Lecture 7.2: Referee Reports and Author Responses

AREC 570 / ECON 530 · Unit 7

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Before class

- Boonpramote, *Writing for Economics Journals* (Boonpramote 2000)
- Choi, “Rejection and Revision” (Choi n.d.)
- Fryer, “A Response to Steven Durlauf and James Heckman” (Fryer 2020)

Bring one passage from Choi about responding to criticism and one from Fryer where the author defines the scope of a claim

Learning objectives

By the end of class, students should be able to

1. Explain the purposes of comments to authors and confidential comments to the editor
2. Distinguish necessary revisions from optional suggestions
3. Explain how recommendations inform an editorial decision
4. Describe a direct, verifiable response to a substantive comment

Preparing the referee report

Two audiences for a referee

Report to authors	Confidential comments to the editor
Explains strengths and substantive concerns	Gives an overall recommendation and its reasons
Shows the evidence behind each concern	Assesses whether there is a path to publication
Offers feasible changes or clarifications	Notes conflicts, expertise limits, or integrity concerns

AJAE asks referees to keep the accept or reject recommendation out of the report to authors

Sources: AJAE referee instructions, Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer (Berk et al. 2015), checked 14 Nov 2026

Preparing a report to authors

1. Summarize the question, claimed contribution, and main result
2. Identify the concerns that affect the main claim or journal contribution
3. Give evidence and a feasible response for each major concern
4. Group smaller suggestions after the substantive concerns

The author should be able to locate the issue and understand what evidence or revision would address it

Sources: Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer (Berk et al. 2015), AJAE referee instructions, Ethridge (Ethridge 2004)

Necessary changes and suggestions

Necessary for publication

- A concern changes the credibility, meaning, or contribution of the central result
- The report explains why the issue matters and what would resolve it

Optional suggestion

- A change may improve clarity or extend the paper without determining publishability
- The author can consider its value and cost

Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer ask referees to make this distinction explicit (Berk et al. 2015)

Example: connect evidence to a comment

Illustrative claim: Revised SNAP stocking standards improved household diet quality

Evidence described: A change in the number of SNAP-authorized retailers

> The reported outcome is retailer authorization. It does not measure household purchases or diets. Please limit the conclusion to the change in authorized retailers, or provide direct evidence on purchases and diet quality

The comment identifies the measure, explains the gap in the claim, and gives the authors a feasible response

Confidential comments to the editor

Summarize the paper’s contribution, principal strengths, and decisive concerns

- State a recommendation and explain its basis
- Say whether a revision could address the main concerns
- Describe where your expertise is limited
- Raise possible research-integrity problems with specific evidence through this channel

The substantive assessment should be consistent with what the authors receive

Sources: AJAE referee instructions, Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer (Berk et al. 2015), COPE reviewer ethics, checked 14 Nov 2026

A recommendation is advice to the editor

- The referee assesses the paper and recommends an outcome
- Another referee may emphasize different strengths or concerns
- The editor evaluates the paper and reports together
- The editor or delegated journal role communicates the decision

At AJAE, each co-editor handles a share of submissions and makes decisions on those papers. JARE states that its editors make final acceptance or rejection decisions

Sources: AAEA AJAE editorship description, JARE editorial policies, checked 14 Nov 2026

Example: advice to the editor

> I have completed my review of the manuscript “Insert Title Here” (MS 26XXX), which was submitted for consideration in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*. After a thorough review of the manuscript, I recommend a rejection.

> The manuscript does XYZ… The question is relevant and the data effort is substantial, but the paper is not yet publication-ready and, in its current form, does not provide a sufficiently credible basis for the policy conclusions. I have outlined my main concerns below: [List main concerns here].

> Thank you for considering my comments. Should you require further clarification on my report, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be happy to review the paper again, if requested.

Why recommendations can differ

Referees may agree on the facts and still differ about

- How much the question contributes to the journal
- Whether a concern can be resolved in one revision
- Whether a requested analysis is necessary for the central claim
- How the paper fits the journal's readership

Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer describe contribution as a particularly judgment-dependent part of a report. The recommendation should explain the judgment (Berk et al. 2015)

What an editorial decision communicates

- Acceptance, a revision invitation, or rejection
- The main reasons for the decision
- The conditions and deadline for a requested revision
- Whether another review round is expected or possible

AJAE’s referee form distinguishes acceptance without revision, acceptance with revisions, revision and resubmission, rejection, and definite rejection. Other journals use their own categories

Source: AJAE referee instructions, checked 14 Nov 2026

Responding as an author

Read the decision letter first

- Identify what the editor asks the authors to resolve
- Separate concerns requiring analysis from requests for explanation
- Locate inconsistent requests across reports
- Plan the manuscript changes and response letter together

Source: Choi's discussion of rejection and revision emphasizes careful attention to criticism (Choi n.d.)

Make the response verifiable

For each substantive comment

1. Restate the concern accurately
2. Explain the analysis or textual change
3. Identify the section, page, table, or line changed
4. Explain any remaining limitation or reasoned disagreement

A response letter helps the editor and referees check the revised manuscript efficiently

Sources: Choi (Choi n.d.), Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer (Berk et al. 2015)

Example: cover letter summarizing major revisions

> On behalf of my coauthors as well as myself, thank you for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our paper for further consideration in Food Policy.

> As we hope to convey in our detailed responses to the reviewers, as well as a separate editorial response, we considerably revised the paper to address the comments and concerns.

> What follows is a summary of the main changes made to the manuscript, with a focus on the substantial changes to our empirical approach.

> First, we did X… Second, we did Y… Third, to address Z, we did this…

Rejection and subsequent revision

- Identify the editor’s decisive reasons for rejection
- Decide which concerns require new evidence, a narrower claim, or clearer writing
- Revise before submitting to another journal
- Check the next journal’s audience and submission requirements

Public scholarly response

Fryer’s response to published criticism

Fryer answers a public critique by Durlauf and Heckman.

The reply addresses the scope of the paper’s claims, selection into police interactions, and the interpretation of police narratives (Fryer 2020)

The authors chose to address a criticism, providing evidence and reasoning that address the public critique.

Closing points

- Referees advise editors with reasons and evidence
- Editors weigh those assessments and make or communicate decisions under journal rules
- Reports distinguish publication concerns from suggestions
- Authors address criticism with manuscript changes that an editor can verify

References

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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Ethridge, Don E. 2004. “Guidelines for Critiquing Papers.” Appendix D in *Research Methodology in Applied Economics: Organizing, Planning, and Conducting Economic Research*, 2nd ed. Blackwell Publishing.

Fryer, Jr., Roland G. 2020. “A Response to Steven Durlauf and James Heckman.” *Journal of Political Economy* 128 (10): 4003–8. https://doi.org/10.1086/710977.

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