

**EC2410 Urban Economics**  
How to write a referee report

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As part of the course you are asked to write three referee reports. The object of these assignments is fourfold: to describe what the paper does; to describe whether and why the paper is important or interesting; to point out and describe problems in the paper; and finally, to recommend whether the paper should be published in its current form, whether the editor should ask for a revision, or whether the paper should be rejected.

You can say just about anything you want as long as you can back it up and you are polite about it.

The object of a referee report is to partly offer the editor your opinion on the paper and to partly save the editor from reading the paper closely. Given this, it is important that the report be shorter than the paper. For this class, don't go above two pages if you can possibly help it. For real reports, try to keep them short, but longer reports can be OK for good, important papers that can still be improved in lots of ways.

Following is an outline that will work for most papers:

1. Describe what the paper does. If it is an empirical paper describe the estimating equation and data. It is almost always a good idea to reproduce the estimating equation. If theory, sketch the model.
2. Describe what the paper finds.
3. Explain why the paper is important (or not).
4. Describe any problems with the paper that should be fixed before it is published, or that should disqualify the paper for publication. If it is an empirical paper, you will want to consider/address each of the following topics:
  - Explanation of the identification strategy.
  - Explanation of the Data and results.
  - Discussion of Internal Validity.
  - Discussion of External Validity.

A little more generally, your job as referee is to think of all the reasons the paper might be wrong, and either suggest solutions or argue that no (tractable) solution is possible. A weak referee report reads like a book report. A good referee report engages with the paper's argument and finds ways to make it better, or a reason to reject the paper's findings.