

Communication in Computer Science

# **Criticism and Peer Reviews**

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version of 14 Sep 2015 at 12:00

# Refereeing a paper

What & why: the cornerstone of quality control.

How & by whom: reviews by your peers.

Reference: Parberry's guide for new referees.

# Parberry's guide for new referees in TCS

Which kind of paper do we have here?

- groundbreaking,
- improving,
- fixing,
- surveying,
- etc.

# The actors in presence

- The author(s).
- The editor / program chairman.
- The reviewers.

# The timeline for conferences

- A paper is submitted.
- It is allocated to PC members and often subcontracted to external reviewers.
- Reviews are collected.
- A decision is taken at the PC meeting.
- Reviews are sent to the author(s).

# The timeline for journals

- A paper is submitted.
- It is allocated to external reviewers.
- Reviews are collected.
- An editorial decision is taken:  
accept / reject / revise.
- Reviews are sent to the author(s).

# Conferences: one-way communication

Conferences are **timely**:

- Would the paper help this conference be a success?
- If not accepted, try another conference.

# Journal: two-way communication

Journals are **timeless**:

- Is the paper in archival form  
and does it meet the journal standards?
- If not, revise it and try again.



# The point of view of the author

The idea is to try to give all the information

to help others to judge your contribution;

not just

the information that leads to judging it

in one particular direction or another.

– Richard Feynman

# The point of view of the reviewer

One never notices **what has been done**;  
one can only see **what remains to be done**.

– Marie Curie

# Content of your review

You should answer the following questions:

- Which kind of paper do we have here?  
(see Parberry's guide)
- Is it correct, worthwhile, readable, etc.?
- Does it refer to related work properly?

# Form of your review

1. Convey your understanding of the paper with a summary.
2. Double up with an analysis.
3. Sum up with an assessment and a recommendation.
4. Add a list of remarks, if any.

# Context of the review

- Be objective.
- Be fair.
- Don't delay.
- Be courteous.
- Remain confidential.

## To summarize

- Reviews should be as **comprehensive** as possible.
- Reviews should be as **courteous** as possible.
- Reviews should be as **selfless** as possible.

# The job of a program chairman

Assemble the best possible program  
(at the cost of rejecting good papers).

# The job of a journal editor

Make the journal as good as possible.



# The job of an author

To cooperate with the reviewing process.

# The job of a reviewer

To provide impulse in the reviewing process.

# Choosing reviewers

- Competence.
- Availability.
- Depth / breadth.

# You, reviewer

- You are one among several others.
- Your anonymity.

# Extracting reviews from reviewers

- It may take persistence.
- The more competent, the more busy.

# Editorial strategies

- Consult more reviewers than needed.
- One week before the deadline, gently send a reminder.
- Don't add to the stress of the reviewers: if they can't make it this time, they will next time.  
It's all uncredited charity work anyhow...

# Getting credit for your reviews

- Subreviewers are often listed in proceedings.
- The editor might serve as reference.

# Synthesizing the reviews

- Accept / revise / reject.
- Editors sometimes moderate the reviewers by coming back to them.
- Get back to the author(s).



# Receiving a review

- Rod Burstall's take: a review is an offering.
- The Dilbert syndrome.

# Receiving reviews

From my close observation of writers, they fall into two groups:

1. those who bleed copiously and visibly at any bad review, and
2. those who bleed copiously and secretly at any bad review.

– Isaac Asimov

# Facts

Nobody likes a bad review.

Most reviews are critical.

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(Corollary: “and will take credit for it.”)



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- Thank the reviewers for their time: they are actually your best allies.
- Finally, consider using [latexdiff](#): it is surprisingly useful.

# Sending the revision

- Expect an acknowledgment.
- Be prepared to be moderated.
- Think of pinging the editor after 3 months.

# Choose your editor wisely

- Rare are papers that don't need any help.
- An indifferent editor is rarely of help.

# Reviews and the paranormal

Feynman's advice about the paranormal:  
keep track of presentiments,  
for you only remember them selectively.

Here: keep track of both good and bad reviews,  
for you also only remember them selectively.

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It's all about the messenger, right?

# Why reviews matter, **objectively**

Most of the time, they are the only feedback **your paper** will ever get.

A reviewer can:

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# Why you should review

You expect others to review your own work,  
don't you?

# All in all

- Peer reviews: The means of quality control.
- You should contribute to this quality control.
- Facts: most reviews are traumatic.

# Exercise

- Find a good review and a bad review on amazon.com, and
- explain why one is good and the other bad, using your own words.

## PS. About proof-reading

When making comments, it is more efficient to first describe the problem and then, optionally, to suggest a solution.

If you are short of time, just point at the problem, and let the author find a solution: most of the time, his solution will not be the same as yours, and also some of the time, a young author won't take your solution even if it is the right one, because he prefers to come up with his own solution. Technically, it is called "respecting the ownership of the author," and the younger the author is, the more important it is to respect his/her ownership.