

How to reject a paper you don't like but don't know why

anonymous referee

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Here is a quick and effective process for justifying the rejection of a paper to a conference in computing.

Step 1

Suggest that you have read the paper, by pointing out that it isn't the paper you would have written. In particular, it:

- doesn't solve your problems;
- doesn't cite your papers;
- doesn't use your notation.

This will establish your credibility.

Step 2

Choose two of the following options. Add detailed comments to suit.

- If the paper surveys an area of new research then point out that no particular problem has been solved. If the paper solves a single problem then criticise its lack of breadth.
- If the paper is very clear but omits details then criticise it for being technically vague. If the paper is technically precise (complete definitions, special cases, etc) then criticise it for being obscure.
- If the paper discusses its own limitations then repeat these as if they are fresh objections. If the paper is strictly positive then comment that it can't be a good as it sounds.
- If the paper gives copious references then say that the area is over-worked. If the paper gives only key references then complain of poor citation.
- If the paper gives many self-references then hint at the egotism of the author. If the paper gives few self-references then hint that the results may have been published elsewhere.

Sample review

General comments:

The submission "Foozle domains" develops a denotational semantics for foozles. However, the authors have not shown how this contributes to the implementation of a programming language, and without this the whole effort seems pointless.

Although easy to read, the lack of technical detail makes this reviewer uneasy. It is not clear that all of the details are covered in the associated technical report (which I have not read).

There have been any number of papers on foozle semantics recently, as the authors are aware. Do we really need another one?

Detailed comments:

Why do you insist on using capitals when lower case is perfectly fine?

You should cite my friend's work here as it is also about foozles.

How to tell if you have received such a review

All of the criticisms above are usually legitimate and should be taken seriously. However, there are some tell-tale signs of this process at work. Here are two.

The main claims of the paper are not addressed. It sometimes happens that the submission does not make the main claims clear, but if you can point to a sentence on page one that say "In this paper,..." then it is reasonable to expect these claims to be addressed. Hardy put forward three criteria for accepting a mathematics paper.

- Is it true?
- Is it new?
- Is it interesting?

If none of these questions are answered there may be a problem.

The referees contradict each other. For example, one says it's all old material, the other says the background is too compressed.