

So, Which One Do Your Referees Follow?

[Editor's note: Many of us have reason to suspect that referees often fail to read the instructions they are given. The *Astronomical Journal* might have found a solution: letting referees choose between 2 sets of instructions.

Thanks to Rebecca Johnson for calling my attention to this piece (1), which she came across while doing a project for one of my classes. And thanks to The *Astronomical Journal* for permitting CBE Views to reprint it. BG]

Refereeing for *The Astronomical Journal*

The following ideas about refereeing may seem obvious to you. Most scientists know instinctively how to judge a scientific paper. However, many prospective referees have questions about the details of the refereeing process and want to know what a journal's editor would like to see in an "ideal" referee's report. If the first version of the report below is too boring, try the second, negative, version, which follows it.

How to Be a Good Referee

1. Respond promptly to the Editor's message asking whether you are willing to referee a paper. If you have other commitments and cannot referee the paper in the time requested by the Editor (usually two weeks in the case of the AJ), let him or her know immediately so that another referee can be chosen.
2. Remember that it will take just as long to referee the paper several weeks from now as it will today.
3. Let the Editor know immediately if there is a conflict of interest problem: is one of the authors now at your institution? is one your student? your close collaborator? your nemesis? your spouse?
4. You will be an anonymous referee unless you specify otherwise. If you want to make your identity known to the authors,

sending them a copy of your report is quite acceptable, PROVIDING THAT YOU ALSO SEND A COPY TO THE EDITOR. If there is further correspondence between you and the authors, be sure to copy all the messages to the Editor.

5. If the manuscript needs a lot of copy editing, it is helpful for you to note that fact in your report, but not at all necessary for you to do that task yourself. The Journal has a staff of copy editors at the Press whose job is to correct spelling, punctuation, grammar and format.
 6. If the manuscript makes you angry, keep in mind that insulting or offending the authors will only make them feel that you are biased against them and that, therefore, they need not pay any attention to your otherwise useful review. A calm and persuasive report, making exactly the same recommendations, can be much more effective in straightening out the errant authors.
 7. These are the somewhat obvious questions to ask when you read the manuscript:
 - Is the Abstract informative?
 - Are there significant new results?
 - Are the results adequately documented (e.g., are the data included, perhaps in electronic form for the electronic edition)?
 - Are errors and uncertainties given and explained?
 - Is there sufficient reference to previous work?
 - Is the material clearly presented?
- ### How to Be a Bad Referee
1. If the Editor sends you an Email message asking whether you will be willing to referee a certain paper, ignore it; maybe he'll be run over by a truck.
 2. Never do today what you can put off until

next month. Nobody really believes that the Editor means two weeks when he says "two weeks".

3. If the author is a close friend, respond promptly; if an enemy, promise to referee the paper "by next Friday, for sure", then go on an extended trip to Antarctica.
4. The Editor doesn't really care about the paper, so Email the author directly and work a deal with him or her and then, after you're satisfied that the authors have jumped through your hoops, tell the author to tell the Editor that you "have accepted" a revised version of the paper.
5. It's not the science that you're supposed to be interested in, but the punctuation. Make a long list of misplaced commas.
6. If the authors somehow, unbelievably, neglected to reference all of your papers, make a bunch of snide comments about today's lack of proper scholarship and express astonishment that the authors, who were "supposedly educated" at a "supposedly reputable school", are ignorant of the most important papers on their subject.
7. No matter how anguished the Editor's messages to you asking the status of your referee's report, either don't answer them or promise a report "soon" and then hide the paper under a stack of junk mail.

Reference

1. Refereeing for *The Astronomical Journal*. www.astro.washington.edu/astroj/referee.html (28 March 1999).

The Lighter View consists of short articles, cartoons, quotations, or any other type of humorous material about the editing life. We invite your contributions. Send ideas to Barbara Gastel, Editor, CBE Views, Department of Journalism, 230 Reed McDonald Building, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4111. Phone 409-845-6887; fax 409-845-5408;