Reviews: Writing, Reading, and Responding

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

4th February 2021
Why?
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 you 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

Days until maximum deadline

Fraction of assignments completed

[Graph depicting procrastination with days until maximum deadline and fraction of assignments completed]
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!