timely response and returning a paper. You should return your report promptly. For a conference, referee reports must reach the program chair well before the program committee meeting so that the material can be assembled and prepared for discussion. Reports received after the program committee has met are useless.

Journals do not generally have firm deadlines, but preventing consideration of a paper by taking a long time to review it is unethical. Computer science journals are notorious for long delays between submission and publication; the two major bottlenecks are the referees and the publication queue for the journal itself. Imagine if it were your paper. If you can't read the paper in a reasonable amount of time, typically four to eight weeks, send it back to the editor or at least get the editor's agreement to the delay. Dante probably had a place for referees who promise to do reports and then don't do so.

Keep in mind that if you expect to have your own papers published, you have a responsibility to referee a reasonable number of papers. It is part of your job as a researcher. The option of sending a paper back to the editor should not be abused. Editors can choose not to handle papers by authors who don't fulfill their refereeing responsibilities. If you are sent a paper that you are not
qualified to referee, you can send it back to the editor. However, if the editor has selected you to provide an "outside" view of the field, you should provide a limited opinion (see the section on the editor's role).

If you are going to send a paper back without refereeing it, do so immediately. Be sure to return the manuscript.

The author's reputation. Should the authors' reputations influence the evaluation of a paper, as opposed to a proposal? There is no consensus. In my opinion, you should consider the author's name and reputation only with regard to ambiguities, unclear points, and references to work that isn't presented. If the author is justifiably well regarded, you can probably assume that any problems will (and must) be corrected on revision. If the author has a well-earned bad reputation, you can reasonably assume that omissions and ambiguities probably represent concealed (deliberately or otherwise) errors. Because they usually have insufficient time for rereview, conference program committees must make assumptions about whether problems can and will be corrected; for journals, assumptions are generally not necessary.

Confidentiality. In computer science and engineering, editors generally send the verbatim referee reports to the author, usually as photocopies without the referees' names, institutional letterheads, etc. If you don't want to be identified, don't put identifying information in the text of your report. There is no easy solution to the delicate problem of asking the author to cite your own work without giving him or her a hint of who you are.

Papers submitted for publication are not necessarily public. You should neither use material from a paper you have refereed nor distribute copies of the paper unless you know it has been made public, for example, as a technical report.

Conflicts of interest. You should tell the editor of any conflicts of interest. If the conflict is severe, you should not referee the paper and should return it to the editor. For example, if you have a professional feud or a significant personal disagreement with an author, you should send the paper back. If you are reviewing a proposal, and you are competing with the author for funding, you should tell the program officer.

The opposite type of conflict also occurs when you are asked to referee a paper written by a friend, colleague, former or current student, supervisor, subordinate, or former advisor. If you feel you cannot provide an objective review, you should return the paper.

The editor's role. The editor has several tasks. (“Editor” in this section refers to both the editor-in-chief, who typically decides whether to accept a paper, and the associate editors, who solicit the referee reports and recommend to the editor-in-chief whether to publish.) The editor receives the paper from and maintains correspondence with the author, selects the referees, sends them copies of the paper with suitable instructions, and awaits their results. He or she should check up on tardy referees and should find new referees if no response has been received after a certain period.

The editor should select referees who are knowledgeable in the subject and can be relied on to provide a fair and objective evaluation. Unfortunately, this is not always possible; there are too many papers to be reviewed and too few people who are sufficiently expert and responsible.

There is also another problem: people who work in area X tend to believe that area X is inherently worthwhile. Referees who work in area X will usually evaluate papers in area X by the standards of area X; they will seldom, if ever, say that work in area X is pointless and should be discontinued. This is why an editor who wants to debunk a paper on alchemy sends the paper to a chemist, not an alchemist. Someone has to say the emperor has no clothes.

After receiving a sufficient number of referee reports, typically three, the editor must read them and decide whether to accept the paper and what revisions are required. The editor does not simply count the referees' recommendations as votes. In theory, he or she can overrule the unanimous recommendation of the referees; in practice, the editor can and sometimes does side with a minority of the referees. It is important that the referees justify their recommendations; their reasons count as heavily or more heavily than the recommendations themselves.

The editor must also resolve conflicting reports and tell the authors to what extent they must comply with the referees' comments when making changes. A wise editor will also transmit copies of all referee reports to all referees, both to educate the referees and to be fair to the author in case of conflicting reviews.

The program chair's role. For a conference, the program chair selects referees and collects and tallies their reports. Typically, the program committee will decide which papers to accept by majority vote. The chair may or may not have a larger vote than the others, but he or she seldom has the authority to overrule a majority of the committee. Because they handle a large number of papers in a very short time, program committees usually do not give referees and authors the personal attention provided by editors who handle only a few papers per month. The committees often use numerical scores to prepare ranked lists of papers; such scores should be assigned carefully and viewed skeptically by the committee.

When you are the author

This article has been directed at potential referees, but instructions to referees are also instructions to authors. When starting research, writing a paper, finishing the paper, and deciding where to submit it, ask yourself: How will this paper stand up when refereed according to the criteria given here?

You should also consider if you're submitting your paper to the right place. Some journals and conferences will not consider material outside a specific scope; why waste three months to a year to find out your paper wasn't appropriate? Likewise, if you know your paper is minor, why send it to a highly selective forum? Send it where it has a reasonable chance of being accepted. If you suspect that further work will be needed before publication, do the work before submitting the paper; it may turn an unpublishable paper into a publishable one, without the delay. You can answer many of these questions by looking at an issue of the publication. You should also look at the information the journal sends to prospective authors.

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An author who feels insulted and ignores referee reports wastes an invaluable resource and the referees' time.
Keep in mind that a good referee report is immensely valuable, even if it tears your paper apart. Remember, each report was prepared without charge by someone whose time you could not buy. All the errors found are things you can correct before publication. All the mistaken interpretations could have been made by the final readers. Appreciate referee reports, and make use of them. An author who feels insulted and ignores referee reports wastes an invaluable resource and the referees’ time.

Some authors suspect that a negative referee report indicates that the editor, program committee, program chair, and referees are incompetent, biased, or otherwise unfair. While this is sometimes the case, it is the exception. There is seldom a single correct evaluation of a paper, and equally skilled and unbiased readers will differ. However, a set of negative referee reports is an accurate indication that your paper should be rewritten or reworked before resubmission or discarded as unpublishable or embarrassing. A reader forms an opinion of you based on your paper; if your paper’s quality would reflect badly on you, you should not even submit it for publication.

Authors should note that Day, Levin and Redell, Manola, and Wegman discuss how to write technical papers. Refereeing is also a good way to learn to write better papers; evaluating the work of others will give you insight into your own.

Scientific progress relies heavily on the peer review process — the evaluation of research for publication and funding by researchers qualified to evaluate the work. Referee reports are essential to that process. The referee’s task is necessarily a matter of opinion; as a referee gains experience, the quality of the evaluation should improve. The guidelines and instructions presented here should be particularly useful in training and instructing novice referees.

References

Alan Jay Smith is a professor in the Computer Science Division of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences at the University of California at Berkeley, where he has been on the faculty since 1974 and was vice chair of the department from July 1982 to June 1984. His research interests include the performance analysis of computer systems and devices, computer architecture, and operating systems. He received the IEEE Best Paper Award for the best paper in the *IEEE Transactions on Computers* in 1979.

Smith is an associate editor of the ACM Transactions on Computers, is a subject-area editor of the Journal of Parallel and Distributed Computing, and is on the editorial board of the Journal of Microprocessors and Microsystems. He was program chair for the SIGmetrics 89/Performance 89 Conference and is program chair for the 1990 Hot Chips Symposium.

Smith received the BS degree in electrical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the MS and PhD degrees in computer science from Stanford University. He is an IEEE fellow and a member of the ACM, SIAM, the Computer Measurement Group, Eta Kappa Nu, Tau Beta Pi, and Sigma Xi.

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