Opinion

Attributes of an Ideal Referee

All mathematical papers must be reviewed. This is how journals maintain quality. The editor of a journal will select a ranking mathematician in the field and solicit his/her professional judgment of the paper in question. Such a "judge" is commonly called a referee.

We note that the writing of a good paper is primarily the responsibility of the author, not the referee. In particular, it is not the task of the referee to find language errors or to rewrite the paper. The referee is expected primarily to check the correctness of the paper. If the referee cannot check the details, then he/she should inform the editor and at least communicate some impressions. A referee should do the task promptly, or, if this is not possible, he/she should immediately decline to review the paper.

For the refereeing of a paper in mathematics, a useful procedure is that the referee reads the abstract, the introduction, and only the statements of theorems. After some time has passed, if the referee thinks that the paper is neither interesting nor significant, then he/she rejects the paper. Otherwise, the referee reads the whole paper as well as searches on the Internet for more information about related and similar works (to check the novelty and originality of the paper) and about the reputation of the author(s). After that, the referee may provide a definitive report including useful comments, helpful references, a list of errata, possible suggestions, and perhaps new approaches to the results.

Some criteria that may be considered by a referee in determining suitability of a paper for publication in a journal are:

· Correctness
· Novelty
· General interest
· Significance
· Originality
· Organization
· Historical overview

The first three items are indeed deduced from the fundamental precepts "Is it true?", "Is it new?", and "Is it interesting?" to which, Littlewood believed, a referee should always respond. After evaluation, the referee should explicitly recommend one of the following:

· Acceptance
· Acceptance with minor revision
· Acceptance with major revision
· Resubmission of a revised paper
· Rejection

One way to know how to be a good referee is to know how to be a bad referee! Many years in the academic trade have taught me to keep my antennae well oiled in search of these bad refereeing attributes:

· Immediately accept the papers of your friends and immediately reject papers of people you don't like.

· Check the references and the text of the paper to see whether your own papers are cited approvingly. If yes, then immediately accept the paper.

· Ask one of your students to referee the paper and send the editor the student report.

· Immediately accept a paper if one of the (co)authors is famous, and immediately reject it if none of the (co)authors is famous.

· Use your referee report as an excuse to promote your own research agenda.

· Do not write your review in a timely manner. Do your referee task as late as possible, and then do a rushed and sloppy job.

· Ask the authors to mention your name or cite papers of yours that are irrelevant to their paper.

· Write a letter to the authors and give them some suggestions or comments to improve the paper. Ask them to withdraw the paper, to add your name to the paper as a coauthor, and then to submit it to the same or another journal.

· Give rude and unkind comments about the authors (especially beginning mathematicians) and their abilities.

· Keep a paper for more than six months, and then reject it on the basis of general interest, typos, or appropriateness.

· Be vague and nonobjective when writing the referee report.

· Pay lots of attention to small, technical faults and no attention to the overall quality and substance of the paper.

· Promote your own work and demean the work of others.

· Circulate to your friends and colleagues a paper that was confidentially sent to you for review.

Nothing brings people together like shared suffering, and refereeing is no exception.

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