Lecture 7.1: Referee Reports and Editorial Review

AREC 570 / ECON 530 · Unit 7

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Before class

- AAEA, assigned *AJAE Refereeing Criteria* (Agricultural and Applied Economics Association 2013)
- Ethridge, Appendix D, “Guidelines for Critiquing Papers” (Ethridge 2004)
- U.S. EPA, assigned peer review criteria for a research proposal (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2016)
- Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer, “Preparing a Referee Report” (Berk et al. 2015)

Learning objectives

By the end of class, students should be able to

1. Trace a manuscript from submission to an editorial decision
2. Identify which journal roles coordinate, assess, advise, and decide
3. Apply reviewer ethics and current AI rules to common situations
4. Explain how a referee’s assessment informs an editorial decision

Publication decisions

Who decides whether a paper is accepted?

- The author controls the submission and any revision
- Referees provide expert assessments and recommendations
- The editor weighs the paper, reports, journal fit, and possible revisions
- The editor makes or communicates the decision under the journal’s process

Sources: Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer summarize the distinction between the referee (as adviser) and the editor (as decider) (Berk et al. 2015)

From submission to an editorial decision

1. The author submits a manuscript and required materials
2. An editor screens it for fit, contribution, and readiness for review
3. If it proceeds, the handling editor invites suitable referees
4. Referees assess the paper and send reports and recommendations
5. The editor weighs the reports and communicates a decision
6. A revision invitation may lead to another review round

Journals assign these tasks to different roles and may decline a paper before external review

Sources: Wiley reviewer guidance and Elsevier reviewer guidance, checked 14 Nov 2026

Why can the outcome feel uncertain?

- The journal’s fit and contribution standards require judgment
- Referees may bring different expertise and reach different assessments
- An editor may give more weight to one concern than another
- A revision can address some concerns and leave others unresolved

The assignment of editors and referees introduces variation, but the decision still ultimately rests with the editor

Editorial roles and journals

Roles around one submission

Role	Typical contribution
Editorial office or managing editor	Checks files and coordinates submissions
Handling editor	Obtains reviews and makes or recommends a decision
Associate editor or equivalent	Handles or advises on papers, depending on the journal
Referee	Assesses the paper and recommends an outcome

The title **managing editor** may describe an academic editor with decision authority or an administrative role. Check the journal’s structure

AJAE: four editors and associate editors

- The current board lists **four AJAE editors** and identifies one as managing editor
- It also lists associate editors
- AAEA states that each editor handles a share of submissions and makes editorial decisions on those papers
- Associate editors assist the editors in manuscript review

Sources: AJAE board, AAEA editorship call, checked 14 Nov 2026

AEPP: article types shape editor roles

- The current board lists a **managing editor**, **submitted article editors**, a **featured article editor**, and editorial board members
- AAEA describes the managing editor as coordinating submissions and the editorial team
- Submitted article editors manage review of original research submissions
- AEPP specifies double-anonymous review for submitted articles

Sources: AEPP board, AEPP author guidelines, AAEA role description, checked 14 Nov 2026

Food Policy: co-editors and external referees

- A 2025 journal editorial describes **co-editors-in-chief** supported by **co-editors**, a title formerly called associate editor
- It describes review by at least two subject experts without conflicts for papers other than editorials
- Elsevier states that editors are responsible for final editorial decisions

Sources: Food Policy at 50 years, Elsevier ethics, checked 14 Nov 2026

JEEM: editorial screening

- *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* publishes research on environmental and resource economics
- Its publisher says the journal screens submissions before external review and desk rejects some papers for fit or quality
- The editor’s decision letter determines whether a rejected paper may be reconsidered

Source: Elsevier’s JEEM journal page, checked 14 Nov 2026

JARE: editors make the final decision

- *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* lists four editors
- The editors assess each submission's suitability for the journal
- Suitable papers typically go to at least two independent reviewers under double-blind review
- JARE states that its editors make the final acceptance or rejection decision

Sources: JARE editorial policies, JARE editors, checked 14 Nov 2026

Reviewer responsibilities

Before accepting a review invitation

- Check your expertise and whether you can meet the deadline
- Disclose conflicts that could affect impartiality and ask the editor for guidance
- Keep the manuscript and review correspondence confidential
- Obtain the editor’s permission before involving a student or colleague
- Request citations only when they have a scholarly reason, including citations to your own work

If you suspect plagiarism, fabrication, or another integrity problem, send the concern and its basis to the editor. The journal handles any investigation

Sources: COPE reviewer ethics, Wiley ethics guidance, checked 14 Nov 2026

AI rules for AJAE and AEPP reviewers

Wiley publisher guidance, checked 14 Nov 2026

- Do not upload any part of a submitted manuscript, including figures or tables, to a generative AI tool
- A reviewer may use AI to polish the wording of a report while keeping the manuscript confidential
- Disclose such AI use to the handling editor when submitting the report
- Keep the assessment and responsibility for the report with the human reviewer

Sources: Wiley peer-review AI policy, AJAE referee instructions, AEPP author guidelines

AI rules for Food Policy and JEEM reviewers

Elsevier publisher guidance, checked 14 Nov 2026

- Do not upload the manuscript or any part of it to an AI tool, including a private tool
- Supportive use may include improving report language or a background literature search without confidential material
- Use only a private tool for permitted support and retain human control of the assessment
- Disclose the tool and purpose in the review report; basic spelling and grammar checks need no disclosure

Source: Elsevier generative AI policy for journal reviewers

JARE reviewer AI guidance

JARE’s public editorial and author policies reviewed on 14 Nov 2026 do not state a reviewer AI rule

- Keep the submitted paper confidential
- Follow the review invitation and any instructions in the submission system
- Ask the editor before using AI assistance if the journal’s rule is unclear

The Wiley and Elsevier policies on the preceding slides belong to their respective publishers

Sources: JARE editorial policies, JARE author guidelines, checked 14 Nov 2026

Reviewing a paper

First pass: question, fit, and contribution

Start by identifying

1. The research question and the claim the paper makes
2. The journal audience and contribution relative to cited work
3. The part of the paper that most needs support

The current AJAE criteria ask about fit, contribution, scholarship, and presentation.

Ethridge asks reviewers to follow the argument and address general problems before sentence-level edits.

Sources: current AJAE criteria, Ethridge Appendix D (Ethridge 2004)

Second pass: evidence for the main claim

- **Data and measurement:** Who enters the sample, and what does each central variable record?
- **Empirical strategy:** What comparison identifies the quantity of interest, under which assumptions?
- **Results and robustness:** Which estimates support the central claim, and which checks probe its limits?
- **Interpretation:** Does the conclusion stay within the population, measures, and design?

Mark the page, table, or sentence supporting every major concern

Sources: current AJAE criteria, assigned AJAE criteria (Agricultural and Applied Economics Association 2013)

Major concerns and smaller suggestions

Major concern: Resolving it could change the main inference, contribution, or suitability for the journal

Smaller suggestion: It improves clarity, presentation, or a secondary analysis without changing the central claim

An actionable major comment identifies the relevant passage, explains the consequence, and proposes a feasible response

Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer ask referees to separate changes needed for publication from optional suggestions (Berk et al. 2015)

Next class

Lecture 7.2 addresses the written report, confidential advice to the editor, recommendations, and responses to criticism

References

Agricultural and Applied Economics Association. 2013. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics: Refereeing Criteria for Judging the Merits of Journal Submissions*. Reviewer guidelines.

Berk, Jonathan B., Campbell R. Harvey, and David Hirshleifer. 2015. *Preparing a Referee Report: Guidelines and Perspectives*. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2547191.

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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. 2016. *Integrating Human Health and Well-Being with Ecosystem Services: Peer Review Process, Evaluation Criteria and Rating Classifications*. Science to Achieve Results Program, EPA-G2016-STAR-A1/A2. https://www.epa.gov/research-grants/integrating-human-health-and-well-being-ecosystem-services-request-applications-rfa.

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