

# The Reviewing Process

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# Peer Review

- Peer review is a **keystone** of modern academia
  - Evaluation by people of “**similar competence**”
    - Where there’s a fairly **high bar** for minimally sufficient competence
    - No “**external**” gatekeepers
    - The **community of practice** enforces standards
      - “**Locally**” e.g., within a subfield, field, or discipline
      - “**Globally**”, i.e., across academia
- Peer review at different stages
  - Collegial feedback and discussion
  - Gatekeeping publications (refereeing, editing, soliciting)
    - *What we typically mean*
  - Determining career moments (e.g., viva, promotion)
  - Ongoing engagement in the literature
- Key aspect of **academic freedom!**

# Academic Freedom

“...academic staff have **freedom** within the law to **question and test received wisdom**, and to put forward **new ideas** and **controversial or unpopular opinions**, **without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges** they may have at their institutions;”

— Education Reform Act 1988

(This act also abolished academic tenure in the UK!!!!!!)

- Negative academic freedom
  - You cannot **lose** things
- Positive academic freedom
  - You have **support**
- And yet
  - In a resource constrained society we must make **choices**

# What Peer Review Doesn't Do

- (Let's focus on refereeing)
- It doesn't guarantee **truth!**
  - How could it?
- It doesn't guarantee **quality!**
  - People are overloaded
  - People are distracted
  - People are biased
- It doesn't protect against **malpractice!**
  - It helps *mitigate* fraud and other malpractice
  - See above
  - Also, fraud circles
- It doesn't necessarily **improve your work!**
  - Sometimes it makes it worse!
  - The dreaded second reviewer

# Retraction

- Sometimes papers are **retracted!**
  - Relatively **rare**, even for “bad” papers
  - Most critical for **malpractice**
    - Fraud, plagiarism, etc.
    - Whether intentional or not
  - Sometimes done for **severe error**
  - Result of both self- and other-policing
- Worth attending to
  - Cf **Retraction Watch**
    - <http://retractionwatch.com>
    - Seems to be down right now

# A Reviewing Process

- **Situate** the paper
  - What's the genre, audience, venue, and purpose?
- **Skim** the paper
  - Get the gist
  - Look at the major structural features
  - Note tricky bits, highlights, or possible problem areas
- **Read** carefully
  - Section by section and paragraph by paragraph
    - For each section and paragraph, ask:
      - Do I know what's being claimed?
      - Do I know why it exists and why it's *here*?
      - Do I know how it fits in with the rest?
  - Take notes on Content, Structure, and Style
- **Reflect!**

# Reflection

- Were your “skim” impressions accurate?
  - If not, why not?
- What’s the major takeaways from the paper?
  - Why should someone read the paper?
- What are the strengths?
- What are the weaknesses?
- What is your overall impression?

# Write Up the Review

- Make sure you know the review standards...
  - One line reviews are rarely acceptable
  - Hundreds of pages of comments on typos are rarely acceptable
  - Tone standards vary, but being abusive is discouraged
    - Blunt and direct is usually good, but standards vary
- and structure
  - There's often a form or at least basic guidance
  - Generic:
    - Major comments
      - Content
      - Structure
      - Style
    - Minor comments
      - Similar
  - See “reflection” slide!

# In Most Reviews

- **Content** discussion dominates
  - Is what's claimed **plausibly true**?
  - Is there **good evidence** for the claims?
  - Are the claims **interesting**?
  - Are the claims **well situated**?
  - Etc.
- **Structure and style**
  - Can be **reasons to reject!**
  - Probably **dominate your reviews** in this course
    - Which is ok!
  - Should strive to be **constructive**
    - Not just what's wrong but how to fix
    - You do not need to correct all typos!
      - Unless you are explicitly proofreading

# Reviewing What You Don't Know

- You will be reviewing things **you don't understand**
  - In class, obviously
  - In general (e.g., for end of year interviews etc.)
  - In your field!
- **Bluffing** isn't a good idea
  - Don't **pretend you understand** what you don't
  - Choices:
    - **Withdraw** (I'm not competent to review it)
    - **Research** (become competent)
    - Review from a "**naive perspective**"
      - Even if you don't understand it all
        - » You might spot problems (not just in structure or style)!
        - » Or offer advice for making it more accessible
        - » Or ask useful questions!

# In Class

- Be prepared to **review the reviews!**
  - Do you **understand** the review?
  - Does it **help** your paper?
  - Did it **miss** something?
  - Did it **catch** something you didn't notice?
  - Is it **constructive**?
  - Is it **insightful**?
- The best reviews are (mostly) content oriented
  - Though sometimes extremely helpful presentation comments happen!