

# Discussing, refereeing, dealing with rejections, and keeping up to date

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# This talk

1. PhD Seminars
2. The discussant's art
3. Being a helpful and kind referee
4. Dealing with rejections
5. Keeping up to date in the field

# PhD Seminars

# PhD Seminars

Critical part of our PhD program

- Test/screen ideas before it is too late, e.g., what is the market for this paper (question, empirical context, design)
- Get feedback from a broad group of economists (other than your advisors and topic experts) to improve your papers so they can be published in top economics journals
- Practice explaining your research to others, getting them excited about it, and convincing them it is correct
- Don't only show up for your paper or your students' papers. Community is important (give and receive)

# Discussants

## Why the discussant is an important role

- At conferences, you are showing your peers that you can add value (and be smart and kind in the process, just like when you are refereeing papers for journals)
- Distilling contributions and thinking clearly ("")
- Synthesising the approach and findings
- Prioritising issues in terms of importance and tractability
- You are there to help the audience and speaker
- Help lift the ceiling of where the paper can be published
- But remember it is not your paper or your presentation
- Here, same. Should to around 3 times during PhD. Try do it well outside your area of expertise as well.

# The discussant's art

## Word for word from Chris Blattman

“A colleague and I were lamenting the state of paper discussants the other day. Seldom do we faculty teach graduate students how to be **professionals**. Even more seldom are we examples of **brevity** and wit. With that in mind, we came up with a list of tips for the budding academic:”

- Start by telling people why they should care. It is seldom obvious. Whats the big question, and whats at stake if the paper gets it right or wrong?
- Then summarize the paper. Break it down differently than the presenter. Pretend you are explaining it to your grandmother. Or, rather, your adult-attention-deficit-disorder grandmother. Keep it short.
- Say more with less. Mathematically, everything you say after your best point lowers the average quality of your comment. Pick your three best points, say them briefly, then stop talking.

# The discussant's art

## Word for word from Chris Blattman

- Now, say even less. Those three comments? Write out, in bullets, exactly what you plan to say. Now cross out half. What you think will take eight minutes will take fifteen. Bring it back to eight.
- Be constructive. A colleague once said to me: I like it when people find problems with my paper, but I like solutions more. Finding solutions makes you think (and displays it too).
- Don't discuss the small stuff. Write your little comments down, and later give them to the author. Don't bore the audience with footnotes and trivia.
- Feel free to entertain. A discussant need not merely list ideas. You can weave in an anecdote, or frame a point with a story. At least speak from a personal point of view, not a monotone benevolent overlord.
- Have fun, don't make fun. If you use humor, let it not be at the expense of anyone but yourself.

# The discussant's art

## Word for word from Chris Blattman

- Spell it out for us. Tell us why your comments matter. Say precisely what we learn.
- Aim for profound. The best discussants rotate my brain 90 degrees. They reframe the problem, or propose a novel idea. I can't tell you how to be deep. I seldom succeed myself. For me, a few things usually help. I read the paper, walk away for a day or two, then return. I ask myself questions: Do I think about a big question differently now? What convinces me, and what would convince me more? Where should the field be going? [end Chris here]

This last point is hard, but worth aiming for. Giving the presenter a new and better sales pitch is probably the most helpful thing you can do.

**Examples:** is there a model which helps us think about the results? Perhaps the surprising result is not so surprising thanks to your model? Are we thinking about the key question and concepts right, and just where this paper fits in the literature? Is the estimated quantity of interest really correct and are we interpreting it right?

# Refereeing

## Brief digression—first write for the editors

- You have to get past an editor before you get to a referee
- Abstract and introduction are really important. Some people say to rewrite both every time you open the paper up.
- We should know your research question (important) and how you will answer it (well) by the end of the second paragraph.
- We should know the contribution and exactly where it fits into the relevant literature (in economics) by the end of the introduction.
- Don't oversell your work or use weasel words. Help the reader trust you, rather than be skeptical and worried.
- Respect your readers' time. Writing is rewriting.
- Make reading your paper easy and a joy (i.e., don't make the reader work, don't frustrate the reader, again: respect their time)
- Hire an editor if you need or can (loads of academics do). Writing well matters, and is a learned skill. Invest in it. Keep learning.

# Refereeing—why listen to me?

Are these all bad opinions?

- Received a range of reports from top (5+field) outlets, over ten on a single paper (this helps with perspective)
- Regular reviewer for AJAE, WBER, World Development, Food Policy, Nature Communications, and more
- Excellence in refereeing award from WBER for last year
- Associate Editor of APPS, different perspective again
- Extensive discussions with lots of (good) editors (of good journals) over the last few years

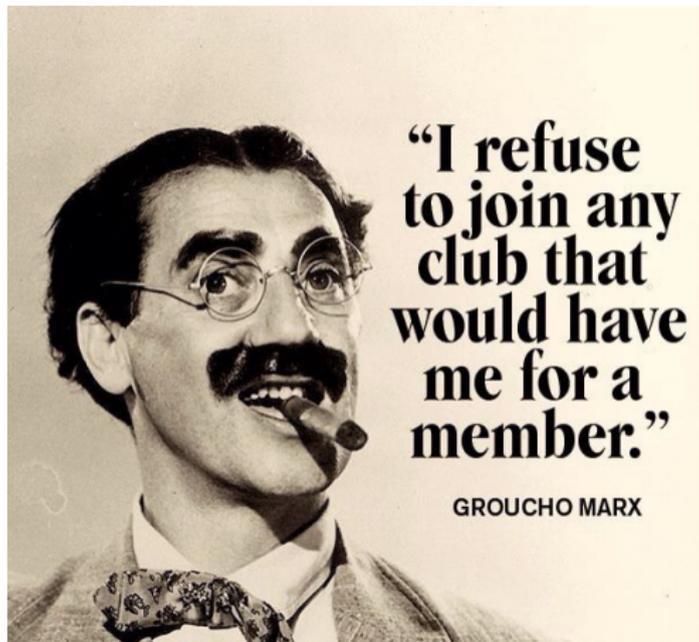
# Refereeing

## When and why to referee

- Some people don't referee for journals lower than they would publish in. This is not that unreasonable
- Refereeing is a public good, so make sure you say yes to doing at least as many as you receive on your papers
- Learn how the process works, how to get through it. You will learn something new from each one (c.f., "service")
- Read bad papers to know how to not write them
- If you say no, say no quickly and recommend someone else
- If you say yes, try be on time and quick
- How to get to referee? Submit. Meet people. Offer.

# Refereeing

When and why to referee



# Refereeing

## The objectives

- Primary goal is to help editors make decisions: recommend whether a paper is suitable for publication, potentially after revision.
- Editors in some fields are deferential. Economics: not so much.
- Most journals get more good papers than they can publish: positive reports do not and should not necessarily mean positive outcomes
- Hence, need to clearly document reasons for accepting, rejecting, requesting revisions. If not sure, document why.
- Editors also want to know what you think the market for the paper is, and the contribution. This is really important for good journals.
- Secondary goal is to help authors publish their paper
- It is fine to make few comments (or none). Reports, papers, and appendixes are too long. They're all related.

# Refereeing

The key reference

Alain de Janvry's timeless guidelines:

<https://are.berkeley.edu/courses/ARE251/2004/assignments/RRGuidelines.pdf>

# Refereeing

Four examples of instructions provided to referees

Which do think was best?

# Refereeing

## Summary

- Summary in your own words, not from the abstract
- Describe it better than the author
- Question, design, data, result

## Contribution and overall assessment

- What do we learn about the world and economics from this paper, and where does it sit in relation to prior work?
- What is the market for this paper in terms of journals?
- Current vs. potential, and what is the path like to this journal if it currently below the bar?
- Is the paper well done but just boring? If so, please say why, with respect to other works. Suggest improvements.

# Refereeing

## **Essential/major points**

- 3 or 4 major positive or negative points
- Negatives are those things that should be addressed before the paper is published
- Say how each point you raise could be addressed
- Criticisms without paths forward = unhelpful
- It is often helpful to advocate for the paper if you like it

## **Suggestions/other issues**

- Everything else that might improve the paper
- Remember that papers are too long and it is not your paper. Aim for a short report. 2 pages max.
- Like discussing, more is not necessarily better

# My inefficient referee report workflow

1. Read the abstract and intro (marking up)
2. Read the Tables and Figures, possibly id strategy
3. Read the rest of the paper
4. Identify the biggest issues, what the paper does and finds
5. Move tracked comments to a word doc
6. Pull big ones out into major points
7. Rest are minor suggestions
8. Delete most in order of unimportance until under 2 pages, even if only a few major points left
9. Come back after a few days to “tone police” yourself

# Refereeing

Discussion of some examples

Which do you think is best and why?

What else do you notice?

# Refereeing—my own random personal tips

- Considering signing your report
- If you don't, write it like you would not be afraid to put your name to it. The editors see you anyway.
- Don't put the explicit recommendation in the report, respect the editors discretion. It's just your opinion, man.
- Remember that you are there to help the editors, the authors, and the final readers of the paper, roughly in that order
- Remember that you are not the author of the paper, and you don't know the topic or the paper better than the authors
- If you like the paper, you should convince the editors it is great and worth publishing, or worth taking a risk on by inviting revisions
- Always help chart a path forward, even if you recommend reject
- Write the reports you want to receive (even rejections)

# Rejections

# Dealing with rejections

## Rejections are progress

- If you are not getting rejected, you are not aiming high enough
- If you are getting rejected, you are probably making progress, learning, and improving your work.
- Acceptance rates are low. There is noise and randomness in the process. Tastes matter, and we have a hierarchical profession where people rely on noisy but imperfect signals. You can get desk rejected at one outlet and published in another in the same or better equivalence class. This should mean don't take it personally, and, in expectation, expect rejections. They'll still hurt though.
- Even those at the top of the food chain get rejected all the time
- This goes for papers, conferences, jobs, and more.

# Dealing with rejections

## What to do when negative referee reports and rejections come

- You don't even have to read them right away. Take time to process and decide how to respond, rationally.
- Share them with your trusted colleagues and advisors. Get their thoughts and feedback too, if you are not sure.
- Assume good faith from the referee, and learn from them. It is never the reader's fault (sometimes it is, but what can you do about that?). You can almost always reduce the probability that someone else will have the same concern or frustration in some way.
- Referee pools are not large. Fields are not large. This is a repeat game. Don't ignore good reports, and good faith suggestions.

Staying up to date

# Tips for staying up to date in the field

What do I mean by staying up to date in the field?

What do you think of?

# Tips for staying up to date in the field

Get to and stay at the research frontier.

What do you define as the research frontier?

Where would you find or see it?

# Research frontier—what is it?

Simple.

Papers that are likely to be published in top general interest or top field journals in economics.

That's it.

## Research frontier—where to find it?

- Econ often has long publication lags: what is published today was started and shared years ago
- Implication: top conferences, working papers are more helpful in this regard than top journals (think directions)
- Development examples: NBER SI, SITE, NEUDC, PacDev, AEA meetings, CSAE papers (try attend)
- Look at the best job market papers (see, e.g., Redding)
- Working papers: NBER emails are the easiest (still old)
- Have a list of your favourite researchers (who publish in top outlets) and occasionally check what they are up to.

## Research frontier—where to find it?

- Life is too short to read everything. Be selective and focus on that most helpful for successful research
- Journals: top 5, AEJs, JEEA, RESTAT, JDE, if your main field is development economics. Some of these send around ToCs, which are helpful (read papers and attend seminars outside your field though).
- Twitter is incredibly helpful for staying on top of the latest research, if you use it well (be careful!)
- Attend visiting speaker seminars! They are there to expose you to the latest and greatest research, to help you learn about the frontier, and to meet your future peer reviewers, collaborators, and friends.

## Key references

1. Blattman's Discussant's Art
2. De Janvry and Sadoulet's Referee Report Guidelines
3. McKenzie's How much to referee and how to do it?
4. Bellemare's 20 rules for refereeing
5. Bellemare's How to Publish
6. Bellemare's Read Bad Papers
7. Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer's guidelines and JEP article
8. Cunningham's hidden curriculum

Find them and more references here:

[www.ryanbedwards.com/resources](http://www.ryanbedwards.com/resources)