

## The process of standardised refereeing of professional publications: a reference framework for the panel of referees of AFBM Journal

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**Abstract.** This paper contains instructions for intending referees of the *AFBM Journal*, - *Australian Farm Business and Farming Systems Management Journal* – a refereed publication of the Australian Farm Business Management Network (i.e. AFBMNetwork). The authors want to ensure that: (1) the papers submitted to AFBM Journal will have a common standard of evaluation; (2) the referees will make an informed decision, while optimising their time; and (3) the refereeing opportunity will encourage and uphold the author's interest in publishing. Logistical issues in the process of refereeing professional publications are summarised. The paper contains a refereeing format to be used by the members of the Referee Panel of *AFBM Journal*.

**Keywords:** instructions to referees, scientific refereeing, referee reports, scientific paper

### Introduction

Professional publications usually require an external review as part of the process of ensuring minimal standards of quality. This approach is often called peer-review, and the reviewers are called "referees" (Smith 1990). Peer-review of a scientific publication is accepted around the world as the standard for releasing scientifically sound information. It may not be a perfect process, but it is thought to be the best available system. The role of peer review has been discussed at length since it was established as a first stage in the process of scientific publishing (Forscher 1965) though not many descriptions of systematic reviewing are found in the literature (Rosenzweig et al. 1994). The essential nature of the peer-review process is twofold: first, to help editors decide which papers to publish; and second, to help authors hone their work and revise their documents to ensure their work displays the required rigour and meets the publication standards of

the journal to which they are submitting (Action Research International 2003; Stewart 2003).

Although the process of peer review or refereeing of professional publications is crucial to the overall process of publishing, peer reviews remain largely under-researched and under-informed (Gosden 2003), potentially leaving the process to some subjectivity. Though refereeing is an important public service, referees typically learn to produce referee reports without any formal instructions; they learn by practice, by feedback from editors, by seeing referee reports from their own papers, and by reading referee reports written by others (Smith 1990). This is an issue that should be seriously considered in order to ensure that the overall process of reviewing and publishing is fair to writers, while also facilitating the referee's job. In the case of multiple refereeing there should be common, clear and simple patterns of evaluation that reviewers should follow to ensure a

balanced review of a paper, and avoid the pitfalls described by Pannell (2002).

This paper aims to present insights to clarify the value of peer review and to ensure uniformity of the refereeing process. The paper explores the complexities of the referee's job and presents a model that ensures the rigour and optimisation of the refereeing process. It also offers instructions to referees. Appendix 1 contains the Refereeing Format for papers submitted to the *AFBM Journal*.

### **The complexity of refereeing professional publications**

A *referee* is a peer who has the opportunity to help authors improve the effectiveness of their message and to strengthen the analysis and interpretation of results, while being a guardian of professional quality and rigour (Waser et al. 1992).

Refereeing a publication is an issue that must be viewed not only from the perspective of enhancing the quality of information but also as an excellent opportunity to improve scholarship and one's own writing by benchmarking with the writing of other authors.

A referee is the person who has been given the opportunity to *mentor* an author in order to strengthen his/her publication opportunities. Though the process of refereeing basically implies a process of evaluation of quality, a fundamental assumption in the relationship between author, referee and editor is one of high regard and respect for each other. Because of this professional relationship, it is expected that the referee's comments should encourage the author to feel committed to complete the paper at the level of quality suggested by the referees, and required by the journal for publication.

Sometimes rejection of the work is necessary. Even in these circumstances, a professional approach demands that the review is presented in a manner that

encourages eventual publication somewhere else. Rosenzweig et al. (1988) highlight that this type of "negative" comment can even be helpful to journal editors and authors.

Constructive criticism and suggestions should be made in a positive manner. A fundamental marketing principle is to "make the customer feel important, as a means to ensure a positive purchase outcome". This could be applied to refereeing of papers to achieve as a final outcome a high quality paper ready for publication.

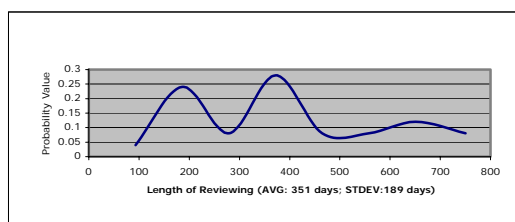
The key to a good review, particularly when the referee's comments suggest fundamental changes to a document, is to convince the author that there are legitimate problems to be solved, and that the referee's comments offer a pathway for solutions. On the other hand, the end point of a referee's non-constructive comments is that a potentially valuable author may simply change the publication outlet or may archive a set of worthwhile results.

Pannell's data (2002) from Figure 1 suggest two typical types of referees in terms of efficiency in returning of reviewed papers. Reviewers who exceed 300 days should be excluded from referee panels. Pannell's data suggest that the best range for reviewing is between 1 and 300 days. However, considering that optimal decision-making processes are going to be implemented for the AFBM Journal refereeing process, and that 'technological advancements will facilitate this process, the scientific editors will make sure that referee panels will operate within the range of 30 and 90 days for paper reviewing. Probabilities are against this objective but decision-making and organisational processes are on the side of the AFBM Journal.

### **A model for refereeing scientific publications**

The proposed refereeing model encompasses the following four areas:

Figure 1: Probabilistic Distribution of Review Time



Source: Pannell, 2002

### **Evaluation of the document settings: style, layout and structure**

This area evaluates whether the requested *standards for layout, formatting, overall organisation and structuring of the contents* of the paper are as per the *AFBM Journal*, or other particular journal requirements. Title and heading settings, use of capital letters, margins, captions of tables, figures, diagrams and plates; proper writing of formulas and acronyms; quality of the citations; quality of English usage and quality of paragraphs in terms of structure and connectness to ensure a coherent argument are the main issues to be reviewed. The list of contents should be consistent with the first-level headings of the paper and it should be centred on the first page of the paper. Names of authors, their organisations and email addresses should be checked.

The referee should consider scoring this area in a radical manner, either poor or excellent.

### **Evaluation of the contents of the document**

This area evaluates whether:

- a) the *title* of the paper makes sense, is informative and clear, concise and attractive. It is expected that the title will cover the argument of the document as a whole;
- b) the *abstract* is concise, informative and holistic. The abstract should convey the purpose of the study, materials and methods, highlights of results and conclusions in a simple

though attractive manner to the reader;

- c) the *introduction* informs the reader about the background to the topic and places the reader in the context of the issue under study; it identifies the critical issues that justify the topic and outlines the major components of the paper;
- d) the *objectives* and/or *hypothesis* of the study are clear and achievable, and they properly encompass the problem statement of the paper;
- e) the *conceptual framework* is supported by the theory or literature review, and provides evidence of the author's familiarity with the most up-to-date information about the topic;
- f) the *methodological framework* is appropriate to the subject, and to the research paradigm under which the enquiry process was conducted. The techniques used for the analysis are applied thoroughly and suitably;
- g) the *discussion of results* is set out clearly and logically, and is accompanied by adequate explanation and interpretation. The analysis is considered to be exhaustive;
- h) the *conclusions* are relevant and cover the total set of key objectives described at the beginning of the paper;
- i) the *scholarship* of the author is evident by the quality and quantity of relevant and recent references, and the integration of his/her own concepts with other authors' statements.

### **Evaluation of the relevance of the document**

This area evaluates whether the reviewer considers that:

- a) the document is a *well written piece of research*;

- b) the document gives evidence of *independence of thought and approach*;
- c) the document evidences *systematic knowledge* and/or *creative interest* in the field of study;
- d) the structure of the document, the conceptualisation and the critical analysis give sufficient evidence that the exercise has been carried out with *rigour*;
- e) independent of a reviewer's personal position in terms of the research paradigm used, the practical value of the issue, the expertise of the researcher, and other similar issues, the reviewer considers that the author has made a *contribution to knowledge*, at any level; has supported well his/her *critical analysis position*; has made a *good synthesis* of an issue, or has developed *innovative approaches or conditions* for further exploring the topic from new perspectives.

### **Selective evaluation of issues not considered above**

Selective evaluation of issues that are not specified in the standardised refereeing format is always an option that the reviewer may consider. The particular issues encompassed by this section are left to the professional judgment of the referee.

### **Score ranking**

The suggested ranges for evaluation of the paper are defined as: Poor (P); Acceptable or Average (A); Good or Above Average (G); Very Good (V); and Excellent or Outstanding (E).

Now, we will refer the reader to the format presented in Appendix 1. Having completed the evaluation, the reviewer will have recorded one entry in each row of the evaluation matrix. Giving each entry the value 1.0, the reviewer needs simply to add up the column scores and multiply each of them by the weighted

value per column. A total of all the weighted scores, divided by the total number of evaluated variables and multiplied by 100 will give a score between 0.00 and 100 for the paper. A *score ranking* detailed in the final part of the refereeing format indicates where the paper stands for publication purposes. A score less than 60 points implies that the paper should be returned to the author, to consider the reviewer's comments and adjust the paper accordingly for resubmission. A score between 60.1 and 74 indicates that the paper is approved for publication, however there are corrections that need to be undertaken by the author. Final acceptance of the paper is left to the judgment of the Journal Editor after the author has undertaken the adjustments. A score between 74.1 and 89 indicates that the paper is approved for publication with corrections left to the discretion of the Journal Editor. Finally a score beyond 89 indicates an excellent piece of work ready for publication.

### **The refereeing process**

When a paper is submitted to the *AFBM Journal*, it is immediately catalogued according to a three-part sequential code, i.e. (1) a textual code representing the disciplinary area to which the paper has been assigned; (2) the date of submission, and (3) a consecutive number within the disciplinary area.

The refereeing process includes an initial thorough review by the scientific editor of the disciplinary area to which the paper has been assigned. The scientific editor will decide whether to continue the process of peer reviewing, consulting, if necessary, with the executive editor of the Journal. An anonymous referee will be contacted to undertake the reviewing of the paper. Should the scientific editor and the anonymous referee disagree on the score ranking (i.e. volatility >20%) a third referee will make the casting decision.

Other than the journal editor and the scientific editor, all other members of the panel of referees are kept anonymous, and only identified in the refereeing process by internal codes.

### Instructions to referees

Review of professional publications, although conducted as objectively as possible, is not normally independent of the reviewer's personal worldview, i.e. *Weltanschauung* (Checkland 1999). Gosden (2003) highlights a common positional trilogy of perspectives of a referee:

- a) *ideational*, when the effectiveness of the review is directed more towards the revision of the technical subject matters;
- b) *interactional*, when the reviewer concentrates on the capacity of the writer in transferring the message to the reader;
- c) *textual*, when the reviewer emphasises aspects of the text itself, (e.g. format, length), rather than concentrating on an analysis that encompasses the three issues in a balanced manner.

Also Gosden (2003) highlights the fact that his research indicated a strong personal orientation of referee's concerns, and a natural concentration on the evaluation on the *interactional* issues of the paper.

We recognise that the referee's job, though complex, can be conducted in such a way that a twofold benefit can be derived from it: firstly for the author of the paper to enhance his/her opportunity for quality publishing; and second, as an opportunity to serve the professional community and enrich the scholarship of the referee.

A referee should not agree to be the reviewer of a paper when he/she believes there is a strong conflict of interest, e.g. when the author is identified and there is a professional

research relationship; when the referee and the author are co-researchers in a current research project; or when the researcher and the referee have a history of unresolved conflicts or disagreement in scientific terms.

After the journal editor has catalogued a paper, and advised the scientific editor, the external referees will be contacted and a coded copy of the paper will be attached to an electronic message. A refereeing format will be attached to the coded paper; otherwise it may be downloaded from the AFBMNetwork website.

Referees are advised that the manuscripts are documents of restricted circulation that are not to be disseminated by any means prior to their publication in a specific issue of the *AFBM Journal*.

Expected time for refereeing is four weeks (28 days). After this time, it is expected that the referee will send an electronic report to the journal executive editor at the following address: [afbmjournal@orange.usyd.edu.au](mailto:afbmjournal@orange.usyd.edu.au).

### Conclusions

By applying predefined standards the *AFBM Journal* will enhance the quality of the review process for papers submitted to it for publication.

The authors of this paper expect that by defining a method that will optimise and standardise the reviewing of professional publications, not only will the authors of the *AFBM Journal* benefit, so, too, will the wider professional community.

Application of minimal rules and standard processes for the interaction among referees, authors and editors will ensure the quality of the *AFBM Journal*, making it a credible and attractive publication outlet for farm business and farming systems management professionals in Australia and overseas.

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## AFBM Journal

### Appendix 1. Refereeing Format

<b>Evaluation of Settings of the Document.</b> <i>This area evaluates whether</i>	P	A	G	V	E
1 The paper is consistent in terms of <i>requested standards</i> for layout, formatting, overall organisation and distribution of contents					
2 The <i>tables, figures and plates</i> setting out is adequate (captions, numbering, source)					
3 The <i>citations</i> are set out in a proper manner					
4 The <i>paragraphs</i> have thematic unity and they build on each other to create a coherent argument					
5 The <i>language</i> expressions are plain and ideas are clearly expressed					
<i>Comments:</i>					
<b>Evaluation of Contents of the Document.</b> <i>This area evaluates whether</i>					
6 The <i>title</i> makes sense, is clear, attractive and concise. It covers the paper argument as a whole					
7 The <i>abstract</i> is concise, informative and holistic. It conveys the purpose of the study, materials and methods, results and conclusions in an attractive manner to the reader					
8 The <i>introduction</i> informs the reader about background to the topic, identifies the critical issues that justify the topic and outlines the major components of the paper					
9 The <i>objectives and/or hypothesis</i> are clear and achievable, and they properly encompass the problem statement					
10 The <i>conceptual framework</i> (i.e. literature support) evidences sufficient familiarity with up-to-date information about the topic					
11 The arguments are well supported with <i>references</i> (i.e. suitable and abundant citations)					
12 The <i>methodological framework</i> is appropriate to the subject of the paper and the techniques used are applied thoroughly and suitably					
13 The <i>discussion of results</i> is set out clearly and logically and is accompanied by adequate exposition and interpretation. The analysis is exhaustive					
14 The <i>conclusions</i> are relevant and cover the total set of key objectives of the paper					
15 The references offer good evidence of the <i>scholarship</i> of the author					
<i>Comments:</i>					

P: Poor; A: Acceptable/Average; G: Good; V: Very Good; E: Excellent

	P	A	G	V	E
<b>Relevance of the Document.</b> <i>This area evaluates whether you consider that</i>					
16 The document is a <i>well written piece of research</i>					
17 The document evidences <i>independence of thought and approach</i>					
18 The document evidences <i>deep knowledge and/or creative interest</i> in the field of study					
19 The structure of the document, conceptualisation and critical analysis give evidence that the analysis has been carried out with <i>rigour</i>					
20 Independent of your personal position about the issue, you consider that the author has made a <i>contribution to knowledge</i> – at any level-, has supported well his/her <i>critical analysis position</i> , has made a <i>good synthesis</i> of an issue, or has <i>developed conditions to further explore</i> the issue from new perspectives.					
<i>Comments:</i>					
<b>Selective Evaluation</b> <i>Optionally, this area evaluates issues not considered above, e.g.</i>					
There are unnecessary areas within the paper or areas with overemphasis					
Important issues that should be considered are missing					
Length of the paper is not acceptable (either too short or too long)					
<i>Comments:</i>					
FINAL SCORE = Summation of weighted score cells, divided by total number of variables and multiplied by 100					Totals per column
					Column weighted value
					Weighted score per column
Summation of weighted scores x 100%					= $\frac{(\quad)}{(\quad)} \times 100 =$
No. of Variables					

Paper Code:  
Referee Code:

**Paper Title:**

Date of Sending of the Paper:  
Date of Completion of Review:  
Days in Reviewing:

**Final recommendation about the paper:**