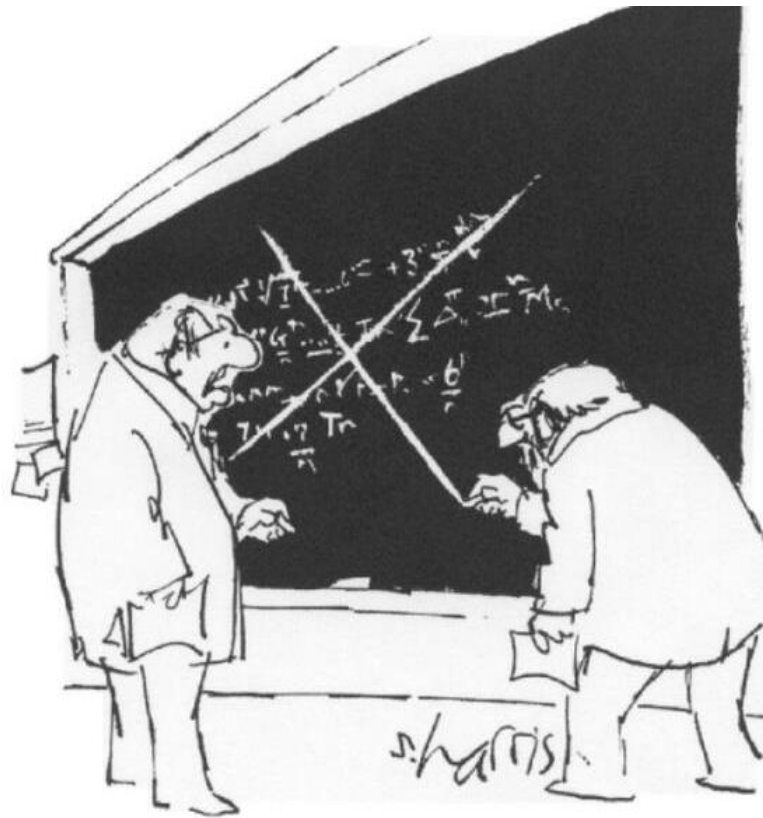


Writing and Responding to Referee Reports

Lance Cooper, Dept. of Physics
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Meet The Editors Workshop, UFRN, Brazil



"That's it? That's peer review?"

Acknowledgments



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Dept. of Physics
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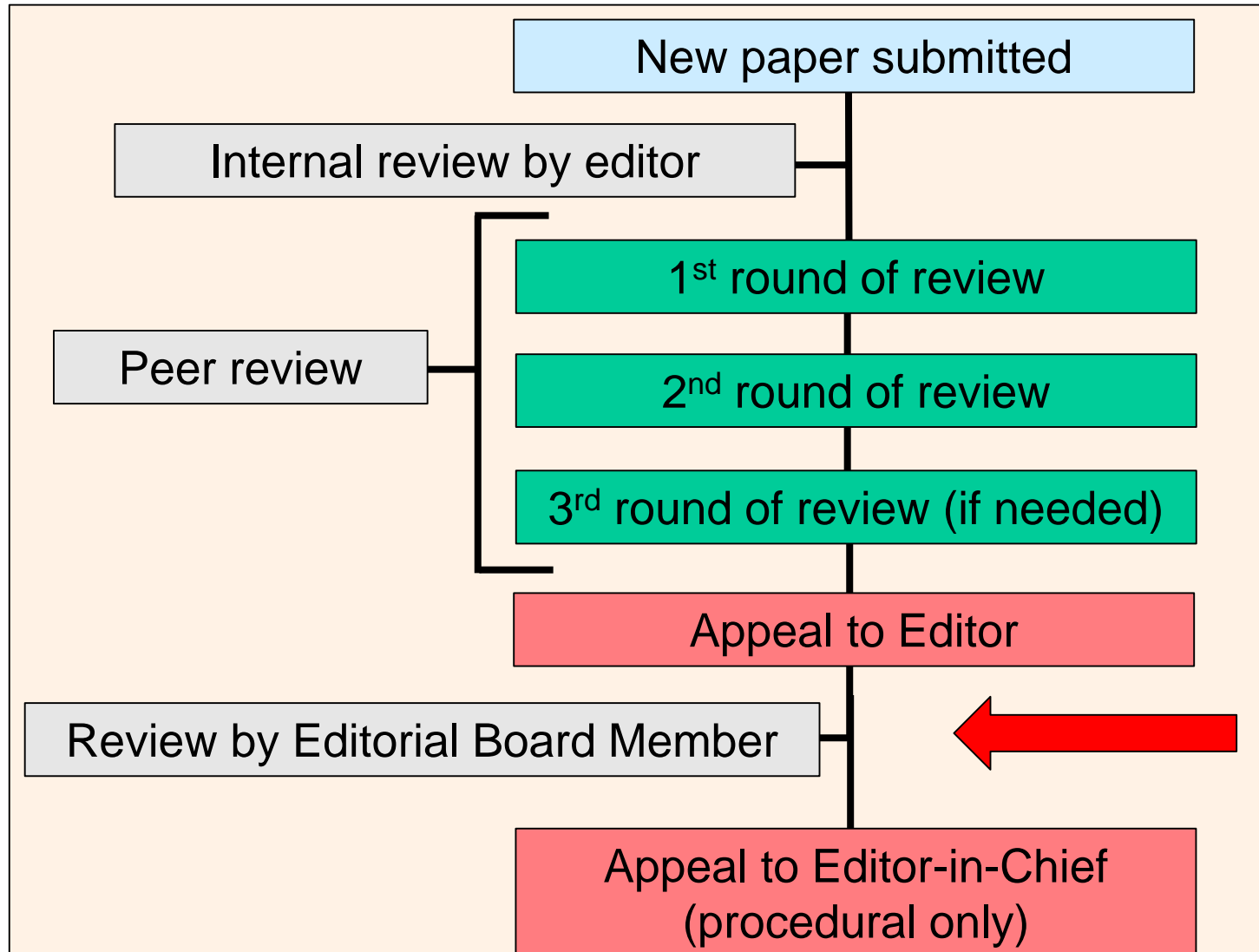
**Dr. Manolis
Antonoyiannakis**
Associate Editor
Physical Review B

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“How to reply to referees’ comments when submitting manuscripts for publication”,
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“Peer review meets analytics,” M. Antonoyiannakis,
[https://physics.illinois.edu/careers-
seminar/UIUC_Physics_Career_Seminar_Antonoyiannakis.pdf](https://physics.illinois.edu/careers-seminar/UIUC_Physics_Career_Seminar_Antonoyiannakis.pdf)

Summary of the *Physical Review* Review Process



Physical Review
Letters
Divisional
Associate
Editor, 2006-
2011

What Does a Divisional Editor/Editorial Board Member Do?

Divisional Editors/Editorial Board Members are assigned to review papers and the review process if authors appeal a rejection after peer review

- Divisional Associate Editors (DAE) and Editorial Board Members (EBM) see the complete review history and are asked to adjudicate the appeal and make a final decision on publishing the paper
- DAEs and EBMs can send the paper out for additional review or render a decision based upon the available reviews and author responses
- Unlike the anonymous peer review process, the decisions of DAEs and EBMs are not anonymous

What Does a Divisional Editor/Editorial Board Member Do?

My general impressions of peer review from this experience:

- I felt that the vast majority of reviewers were trying to help the authors, although the authors often did not appreciate this fact
- I felt that the reviewer critiques were generally reflective of the issues typical readers would probably have with the paper
- I often agreed with reviewers comments about problems with the papers, but authors sometimes ignored critiques that might have helped them improve the paper at earlier stages of peer review

How Will Your Paper Be Judged? *Physical Review Letters* Criteria

REFEREE RESPONSE FORM

(Please include this form with your full report)

Referee Please Note: This form is not a substitute for a full report

This form is to assist the Editors and is not a substitute for your written report. It may be useful, however, as an outline for your report, which should explain why the paper does, or does not, meet our criteria.

(1). Importance

I. Letters published in PRL must meet a high standard of importance and interest.

a) Please judge the importance of the paper to its specific field.

not important ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ very important

(2). Broad interest

b) Please judge the broad interest of the paper, apart from its importance to its specific field, to a wide spectrum of physicists.

not interesting ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ very interesting

(3). Validity

c) Please judge the validity of the paper.

probably not valid ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ probably valid

(4). Accessibility

II. A Letter should have an introduction and conclusion that explains, in terms accessible to a broad audience, the physics context of the work: why it is important and what has been accomplished.

Please judge the introduction and conclusion.

not accessible ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ very accessible

III. Recommendation:

NOTE: IF YOU ARE RECOMMENDING PUBLICATION IN PRL, PLEASE PROVIDE, IN YOUR REPORT, A SEPARATE STATEMENT AS TO WHY THIS PAPER IS APPROPRIATE SPECIFICALLY FOR PRL.

a) The paper should be published in PRL as it is. ☐

b) The paper should be published in PRL after minor revisions are made, without further review. ☐

c) The paper with revisions and further review, might be publishable in PRL. ☐

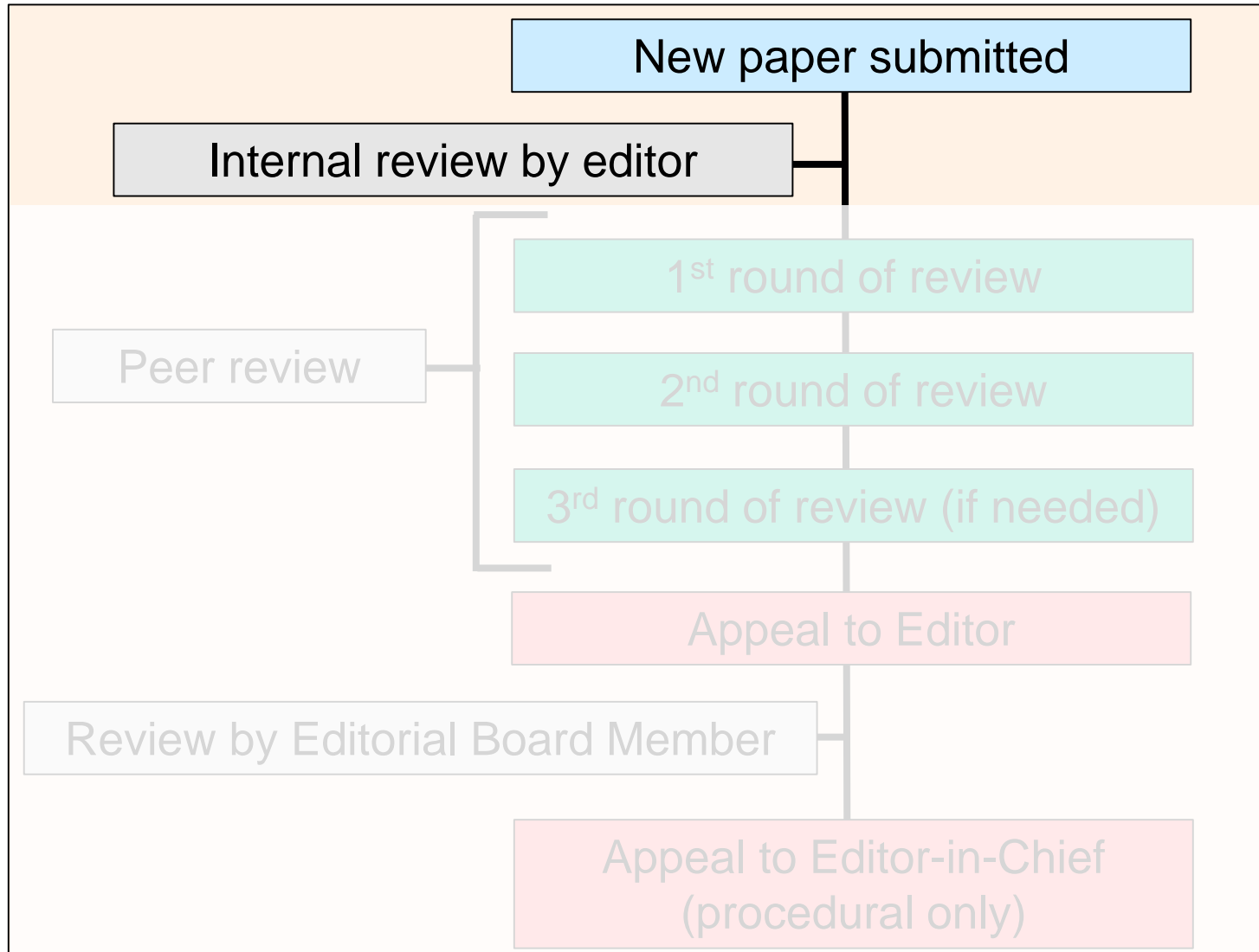
d) The paper with extensive revisions, and further review could possibly be published in PRL. ☐

e) The paper should not be published in PRL. ☐

IV. Would you be willing to review the paper again? ☐ yes ☐ no

If not could you suggest alternative referees?

The Internal Editorial Review Process



The Internal Editorial Review Process

What Is Internal Review?

- Editors assess the paper and decide whether to send out to external referees or **Reject Without External Review**
- If external review is needed, editors select the referees
- Typically, the handling editors makes these decisions themselves; occasionally, they will consult editorial colleagues, an Editorial Board Member, or a trusted expert for a yes/no opinion on whether the paper merits external review

To see full lecture, go to: https://physics.illinois.edu/careers-seminar/UIUC_Physics_Career_Seminar_Antonoyiannakis.pdf

Dr. Manolis Antonoyiannakis
Associate Editor, *Physical Review B*



The Internal Editorial Review Process

What Do Editors Look For to Make This Decision?

- They typically focus on the ***abstract***, ***introduction***, and ***conclusions***
- Is the quality of writing high?
- Is the subject matter suitable for the journal?
- What is the overall importance and quality of the paper?
- What's the punchline of the paper, and is this of interest and appeal to the journal's readership?

To see full lecture, go to: https://physics.illinois.edu/careers-seminar/UIUC_Physics_Career_Seminar_Antonoyiannakis.pdf

Dr. Manolis Antonoyiannakis
Associate Editor, *Physical Review B*



Rejection Without External Review

How Do Editors Decide to Reject Without Review?

- Paper is **too specialized**, a **marginal extension**, or **incremental advance**
- Subject matter of paper doesn't match journal readership
- Presentation is sloppy, writing is opaque
- **The introduction:** lacks clarity, no context, describes prior work poorly, no broad picture, too many technical details, no motivation
- **References:** too many old, specialized references, or self-references
- **Conclusions:** no punch-line in the conclusions

What is the main message of the paper?

Why is the paper important?

How does the paper advance the field?

To see full lecture, go to: https://physics.illinois.edu/careers-seminar/UIUC_Physics_Career_Seminar_Antonoyiannakis.pdf

Dr. Manolis Antonoyiannakis
Associate Editor, *Physical Review B*



Drafting a Cover Letter to the Editor

Typical organization of a cover letter to the editor:

Paragraph 1:

- Give title of manuscript and author list, journal name, type of paper you're submitting (regular article, Rapid Communication, Letter, etc.)
- Briefly explain the question your study sought to address and why this question is important

Paragraph 2:

- Concisely explain what was done in your study, the main findings, and why these findings are significant

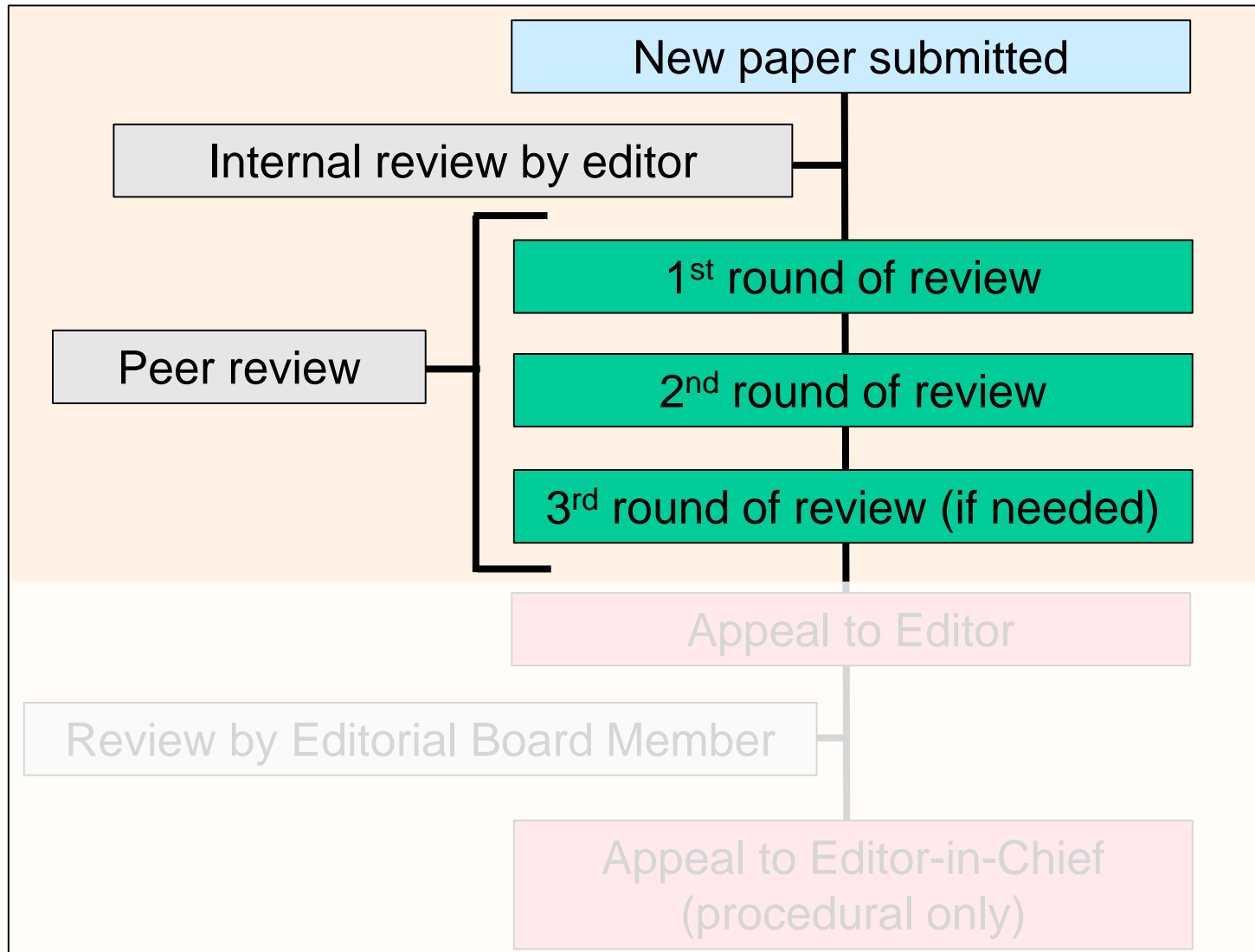
Paragraph 3:

- Briefly explain why readers of the journal would be interested in your research. This explanation should closely follow the journal's scope and readership.

Conclusion:

- List corresponding author and provide list of recommended referees and referees you'd like to avoid.

Reading and Responding to Referee Reports



Typical Editorial Responses to a Paper Submission

1. Accepted with no changes **Rarely happens!**
2. Accept with minor revision
3. Major revisions needed before reconsideration
4. Outright rejection

Possible Referee Recommendations

III. Referee recommendation:

- a) The paper should be published as it is.....()
- b) The paper should be published after minor revisions, without further review.....()
- c) The paper, with revisions and further review, might be publishable.....()
- d) The paper with extensive revisions, and further review, might be publishable.....()
- e) The paper should not be published.....()

Authors see the reviews but don't see which of these recommendations the referee selects!

Interpreting Typical Editorial Responses

The exceedingly rare immediate editor acceptance after review:

A Referee recommendation for “***Publication As It Is***” will probably generate an editor letter that looks something like this:

“We are pleased to inform you that your manuscript has been accepted for publication. Your manuscript will now be prepared for the production process.”

This immediate positive response rarely happens, so don't get upset if this doesn't happen!

Interpreting Typical Editorial Responses

A Referee recommendation for “***Publication After Minor Revisions Without Additional Review***” will probably generate an editor letter that looks something like this:

“The above manuscript has been reviewed by two of our referees. Comments from the reports appear below for your consideration. When you resubmit your manuscript, please include a summary of the changes made and a brief response to all recommendations and criticisms.”

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Interpreting Typical Editorial Responses

It is sometimes difficult to tell paper status from editor responses:

A Referee recommendation for “***Possible Publication After Significant Revisions and Additional Review***” will probably generate an editor letter that looks something like this:

“We cannot accept your manuscript in its current form, but if you do decide to resubmit, then we would consider only a substantial revision.”

OR

“The resulting reports include a critique which is sufficiently adverse that we cannot accept your paper on the basis of material now at hand. We append pertinent comments. If you feel that you can overcome or refute the criticism, you may resubmit. With any resubmittal, please include a summary of changes made and a brief response to all recommendations and criticisms.”

May sound like rejections, but they leave the door open to resubmit with significant changes

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Interpreting Typical Editorial Responses

True rejection letters from editors are typically short, with very little in the way of hinting that you should resubmit:

Referee recommendations of “***Manuscript Should Not Be Published***” will probably generate a terse editor letter that looks something like this:

“The above manuscript has been reviewed by our referees. On this basis, we judge that the paper is not appropriate for our journal, but might be suitable for publication in another journal, possibly with revision. Therefore, we recommend that you submit your manuscript elsewhere.”

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Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

A Bad Example

ELSEVIER

The Journal of Systems and Software 54 (2000) 1

www.elsevier.com/locate/jss

Editor's Corner

A letter from the frustrated author of a journal paper

Editor's Note: It seems appropriate, in this issue of JSS containing the findings of our annual Top Scholars/Institutions study, to pay tribute to the persistent authors who make a journal like this, and a study like that, possible. In their honor, we dedicate the following humorous, anonymously-authored, letter!

Dear Sir, Madame, or Other:

Enclosed is our latest version of Ms. #1996-02-22-RRRRR, that is the re-re-re-revised revision of our paper. Choke on it. We have again rewritten the entire manuscript from start to finish. We even changed the g-d-running head! Hopefully, we have suffered enough now to satisfy even you and the bloodthirsty reviewers.

I shall skip the usual point-by-point description of every single change we made in response to the critiques. After all, it is fairly clear that your anonymous reviewers are less interested in the details of scientific procedure than in working out their personality problems and sexual frustrations by seeking some kind of demented glee in the sadistic and arbitrary exercise of tyrannical power over hapless authors like ourselves who happen to fall into their clutches. We do understand that, in view of the misanthropic psychopaths you have on your editorial board, you need to keep sending them papers, for if they were not reviewing manuscripts they would probably be out mugging little old ladies or clubbing baby seals to death. Still, from this batch of reviewers, C was clearly the most hostile, and we request that you not ask him to review this revision. Indeed, we have mailed letter bombs to four or five people we suspected of being reviewer C, so if you send the manuscript back to them, the review process could be unduly delayed.

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

1. Take the referee responses seriously...they may have a point!

When reviewing both the referee reports and author responses, I often found I agreed with the referees, even when the authors vehemently objected, particularly on questions related to the **broad impact** and **importance** of the work.

- Did you make your main points clearly enough?
- Did your introduction emphasize the significance of your work relative to existing results?

Worth reading: “How to reply to referees’ comments when submitting manuscripts for publication”, H.C. Williams, *J. Amer. Acad. Dermat.* 51, 79 (2004).

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

2. Respond to referee reports completely

Respond to all referee comments, even if you don't plan to make changes, no matter how annoying you think the comments are:

- Clearly number your responses, using headings such as "Reviewer 1", then "Comment 1", then "Response", then "Changes Made"
- Thank the referees for useful or complimentary comments

Responding completely to the referee reports in this way helps you

- Think more clearly about the referee remarks
- Show the referees and editors that you took the comments seriously
- Separate different referee comments that may be mixed together in the referee reports

Example of a detailed, clear response to the referee:

Referee A Comment 2(i) *“what are the analogous discrete configurations in the case of....”*

Response: We thank the referee for this question, which helps us clarify our paper. The discrete molecular configurations represented by the pseudo-spin variable are believed to be different.... This interpretation is supported by...

Changes made in response to comment: Although we did mention this in paragraph 3 of the original manuscript, we have made this association more explicit by adding...

Referee A Comment 2(ii) *“I would say that the ‘mode softening’ (fig 1b) is not that soft. In standard cases, the energy of the phonon decreases by a few meV. In the present case (fig 1), the phonon energy decreases by about 1 meV between room and base temperature.”*

Response: With all due respect to the referee, I don’t think this criticism is justified. First, we don’t make any claims that the observed mode softening is particularly dramatic...

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

3. Respond to referee reports politely

You will be more persuasive – not only to the original referee, but also to the editor and other referees that might review your paper later – if you respond to referee remarks politely and rationally.

Real Example of a Bad Referee-Author Exchange:

First Referee Response:

"I cannot recommend this paper for publication in Phys. Rev. Lett. because essentially all the results in the paper have been published before.

The authors should be applauded for their courage to show Fig. 4 in the paper. This figure shows what has been known for a long time."

Author Response:

"We do not understand why the referee cited two currently inconsistent results as his main ground for the rejection of the present paper.

Our result is not equivalent to the previous study. The referee ignored the fact that the previous study observed behavior different from ours. Such comments are misleading."

Second Referee Response:

"In the first round I refrained from using the term 'misleading', but since the authors accused me of being 'misleading', they left me no choice:

The authors did not cite 3 recent papers. These papers deal with almost the same subject and report essentially the same result. The authors did not cite these papers on purpose, with a clear intention to mislead the editor, the referees, and the readers, as to the novelty of their work."

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

3. Respond to referee reports politely

You will be more persuasive – not only to the original referee, but also to the editor and other referees that might review your paper later – if you respond to referee remarks politely and rationally.

- Avoid antagonizing phrases, such as “we completely disagree with...”, “the referee obviously doesn’t know the field”, “the referee obviously didn’t read the paper carefully”, etc.
- Try more conciliatory phrases, such as “we agree with the referee, however...”, “with all due respect to the reviewer, we don’t believe this point is correct”, “we thank the referee for making this suggestion, we have made the following changes...”
- Even if the referee uses impolite or antagonistic language, respond collegially and rationally. The author/referee exchange will be evaluated by editors and other referees, and you’ll come across as the rational and persuasive person in the exchange.

Advice for Responding to Referee Reports

4. Provide evidence to support your responses

Don't just dismiss referee comments with a terse "we disagree", in your response letter. Support your responses to the referees the same way you would support the scientific arguments in your paper, with logic and concrete evidence

- Provide evidence presented in the paper. Consider whether you made your original point clearly enough in the first submission.
- Provide additional evidence – in both the response letter and the paper – to support your claim
- Sprinkle your response letter to the editor with positive remarks on your paper from the referees

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

1. The terse negative referee report with little explanation or justification

If you must get a negative referee report, this is a “good” of negative report to get.

- Respond politely to the report by reiterating your justifications for publishing.
- Point out to the editor in “Comments intended solely for the editor” that the referee didn’t justify the negative evaluation, making it difficult for you to respond.

2. Two referees of your paper give conflicting reports

This is another “good” kind of negative report to get.

- Respond politely and completely to the negative referee’s critiques.
- Mention in your response letter the supportive views of the “positive” referee
- Point out to the editor in “Comments intended solely for the editor” that the “positive” referee didn’t share the negative views of the “negative” referee.
- However, make sure the critical comments of the “negative” referee don’t have some merit, because sometimes these comments are justified and can help you improve your paper!

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

3. The referee offers distinctly different criticisms in different rounds of the review process

Such “moving target” reviews can be very frustrating, however...

- Don't assume the referee is out to get you...maybe they just saw new problems after reading your revised manuscript. Make sure the new critical comments don't have some merit.
- Politely and thoroughly respond to the new comments, making suitable changes to the manuscript if appropriate.
- If you don't agree with the new negative comments, point out to the editor in “Comments intended solely for the editor” that the referee is raising new criticisms not raised in the first-round review and why you disagree with those critiques. Point it out if additional referees didn't raise the same criticisms.

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

4. The referee missed some “obvious” points you thought you made

Don't assume the referee is just an idiot and/or didn't read your paper

- Consider the possibility that you didn't make your points clearly enough
- Ask a trusted colleague to read the paper to see if you can make any points more clearly
- Respond politely to the referee, indicating how you clarified your points in the revised manuscript

5. The referee is just wrong

Address the criticisms politely but with logic and supporting evidence

- Again, consider the possibility that you didn't make your points clearly enough or didn't provide enough supporting evidence
- At this point, you are probably trying to convince the editor and future referees that you're right, so be collegial and persuasive and avoid criticizing the negative referee

Responding to Different Types of Referee Reports

6. The referee is rude

Don't respond in kind.

- Respond to the criticisms politely and completely...ignore rude comments
- Again, in this case you are trying to convince the editor and future referees that you're right, and when the editor and other referees review the record, you want them to see you as the collegial and rational one
- Point out to the editor in "Comments intended solely for the editor" that you found the rude comments inappropriate.

Summary: Responding to Referee Reports

Take the referee comments seriously: they are probably trying to help and their uncertainties about your paper may indicate weaknesses in your presentation

Respond to referee comments politely and completely: persuasive logical argumentation with evidence is far more effective than angry retorts when responding to referee comments.

Make sure your Introduction, Abstract, and Conclusions convey the motivation for and punchline of your work: this is important not just for the external reviewers, but also for the internal editorial review process

Questions? slcooper@Illinois.edu