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Developing as a writer

Refereeing manuscripts for peer-reviewed LIS journals

Refereeing a manuscript is a process of intimate writing in which the referee influences the substance and style of another s work, typically in preparation for either publication or presentation. The product of this process essentially a written narrative shared between you, an author or set of coauthors, and an editor allows you to channel your knowledge, expertise, and perspectives as a professional into constructive feedback on a writing-in-progress.

Additionally, this process allows you to closely monitor developments in the eld that are relevant to your work and interests prior to their publication. I have found that refereeing forces me to read more broadly and deeply in a way that ultimately strengthens my formal writing. Although many of the suggestions that follow are written speci cally with refereeing article manuscripts in mind, similar strategies and processes generally apply to refereeing conference papers, posters, and other genres that are subject to peer review.

Becoming a referee

Knapp and Daly (2004) discuss three ways in which you could become a referee for a journal:

> 1) being recommended by another scholar who is a reviewer, a colleague of the editor, or on the journal s editorial board; 2) being visible to the editor through the quality of your work or other scholarly activities, such as publication of an insightful book review; or 3) volunteering your services and documenting your areas of expertise.[1]

In my experience, and particularly for beginning writers, methods 1 and 3 have proven far more common. After joining the pool of referees, you may be part of a blind review process (i.e., the author does not know who the referees are, but the referees know the identity of the author) or a double-blind review process (i.e., neither referees nor the author know each other s respective identities).

In general, I will referee a manuscript when two conditions are satis ed:

> I already know something about the topic of the article or the method of investigation.

> I read the journal regularly and have a feel for what a typical article looks like in that publication.

The editor will share the set of criteria upon which referees should base their recommendations along with a reviewing form in which to enter comments.

Suggestions for reviewing a manuscript

Offer constructive feedback that would help the author turn the paper into a publishable piece of work. Conscientious editors typically weed out any woefully unspectacular manuscripts before sending them to referees, and this act indicates some amount of faith that the editor has regarding the prospects of the manuscript. (This is somewhat less applicable

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to manuscripts submitted for conferences, where every submission might receive some attention from referees.)

Resist the urge to copyedit. Editors and publishers deftly catch typographic errors mistyped references, errors in formatting and layout, spelling problems so commenting on speci c grammar, style, or usage is not an ef cient use of your time. Limit your comments to substantive aspects of the text: the logic, clarity, and coherence of the argument; the incorporation of relevant literature; and the signi cance of the ndings or conclusions. I have reviewed manuscripts that were in obvious need of thorough proofreading, and making note of this through a general comment on the manuscript was suf cient.

Be specific and support your critique with examples from the manuscript whenever possible. Fittingly, this suggestion is best supported through an example: a comment such as The introduction is unclear might be less helpful for authorial revisions than a comment like In the introduction, the author mentions the relationship between issues X and Y. Throughout the article, X appears often, while Y does not appear until the conclusion. The author should either consider reinforcing this proposed relationship throughout the narrative or focus the discussion on issue X exclusively.

Suggest additional authors and perspectives that would augment the arguments. It is dif cult, if not impossible, for anyone to have complete knowledge of the literature, and you should point out unintentional omissions of relevant background material to the author.

Remember that the editor makes the final decision of whether to publish the manuscript. In most cases, referees do not have direct authority over whether a manuscript is published; they present evidence to support the case for or, in some instances, against the publication of the manuscript. You may be afforded the opportunity, however, to send separate comments to the

editor and the author. When presented with an option to convey additional feedback to the editors, I typically identify and reinforce those comments that are non-negotiable (e.g., errors in data analysis) and those comments that reasonable people may disagree with (e.g., judgments about relevant and irrelevant literature).

Write to meet the deadline provided by the editor. Letting a manuscript languish on your desk or your hard drive is discourteous to authors and editors alike. If you are unable to review and return the manuscript in a timely manner, please let your editor know so that the manuscript can be assigned to another referee.

Be prepared to break up the refereeing across several blocks of time. Reviewing a manuscript when you are rested, gracious, and alert is far more effective than trying to do so when you are tired, irritable, or distracted. When an article appears in print, an author will occasionally tip his or her hat to the anonymous referees as part of the acknowledgements; this is one of the bene ts of the process that justi es all of the investments you have made to strengthen the author s writing.

Additional resources

For those interested in the history and mechanics of the refereeing process from multiple perspectives, I recommend Margaret Stieg Dalton s review (Refereeing of scholarly works for primary publishing) in the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* (1995, vol. 30, p. 213 50).

Rob Kitchin and Duncan Fuller introduce additional strategies for reviewing manuscripts in Appendix 3 (Refereeing for Journals, Publishers and Conferences) of *The Academic's Guide to Publishing* (Sage, 2005).

Note

1. M. L. Knapp and J. A. Daly, *A Guide to Publishing in Scholarly Communication Journals,* 3rd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).