

Reviews: Writing, Reading, and Responding

Robert Atkey
Strathclyde University, Glasgow, UK
robert.atkey@strath.ac.uk

4th February 2021

Why?

PEDESTRIAN

EQUESTRIAN



The Process —

- You write down your best ideas
backed up with proofs and other evidence
- You submit it to a workshop, conference, or journal
- ... time elapses ...
- You get back reviews
 - crushing your dreams / recognising your genius¹

¹Delete as appropriate

The Process (from the other side) —

(For workshops / conferences)

- Chair gathers a Programme Committee
- n papers get submitted
- Committee writes reviews, or solicits external reviews
- At larger conferences: Author response period
- Committee builds a programme of $n - r$ selected papers

Why have reviews? —

(For workshops / conferences)

- Maintain scientific standards
- Manage the attention of the community
- Construct a balanced and interesting programme

Why do reviews? —

- You don't get paid!
- Help the community
- Shape the community
- (Most?) Institutions recognise reviewing

Writing Reviews

Writing a review —

- What does the paper claim? is this clear?
- Is what they claim interesting?
- Does the paper support the claim? proofs, benchmarks...
- Is the paper written to a high enough standard?

Typical Structure —

- Score and Expertise
- Synopsis of the paper
- Recommendation (accept / reject) and high level justification
- List of detailed points
 - “Things that I liked”
 - “Things that could be improved”
- Low-level comments
- Typically, reviews are addressed to the author
 - primarily feedback to them.

Possible Reasons for Rejection —

- Technical flaw
- Too small a contribution
- Unclear contribution
- (Very) Bad writing
- Out of scope, or wrong audience

(side remark: Basing abstract data types on set theory is more appealing to me and I have always wondered why the community is so attached to category theory.)

Be Constructive! —

- The authors will have put a lot of work in!
- The authors have their vision, which may differ from yours
- Try your hardest to recognise good points in a paper
- Be specific
- Don't be dismissive
- Try to offer suggestions for improvement
 - Don't be patronising
 - Don't rewrite the paper
 - Don't suggest a “lesser” venue
 - Don't suggest finding a native English speaker

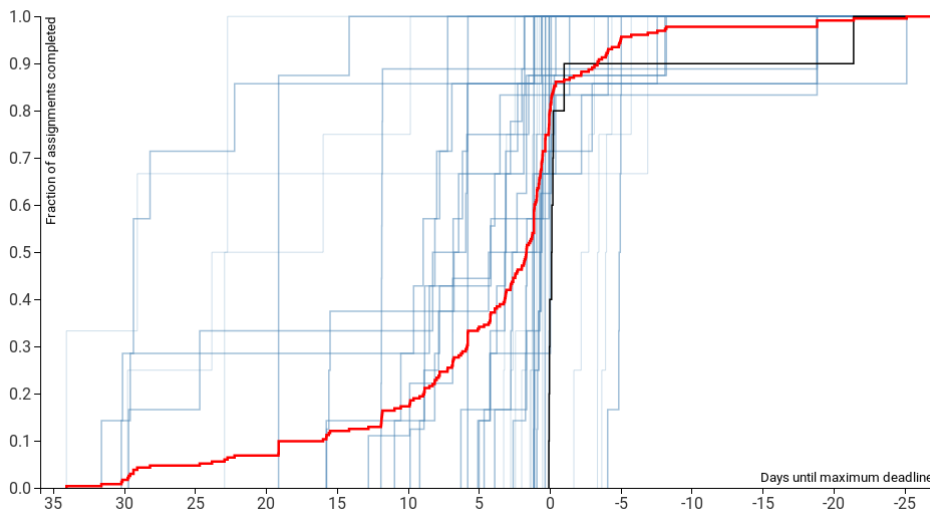
"outwith" nitpick: no offense intended, but I originally thought this was a typo. Perhaps "outside" could do for the US part of the audience?

: (

Difficulties —

- Badly written? or do I lack the right background knowledge?
- Conference papers don't often include full proofs
- Checking proofs in detail is time consuming
- “I was going to do that!”

Procrastination



Ethical issues —

- The authors have submitted their work in confidence
- It is their decision on how it is released
- It is their decision on how to present their work
- Do not discuss the work or your review publicly
- You are anonymous, but authors are not (in the end)
- Declare conflicts

Reading reviews

Reading (the bad way) —

- Spend the notification day refreshing emails, panicking
- Due to timezones, the email arrives when you're asleep
- You sleepily read reviews on your phone, missing any nuance
- If it is a reject, spend the day angry, before reading properly
- You may still be angry after that ...

Reading —

- Try to understand the reviewers' point of view
- At best, free, unbiased, expert feedback
- Even if accept, take criticism and suggestions seriously
- Unfortunately, bad reviews happen

Writing responses

Responses —

- Take time to digest the reviews
- Thank the reviewers
- Opportunity to correct misconceptions
- Answer direct questions directly, make answers easy to find

Conclusions

- Reviews help maintain the research community

This is what is interesting

- Writing reviews is hard work
- Take reviews seriously
- Use reviews to build the community you want to see!