

How NOT to review a paper

The tools and techniques of the
adversarial reviewer

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Disclaimer

- Many of the following comments can appear in a review
- But they should not be the main reason for rejection (they often can be fixed in a revision)
- Keep those comments in mind as you write, to prevent their use by your future reviewers

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⚠ Did you ever feel adversarial while reviewing?

Adversarial conditions

- A typical review may be conducted clutching a crumpled and stained printout of the paper while packed into coach class on an intercontinental flight with a small child kicking the seat from behind...



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⚠ Make sure that you review papers in proper conditions

⚠ Make sure that your paper is as readable as possible in worst-case settings

Motivation

- The initial reason for rejection may be as vague as gut feeling, or a lack of enthusiasm for the problem or approach taken
- But the reviewer needs to concoct a set of reasons to support the judgment
- Therefore, the adversarial reviewer will seek out every last negative point of the paper to make it seem that there is no hope

The Goldilocks method

- Find an aspect of the paper and complain that it is either « too hot » or « too cold »



The Goldilocks method

- “There are insufficient examples to illustrate what is meant”
or “ There are too many obvious examples which interrupt the flow”
- “Insufficient analysis to justify the interest of the method”
or “The approach is clearly of theoretical interest only”

The Goldilocks method

- Most satisfying on re-submissions!
First complain that proofs are missing, and then complain that the proofs are obvious and could be omitted.
- Can be done in a single review: say that the paper is too long and wordy, yet complain that many important details are missing.

If you can't say something nasty...

- ... don't say anything!
- If there are any section for which the adversary reviewer is unable to find anything meaty to complain about, they will simply skip over these in their review

Silent but deadly

- Very low score with minimal comment
- Guarantee extra frustration for the authors as it gives no help in identifying what to improve

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- Pick a different problem in roughly the same field
- Decide how you would tackle it
- Berate the authors for not having done so



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- Vicious variant: pick a problem worked on by the same set of authors, and quote sentences from their papers

Introduction

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⚠ Motivate with facts rather than subjective statements

Related work

- Often the most badly written, so plenty for the adversarial reviewer to complain about
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⚠ Always discuss how previous work *relates* to your work. Use it to highlight your contributions.

Related work

- Say that “many important references are omitted” without suggesting any
- Suggest some papers with absolutely no relation to the submission, and leave the authors scratch their heads
- Make a casual reference to a very prolific researcher, or to a common surname, which could refer to one of hundreds of papers

Related work

- Cast suspicion on an innocent third party by making repeated references to another researcher, so that the authors believe that this person is the adversarial reviewer

Evaluation

- Dismiss synthetic data as being unrealistic
- Dismiss real data as being just a single instance, unrepresentative of “real” real data
- Complain that the datasets are too small
- Complain that the plots are too small to read, affect to suffer from color-blindness

Conclusion

- Disagree with each claim of what was accomplished (« No you didn't »)
- Respond to any statement of the form “In the future, we will ...” with the simple request “Please don't”

Throughout the paper

- Methodically highlight every spelling error and typo
- Mix up minor issues and major concerns to disorient readers of the review
- Say that several parts would need revision by a native English speaker
This is most devastating when all authors *are* native speakers
- Conclude by saying that the paper cannot be accepted “in its present form”