



A Publishing Resource for Geographers

Good practice in refereeing

1. The role of an article referee is ...
2. A referee should be ...
3. A referee should never ...
4. Writing a referees report
5. Questions you may have about refereeing

1. The role of an article referee is ...

- to help the editor make a decision as to whether the paper is worthy of publication
- to provide constructive advice to the author(s) so that they might improve the quality of their paper

2. A referee should be:

Constructive, helpful and insightful

As noted above, one of the primary roles of a referee is to help the author improve their paper. Constructive criticism, helpful hints and insightful comments provide authors with valuable guidance as to how they might address any perceived shortcomings of their work.

Respectful of the right to different ideas

A referee's job is to assess the scholarship of a paper, not to police the ideas that are presented. This means being respectful of differing viewpoints, and yet still being critical of their coherence. In other words, the arguments made should be evaluated on their respective merits, and not simply dismissed as 'wrong' or 'out-of-date'.

Mindful of their position as a 'gatekeeper'

A referee should always be mindful of their position as a gatekeeper to publication. With this position comes a *responsibility* to be fair to the author. It is important to remember that the author(s) will have spent several months to years undertaking research and completing the paper. For some authors the paper will be their first attempt at publishing. Ill phrased and dismissive refereeing could unnecessarily knock their confidence and ruin what should be a fulfilling exercise.

3. A referee should never:

Be patronising, condescending or malicious

There is no justification for writing a deliberately destructive referee's report that is patronising, condescending or malicious. A referee can recommend rejection for good reasons and still be kind to the author. If a referee feels that they cannot write this kind of report then they should return the paper to the editor and let someone who will be more constructive undertake the report. One point to remember is that English is spoken by only 8% of the world population.

Be personal

A referee's report should never be a personal attack against an individual (e.g. 'this person is an idiot'). Evaluation should be based solely on the merit or ideas contained in the paper, and not on who wrote it.

Be over-particular

The role of the referee is not to try and find all the faults in the paper but to give an overall assessment. Moreover, if the author can address the shortcomings of the paper with reasonable effort, do not overemphasize the faults then recommend publication with only minor revisions.

Be self-promoting

The referee's report is a constructive assessment of the paper under review, not an opportunity to promote your opinion at the expense of the authors. As such, the report should not be used as an opportunity to force the author to cite your work if it is only tangentially related theirs.

Be reactive

Undertaking and writing-up research is all about critiquing and developing ideas. Therefore a referee should not overreact to arguments that criticise their previous contributions. Instead the arguments should be evaluated on their own merits.

Express favouritism

The refereeing process is designed to ensure that quality articles are published. There is therefore a responsibility on the referee to be impartial and to help the editor make a decision. Each article should be judged on its merits and should not be tainted by favouritism, whereby a paper that supports your own position or is written by a colleague is given your support when it does not deserve it. Such favouritism does not aid the author, whereas constructive criticism would have helped to improve the article's quality.

Plagiarize the ideas in the paper

Even though the paper has not yet been published, the ideas expressed within it are the intellectual property of the author. If a referee feels the idea is of sufficient merit to use it themselves or it inspires them to write a related paper they should recommend publication, even if the paper is badly written (this can always be addressed), and ask the editor when the paper will be published so that they can cite it.

Circulate or cite the paper without the permission of the author

The version of the paper submitted to the journal is an initial draft and it is sent to a referee for evaluation in confidence that this version will not be circulated to colleagues or cited without permission.

4. Writing a referees report:

There are three basic rules to writing a referees report.

1. Follow the guidelines as set out by the journal editor.

Every journal has a different set of aims and objectives. As a consequence, while each editor is looking for good quality contributions, each will have particular criteria by which they would like the paper to be judged. These criteria will accompany the paper.

2. Always start and end on a positive note even if you think a paper does not merit publication in its present form.

3. Follow the recommendations as per referee conduct as set out above.

In general, a referee's report will consist of two sections: a cover letter and a summary report.

The cover letter

The cover letter need not be long, as the substantive discussion of the paper will be in the report. However, it should include the manuscript number and title along with the overall recommendation.

Most journals adopt a fourfold classification of recommendation:

- accept as is
- accept with revisions (but the paper need not be seen by a referee again)
- revise and resubmit (here the revised paper will be sent out to referees again for re-evaluation)
- reject (the paper is deemed unworthy or unsuitable for publication)

The most common deviations from this are:

- a division of the 'accept with revisions' category into 'accept with minor revisions' and 'accept with major revisions'.
- that the author be advised to withdraw the present paper and encouraged to submit a much shorter paper
- that the author be advised to seek publication elsewhere

The summary report

The summary report most often consists of two sections. The first will be a checklist supplied by the editor. This will simply require the referee to check boxes or rate the paper against a set of criteria. The second section will be an open-ended report discussing the merits and faults of the paper, along with general suggestions for improving the paper including advice about the argument made or structure of the

paper, and for additional work that might be required. This discussion might be guided by questions from the editor such as:

- Does the paper fit the aims and brief of the journal?
- Is the topic of the paper interesting and pertinent for the journal's readership?
- Does the paper make a significant new contribution to the literature?
- Does the paper display sound scholarship?
- Is the paper clearly written and well structured?
- Is the paper of an appropriate length?

It is helpful to both editor and author if those things that you judge must be done before publication are distinguished clearly from those that you suggest might be done. As far as possible, a negative review should explain to the authors the weaknesses of their manuscript, so that rejected authors can understand the basis for the decision.

5. Questions you may have about refereeing

Are referees compensated in any way?

In general, no. Editors rely on professional courtesy given that the referees themselves are reliant on others to referee their papers when they submit them to a journal. Recently, some publishers have started to reward referees with discount vouchers. For example, until recently Routledge gave individuals who refereed papers for any of the journals they publish a 25% discount on any of their products. Editorial board members will receive a free subscription to the journal for the period on the board.

When can I reasonably decline a request to referee a paper?

If you are asked to referee a paper there is no obligation that you undertake this task. However, given professional courtesy and the fact that anyone who wants to publish an article is similarly reliant on referees, it is generally expected that referees will review a paper unless there is a particular reason that means that they cannot undertake the task. Such reasons might be a conflict of interest or an over-familiarity with the author and their work that hinders fair and 'objective' comment or that the paper concerns a topic the referee feels unqualified to pass 'expert' comment on. It should be noted that some non-geography journals may have penalties for refusal, such as barring the referee from submitting to that journal for a couple of years. If you must decline, let the editor know quickly (within a few days of receiving the paper), by fax or e-mail. Some journals will want you to return the paper so that it can be sent out again. Others will simply photocopy the one on file. If you do decline to review a paper it is always helpful to the editor if you provide the names and addresses of alternative referees.

How much time should I spend refereeing a paper?

This often depends on the article being read. A paper that is very well written and is almost publishable 'as is' takes less time to review because it takes less time to read and there are fewer comments to write. Similarly, a paper that is extremely poorly written with weak argument may not take long to review because it clearly is not going to get through the publication process, despite constructive criticism. Papers that display potential, but are not yet of the required standard generally take the longest

time to referee. This is because they require detailed reports that suggest ways to improve the paper. Experience tells us that a good, constructive review will take up to 3 to 4 hours to complete.

How long should a referee's report be?

There is no set length for a report, however it should be of a sufficient length that it explains fully to the editor and the author the reasoning behind a decision and ways to improve the paper to the required standard. This generally means that the review will have some substantive content. A report that consists of one or two sentences, but recommends rejection or major revisions is of little help. The basic rule is: produce a report that you yourself would appreciate.

Will I get to see what the other referees recommended?

This depends on the journal. Some journals (e.g. *Gender, Place and Culture*) have recently adopted a policy whereby all the referees' reports are sent to all the referees of a paper so that they know how their assessment compared to that of others.

Are referees reports edited or censored by the journal editor?

Generally no, but they can be, especially if a report is unhelpful, malicious or offensive.

What if I have lost the manuscript?

Contact the editor immediately and they will send you out another copy.

What should I do if I have already refereed the paper for another journal?

Inform the editor straight away. They will make a decision as to how to proceed. There might be very good reasons as to why the paper was resubmitted to the new journal. For example, the first journal might have felt that the paper was inappropriate but was more suited to the aims and objectives of the current journal. Further, the author may have felt unfairly treated or misunderstood by the first journal.

How does one become a referee?

Generally one gets selected to review papers by becoming known to the editor or an editorial board member as an expert in a particular field. So the more one publishes or presents their work at conferences, the more likely they will be asked to referee papers related to their topic of interest.

What if I want to get in contact with the authors of the paper?

If you wish to be put in contact with the author of the paper most editors will be happy to act as a go-between, making sure each party is happy to be identified before releasing contact details.