

### Writing a Referee Report

Along with the research proposal, Ph.D. students will write a referee report of a working paper in the economics of science and technology. The referee report is an important task for academics. When you submit articles for publication, the work will be refereed, usually by 2-4 anonymous referees, who will provide the journal editor with guidelines as to the submissions quality for publication. I have attached some sample referee reports for you to look at. A typical report is 2-3 pages long. Often, a report begins with 1-2 pages critiquing major points, and then concludes with more random notes on smaller issues that need clarification. Typically, referees will make one of three recommendations. For actual referee reports, these recommendations are not put directly in the report, but rather in a separate letter that goes to the editor. The author should not know each individual referee's decision, but rather the collective decision of the editor. For the case of this assignment, you may simply put the recommendation in the report.

**Reject** – the paper does not meet the standards of the journal, and is unlikely to meet the standards with further revision. The referee report should explain why this is the case. If possible, the referee should also offer suggestions that may improve the paper before it is submitted elsewhere.

**Revise and resubmit** – the paper does not currently meet the standards of the journal, but is likely to do so after revision. The referee report should include suggested revisions.

**Accept** – the paper is suitable for publication as is, or with only minor revisions. It is rare that a first submission to a journal will get a straight acceptance.

The criteria for reviewing an article will vary somewhat for each journal, as each article should be appropriate for the journal's target audience. For example, an article that is suitable for publication in a technical economics journal might not be suitable for publication in a policy journal. Nonetheless, there are some guidelines that can generally be followed. The following guidelines come from referee instructions I received from *The Energy Journal*.

- 1) Contribution: Does the paper make a significant contribution to the field?
- 2) Scholarship: Is the scholarship sound? Does the paper meet academic standards?
- 3) Appeal: Is the topic important? Will it appeal to a large enough audience?
- 4) Originality: Does the author bring a fresh perspective to the topic? Is the paper novel or insightful?
- 5) Analysis: Is the information presented in the paper analyzed correctly? Is more than one side of the issue presented? Does the work deliver what it promises?
- 6) Illustrations: Do the figures, graphics, tables, and appendices add to the paper? Could some be omitted or condensed?

Finally, when writing a referee report, strive to be constructive. Are there ways the author could work around any flaws in the paper to build a more convincing argument? Are flaws in the data or methodology fatal flaws that cannot be corrected? If so, the referee should explain why that is the case. Think about what advice you would like to receive as an author to help improve your own work.

For the referee report, you should identify a working paper in an area of interest to you. Working papers are typically papers that have been submitted for publication, but have yet to be accepted. Thus, they will be easier to critique than papers that have been accepted for publication. Working papers can be found at several places on the Internet. Many economics departments and policy schools will have working papers on their web sites. In addition, some other good sites for working papers include:

**Social Science Research Network (SSRN):** SSRN is a searchable database of working papers in several fields, including economics. I believe that the Maxwell School has a site license to SSRN, so you should be able to download papers from their site. The address for the economics page is <http://www.ssrn.com/ern/index.html>.

**National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER):** NBER is a nonprofit research organization whose members include many top research economists. Most of their work is of an applied nature. Included among their research programs is the Productivity Program. Most working papers in this program will be appropriate for the class. Their website (<http://www.nber.org>) includes a searchable working paper database. The Maxwell School has a site license, so you will be able to download their papers for free from a Maxwell School computer.

**The World Bank:** The World Bank employs several economists who research many areas of development economics, including those pertaining to growth and technology. Links to these working papers can be found at <http://econ.worldbank.org/>. There you can browse papers by topic.

Please feel free to ask me for help in finding an appropriate paper. I would ask that, at a minimum, you let me know when you have chosen a paper, so that I may check that it is appropriate. *Finally, when you hand in the report, please give me a copy of the paper as well.*

Since Ph.D. students are not doing the take home exam, and since some of you may wish to write reports on topics found at the end of the class, the referee reports will not be due until **Wednesday, May 7**. However, I *strongly* advise you to not wait until classes are over to begin this assignment. Although the writing itself is not long, critiquing a paper can be a time consuming task, especially for those who are new at it.