Reviews: Writing, Reading, and Responding

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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 genius

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?

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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!”
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!