A Tale of Two Referees

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Abstract

Success in academia hinges on publishing in top tier journals. This requires innovative results. And this requires clear and convincing presentation of said results. Presentation can make the difference of one tier in journal level. A lot of useful advice on this topic is available online from well-respected outlets; see, for example, El-Omar (2014); Gould (2014); Neiles et al. (2015); Netz and Kafadar (2011); or Sachdeva (2020). This text provides a different angle.

Two types of referee

When your research is completed, it comes to preparing a manuscript for submission. You select a target journal, study its style and write your manuscript accordingly. In doing so, it is helpful to look at what will happen after submission.

The handling editor will select a number of people to referee the paper. Ideally, the editor picks at least one person whose specialty is the subject area of your paper, an expert or ‘maven;’ the maven’s opinion on technical correctness and innovation will carry a heavy weight. And the editor also picks someone to evaluate your paper’s merits from a broader perspective, who is not myopically focused on the particular subject area, a non-expert or ‘muggle.’ Sometimes, there will be several or combinations of these two types; sometimes, one of them will be missing. As this is unknown to you at the time of writing, it is wise to assume that both a maven and a muggle will referee the paper.

You need to prepare the manuscript so as to get a positive report from both the maven and the muggle. In doing so, it is best to assume the worst of them. This facilitates a more detailed description of these two types of referee.

1The muggle will almost certainly be an expert in his own area; but as far a your paper is concerned, he is a muggle.
The moody muggle

Try to look at things from that referee’s perspective: He has to spend several hours evaluating someone else’s research in an area he is only vaguely familiar with, hours that he would gladly spend otherwise. Standard arguments in your area may not be known to him, he will at best skim over the technical parts. His attention span will be short. And as soon as he has lost attention, he will write his report. He is a moody muggle. That said, the moody muggle rarely is openly hostile, just moody. Your paper should be written so as to elicit a strong positive report from him.

You have about 5 pages to win over the moody muggle. For this, you need to get him positively excited about your results and about their broader impact on the field, without over-selling. Do this as non-technically as possible. Avoid formulae as much as you can. Avoid insider talk. Accomplishing this in about 5 pages is crucial, but can be extremely difficult. The rest of the paper should be written so that the moody muggle can get a superficial understanding by skimming through it. The moody muggle is a smart guy. And if you can hold his attention long enough to hammer home your main points and innovations, without getting him confused, you are halfway done.

The mean maven

If the handling editor is any good, the maven will not be your friend. He might be in competition with you, or your results might extend, replace or contradict his own work. He might even have an interest in delaying or avoiding publication of your paper. Ergo, the mean maven. You will not get an enthusiastically positive report from him. The best you can hope for is a grudging admission that the results are correct and innovative.

The mean maven does not need convincing that your paper’s area is important; he is working on the same stuff. He does, however, have an interest that the journal is not polluted by publication of faulty, incomplete, irrelevant, incompetent or otherwise mediocre work. You need to write your paper so you do not give him any angle of attack. The mean maven will check whether all the relevant literature is cited (most likely, his name will be in the bibliography). He will be vain and he will not respond well if you denigrate his own work. He will look for errors, clumsy arguments, possible generalizations, or conceptual issues in your results. The first two must be avoided at all costs. The other two should be addressed in the paper. It is always better to discuss an issue before the mean maven can raise it in his report.

The good thing about the mean maven is that his attention span is practically unlimited. After the first 5 pages, the rest of your paper should be focused
on not giving him an opening.

Satisfying both

Eliciting a positive report from both the moody muggle and the mean maven can be conflicting objectives. As a global optimum may not exist, an iterative approach is in order: Write a first version of the manuscript to satisfy the moody muggle. Then read this from the mean maven’s perspective and re-write the manuscript accordingly. Next, read from the moody muggle’s perspective and re-write again. Repeat this. Several times. Stop only when a complete pass-through from both viewpoints does not lead to further changes. Finally, submit and wait. If you are very lucky, you can skip the next section.

Dealing with reports

Critical reports will happen. The most infuriating ones are one-line rejections. The most useful ones are detailed discussions. Before deciding what to do next, wait until you can read the reports with a sufficiently clear head. Useful feedback is not necessarily pleasant feedback. And even though some reports are positively inane, you should still try to get the most out of them. Very smart people have read your work and provided their feedback, however detailed, however positive, however reasonable. Use it and revise the paper accordingly, irrespective of whether or not it was rejected.

If the editor invites a revision, the replies to the referees should be prepared with great care. Gauge who wrote a report, a muggle or a maven. Muggles sometimes provide interesting feedback and suggestions, not all of which are practical. If there was a mis-understanding, eliminate its source and respond kindly. A maven’s suggestions should be followed to the letter, to the extent this is possible. If this is not so, respectfully but firmly stand your ground.

After a rejection, aspirations sometimes have to be adjusted. Otherwise, just move on to the next journal on your list.

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