

# Doing Applied Research

*MIXTAPE TRACK*

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**Section 5. Refereeing:**  
The nuts and bolts of being a good referee



# When should you decline a request to referee?

- Do you know the journal? Do you want to publish there?
  - Quid pro quo agreement. If you have never heard of the journal and don't anticipate publishing there, then consider politely declining the invitation to referee.
    - Is the manuscript directly related to your research?
    - How long will it take to write a review?
- Do you know the editor/journal?
  - Can you suggest an alternative referee?
    - Provide full name, affiliation, and email address
  - Remember, editors have long memories and they can move from one journal to another



# When should you decline a request to referee?

- Do you know the author(s)?
  - Can you be objective?
  - How close is your relationship with the author?
    - At the JHR, being reviewed by a co-author is associated with a .096 increase in the probability of positive recommendation, or a 21% increase relative to the mean of 0.45 (Carrell et al. 2022)
  - Email the editor and ask for direction
  - Alternatively, get your report back quickly and let the editor know that you have a relationship with the author

## Reference

Carrell, Scott E., David N. Figlio, and Lester R. Lusher. 2022. "Clubs and Networks in Economics Reviewing." NBER WP No. 29631.



# When should you decline a request to referee?

- Have you refereed this manuscript before?
  - Email the editor and ask for direction
  - Alternatively, get your report back quickly and let the editor know that you've reviewed the paper before
  - Has the manuscript changed?
    - If they have addressed your comments, it is ok to recommend "accept as is."
- Do you have a competing working paper?
  - E-mail the editor and ask for direction
  - Alternatively, get your report back quickly and let the editor know that you have a competing paper. Carefully describe the overlap between the two papers.
  - Is your working paper cited?
    - How long has your working paper been available?
  - Is your working paper described accurately?

# Your report



- Begin report with a quick summary
  - Describe, data source, ID strategy, main findings
- What is the bottom line?
  - Describe the importance of the contribution and shortcomings
- Number your points
  - Numbering provides structure/guidance
    - Major comments questions, and suggestions
    - Minor comments, questions, and suggestions
- Be constructive
  - Your job is not to impress the editor
  - Ask if you're not certain
  - Try not to stargaze



# Your report

- Try to keep the report to one or two pages
  - If you are recommending revisions, your report will usually be longer than if you are recommending rejection
    - In general, 5-page reports are useless
- You are writing with two audiences in mind
  - Provide enough background so that the editor can understand your major points. Remember, the editor probably has not read the paper carefully.
    - You're trying to persuade the editor, not the author(s)
    - If you're writing a positive report, keep in mind that another referee is almost certainly writing a negative report. Be clear about why you like the paper.
    - If you're writing a negative report, try to put yourself in the author's shoes. Be clear, but not gratuitously negative or pedantic.
  - Other comments, suggestions, and questions can be directed to the author(s). You can assume an intimate knowledge of the methodology and institutional details.

# Negative but constructive



In Table 4, the authors split the sample based on the gender of the instructor. Unfortunately, they run into power issues. In columns (1) and (2) of Table 4, neither of the  $\delta$  estimates is statistically significant and my strong suspicion is that the estimates of  $\gamma$  (the effect of being assigned a female TA) are not distinguishable from each other in a statistical sense...

In Table 6, they split the sample based on student ability (as measured by composite SAT scores) and again run into power issues. In columns (1) – (3) of Table 6, the estimates of  $\gamma$  and  $\delta$  are not precise enough to say anything meaningful...

On page 18, the authors write that...and then go on to make a mechanism argument...I am skeptical of these interpretations given the power issues referred to above. Would it be possible to collect more data? With more data, the authors might be able to convincingly answer these questions.

# Positive and constructive



The authors identification strategy is clever and the research question is of first-order importance, although...

1. The empirical setup is a standard DD (and then a DDD) regression model. However, instead of using an indicator (ban vs. no ban), the author uses an index that is intended to capture the strictness/intensity of the smoking ban. The index is described on pages 15-16 and involves weighting the four different types of bans by the number of workers by establishment type (e.g., workers in bars, restaurants, small pubs, dancing clubs, party tents). My preference would be to start by showing the results of DD and DDD regression models that use a simple ban vs. no ban indicator...After describing these results (and showing the corresponding event-study figures), I might introduce the index. I want to emphasize that the author's index is not incorrect, but it is not as transparent as the setup I am describing and transparency is key to convincing the reader that the research design is valid.





Q&A ( $\approx$  10 minutes)