

Top Ten Ways to Deal with Editors and Referees

When submitting an article:

1. Make sure your paper is a good 'fit' for the journal. Consider whether your paper fits within the range of topics published recently in that journal. Here's a simple test: if your reference list does not include any papers published in the journal to which you are submitting your work, your paper is likely not a good fit. "Fit" can be a somewhat elastic concept. Sometimes it pays to go out looking for a paper or two published in the journal to which you are submitting that you can cite, as a way of signalling to the journal editor that your paper fits within the journal's scope.

2. Pay attention to any publication guidelines provided by the journal. A journal editor generally will not reject a good paper because it is a little long (though you may be asked to shorten the paper if it is accepted), but sending an 80 page paper to a journal that generally publishes 25 page papers will irritate both the reviewers and the journal editor. This will not help your chances of getting the paper accepted. If the journal does not have explicit guidelines, look at papers they have published in the past.

When you receive a decision letter from the editor:

3. If it sounds negative, make sure that it is a rejection before you move on to another journal. Editors' letters regarding their decisions often are written in code. A letter offering you the opportunity to submit a revised version of your paper is a very good outcome, even if the letter also sternly states that there is no guarantee that the revised paper will be accepted. If you're not sure how to interpret a letter you have received from a journal editor, ask a senior colleague or two to look at it.

4. If you are given the opportunity to submit a revised version of your paper, do it as soon as possible. Even if the editor does not give you a deadline for resubmission, it is in your best interest to resubmit the paper quickly. Journal editors rotate, and while one editor may be positively predisposed toward your work, her replacement may not be so inclined. Delaying can only hurt the chances of your paper ultimately being accepted.

When you resubmit a paper:

5. Include detailed letter that explains how you addressed referee concerns. The first few paragraphs of your letter should discuss how you have addressed any major issues raised by the reviewers; a discussion of your responses to more detailed comments should follow. You do not need to make changes to your paper in response to every single reviewer comment, but if you don't accept a reviewer's suggestions, you should explain why. Editors and referees may want you to change your paper in ways that you are uncomfortable with, and so you need to balance your desire to get the paper published against conceding particular points.

6. Be polite in your response to the referees. The original reviewers are likely to see the letter you send to the editor about how you have revised the paper. Thank the referees for their comments. Even if you think that the reviewer did a careless job or completely misunderstood your paper, be as courteous as you can. Keep in mind that referees are chosen to represent the readership of the journal. If the referees (who have read your paper carefully) don't understand or misinterpret your results, then you haven't explained them well enough for the casual reader to get them either.

If you are asked to serve as a referee:

7. It is okay to occasionally turn down requests to referee. Reviewing papers is a part of being a practicing economist, and the peer review system only works because people are willing to volunteer their time to referee papers. Also, reviewing papers helps you to build a reputation with journal editors (see tip number 10). That said, it is acceptable to tell an editor that a paper is not one you feel comfortable evaluating, in which case you might let the editor know what types of papers you could review, or that you are too busy at the moment to return the review in the time frame requested by the editor, in which case you should let the editor know when you would have the time. To avoid becoming overburdened with referee responsibilities, you might consider setting a 'referee budget' of a reasonable number papers to review, and then use that to guide your decisions on accepting to review papers.

8. Let the editor know promptly whether or not you are willing to referee the paper. Journal editors become very aggravated if they wait weeks to hear from a potential reviewer, only to have that person then turn it down. At that point the editor has to start over with another potential reviewer. If you have refereed the paper for another journal, also notify the editor to see if she or he would like to send it to a different reviewer (and ask for a change if you've already written negative reports on the paper for more than one journal—give the author a new draw). If the paper has not been changed since you reviewed it, you could send your earlier report with a note indicating it is the report you wrote for a different journal.

9. Budget the time you allocate to writing a referee report. Triage the papers you are asked to review. Don't spend a lot of time on papers that you think are hopeless -- explain relatively briefly why you think this and move on. Journal editors will appreciate your spending more time on papers that are stronger candidates for publication, especially if you have constructive suggestions for improving the paper.

10. Do a careful job when refereeing a paper. Reviewers acquire reputations with journal editors. While you should not spend too much time reviewing other people's papers, you should not do a sloppy job either. The positive impression that you make on a journal editor may turn out to be valuable to you professionally at a later stage. Journal editors tend to be well-regarded senior researchers, and if they have a positive impression of you based on reviews you have written for them, they may think of you when looking for people to present papers at conferences, serve as discussants, present papers at their university's seminar series, etc.

Remember your goal is to get the paper published. So if the response sounds negative, take a deep breath, drink some water, go for a walk, and then return to re-read the editor's letter and the referee reports.