

The Young Economist's Guide to Professional Etiquette

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Nearly all advanced graduate students and new assistant professors demonstrate astounding naïveté in their non-substantive professional dealings. Graduate programs in economics offer courses that lead to written drafts of important research; they teach little about how to refine those drafts and, more generally, about the personal interactions that cut and polish intellectual diamonds in the rough. I provide here a short course aimed at removing that naïveté and helping young economists to avoid *faux pas* that might reduce their success in the profession.

If I Am Not For Myself, Who Is For Me?

With tenure decisions usually made $5\frac{1}{2}$ years after you start your first full-time academic job, a leisurely revision of your thesis and slow submission for publication court disaster. A major reason for denying tenure at most schools is lack of publications resulting from the researcher's slow start. Committee work, lecture preparation and advising students can quickly fill your schedule. At least one manuscript from your thesis should be sent to a journal before you have finished your first year as an assistant professor. Better still, have the entire thesis material submitted by that time, then move on to other research. Unless you discipline yourself to produce research and try to publish it, it simply will not happen.

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Young economists are often extremely diffident about presenting their work. Remember, though, good research is rarely done in solitary confinement; and appearing inexperienced in public leaves you no worse off than obscurity and anonymity. A presentation can improve your work, acquaint senior scholars with it, and raise your visibility with editors and potential employers.

Present your work at seminars, professional meetings and conferences. These last in particular often welcome younger people, and can be broadly attended. If you do so, make sure you get the paper to discussants at least 10 days before the meeting. At least one well-known economist has killed off many relatives in excuses about tardy papers and has a wide reputation for irresponsibility.

Do not be embarrassed to send your work to more senior people (but do not be forlorn if few or none respond). A simple cover note stating that the recipient might be interested is sufficient. Do not write a letter praising your work; and never attempt to enhance the recipient's interest by criticizing others. I received a cover letter that asked, "Are 20 million Americans wrong, or are [the authors' antagonists] wrong?" This appeal generated neither respect nor interest. An advanced graduate student asked if he should mail his revised paper to a senior economist who had already provided comments. Except for very close friends and colleagues, you cannot ask people to read multiple drafts. His only "hook" was to send the revision as a courtesy, with thanks for the earlier comments but with no expectation of eliciting further aid.

The chief rule in presenting your research orally is to make sure that you convey the paper's main contribution. Too often, a junior lecturer will spend a large fraction of the allotted time reviewing the literature or engaging in needless algebraic pyrotechnics. Stick to your point. You have every right to tell a pesky interlocutor that you will handle a question after the presentation, provided you do so gently. One-and-a-half hours are enough to demonstrate what you have done and why it is important, if you prevent others from wasting time and do not yourself dissipate the time with trivia.

When is a draft ready to send out for comments and presentation? Except for seminars at your own institution (where the participants may be more friendly, or at least more forgiving), I recommend using the draft before the one you plan to submit for publication. By this time the roughest edges are rounded off, yet it is still possible to improve the work greatly. Waiting until the near-final version turns your interactions with other scholars into mere formalities.

How to respond to written and oral comments? *Don't* respond to written comments that you think are foolish or correct, and don't, as one student proposed, write a detailed refutation. Other than offering thanks for the comments when you next see the person, no written response is necessary unless the point is partly correct and would benefit from further discussion. For oral comments (including those offered at seminars), immediate thanks are

always in order, for both brilliant insights and complete nonsense. Disputation may be beneficial, but only to advance understanding *by both parties*, not to score debating points.

The deepest expression of gratitude is explicit thanks in the acknowledgment footnote of the paper. Thank people who offered major substantive comments that you incorporated, but avoid the usual callow exculpation of them. If you have borrowed heavily and fairly generally from someone else's work, be sure to include a statement to that effect in the footnote or elsewhere in the paper. A journal editor asked one department chair about a young colleague whom a referee accused of wholesale plagiarism. The young man had not plagiarized; but the problem would have been avoided (and the paper perhaps not summarily rejected) if he had noted his intellectual debt. Beyond these, the footnote should include only your title, affiliation, and thanks for any grants that supported the work.

An editor is unlikely to choose someone whom you have thanked to referee your paper. Thus, some economists strategically fail to thank people, hoping for a friendly referee. Others thank someone who has not seen the paper, as a talisman against that person being chosen. DON'T PLAY THESE GAMES—the gains are not worth the potential costs of being caught.

You now revise your paper in light of the comments that *you* thought were useful. Make sure the paper is not overly long, as no editor wants to publish even 50 typescript pages, and few referees wish to read that much. Your writing style may not win you a Pulitzer Prize, but it should not be so horrendous that it masks your ideas. (A good guide is McCloskey, 1987.) Check that the paper is not riddled with typing errors; they may lead a referee to infer that the substance of your work is also careless. Verify that all pages are included; on several occasions I have received papers to referee that were missing pages.

Do not worry about the detailed style instructions that appear in many journals. Those are for the final submission of an accepted paper. Editors are not prejudiced against a legibly-typed submission that is not in the journal's final format. Even if the journal does not request one, it may make sense to enclose a short abstract of the paper.

Most professional communication is in refereed journals (although this journal is *not* one), all of which welcome unsolicited submissions. In choosing among these, avoid underselling your work. Start with a higher-quality outlet than your eventual target. Better journals are more widely read, which increases attention to your subsequent efforts (Siow, 1991). They use higher-quality referees (Hamermesh, 1991), so that you probably receive better comments. Also, most of the 40 departments among the top 25 require publications in leading journals for granting tenure. The professional returns to choosing a better journal are higher. But a strategy of aiming high requires a thick skin; the acceptance rate at major economics journals is around 10 percent. Thus, it

pays to have a “submission tree” in mind, a sequence of alternative outlets for your work.

Choose a journal whose recent offerings suggest the editor might be interested in your work; that published a paper included in your references; or that a senior colleague tells you is appropriate. Some journals specialize in theory, or in empirical work, or by subfield. To acquaint different audiences with your work, avoid journals where you have published within the last year or where you have just had a paper accepted (unless the editor explicitly invites submission). Certainly do not, as a colleague did early in his career, submit a second paper upon receipt of the letter accepting the first. He was kindly told by the editor to withdraw the second paper.

Unlike in some fields (like legal scholarship), submitting a paper to several economics journals is absolutely forbidden. An editor wrote to me stating that a referee had handled my paper elsewhere and wondering if I had submitted it to two places. I had not—it had been rejected at the other journal—but the implied threat in the letter showed the importance attached to this prohibition.

A cover letter for your submitted paper might be: “Please consider the enclosed manuscript, ‘Paper Title,’ for possible publication in the *Review of Economic Nonsense*. I look forward to your response on this paper.” If a submission fee is enclosed, mention it. Nothing else is needed. Do not summarize the paper, ballyhoo it, tell the editor why the journal is appropriate, or discuss your personal or professional problems.

Nearly all journals send an acknowledging postcard when your paper is received. I have never failed to receive a postcard. (I did, though, receive one from a journal to which I had not submitted a paper, but to whose editor I had sent the paper for comments.) If you have not received the postcard within one month, you should call the editorial office.

The real wait is for an editorial response. I have had responses within two weeks (negative) and as long as 13 months (somewhat positive). Colleagues report initial responses taking 24 months (both negative and positive). After four to six months, it is reasonable to call or write the editorial office. In most cases the editor is aware of the problem, but is waiting for a dilatory referee. Occasionally, though, the paper has slipped through the cracks. One colleague waited two years, only to hear that a new editor had discovered his paper in a filing cabinet, and that the referee who had been assigned to it had died. Having read the paper the previous evening, the new editor accepted it without changes.

An editor will not reject a paper solely because of an author’s reminder after four to six months of waiting. (One even reprimanded an author for “letting your comment grow a beard” by waiting four months to inquire.) I sent a birthday card to a journal editor (whom I knew) on the first anniversary of submission (of a paper that was later accepted). A long editorial lag can jeopardize the paper’s publication. One junior colleague waited ten months to inquire about a paper’s status for fear of offending the editor. The editor

responded that he was having trouble deciding, but that he wanted the paper revised. The resubmission several months later was immediately rejected *by a new editor* who was not interested in the topic.

One fine day you will receive an editor's letter and the reports that the editor obtained from referees. By far the most common is a Type I letter, outright rejection. Most editors are careful to make clear they do not wish to see the paper again. They include statements like, "... your paper does not contain a contribution sufficient enough to warrant publication." You should view the paper as finished with that journal.

Only if you believe the referee comments are completely misguided (a frequent view of rejected authors) *and* the editor indicates that he or she relied heavily on the referee should you think to ask the editor to reconsider your work. Even then, think twice. An editor's mention of a specific reason for rejection does not invite resubmission; the editor usually has several reasons. Asking for reconsideration may make you look foolish; you may wish to submit future work to the journal; and there are more fish in the sea of journals.

A Type II letter, the next most common, suggests major changes with no strong hope of eventual publication. Examples range from: "I would be willing to consider a major revision of the paper, but ... I can promise you nothing. My judgment is that you have an uphill battle;" to, "*The Journal of Economic Rubbish* will not be able to publish your paper. One of the responses is positive enough that I would not entirely rule out the possibility of resubmission. ... Another possibility would be to submit a revised version elsewhere;" to, "If you are willing to completely redo the paper to take account of the reviewers' criticisms, we would be willing to take another look at it."

Should you bother resubmitting the paper? Only the third letter is encouraging. One young colleague firmly believed that a letter like it was an outright rejection and took substantial convincing before resubmitting her paper. A good rule is that, unless the door has been slammed in your face, or you cannot in good conscience comply with the editorial suggestions, you should resubmit the paper. The vagaries of the refereeing and editorial process make the likelihood of eventual acceptance far greater on a resubmission, even after a tepid response, than on any alternative second journal of equal quality. Also, if you constructed a "submission tree," your next alternative will be of lower quality. Only on the first Type II letter should there have been any hesitation to resubmit.

The still less common Type III letter encourages resubmission but asks for substantial revisions, along the lines of: "Please prepare a revision ... that deals with these issues. I will check back with the referees before making a decision."

A Type IV letter states that the journal is happy to publish your paper and asks for none, or only editorial changes. This species is extremely rare.

Before sending the paper to a different journal in response to a Type I or very negative Type II letter, wait at least one week to digest the letters. Then, if

the editor or referees made comments *that you think are useful*, incorporate them. In many cases a conscientious editor or helpful referee will indicate other potential outlets for the paper, perhaps better ones than you had in mind. Send the paper off to the next journal, and wait again. Remember that the editorial/refereeing process is sufficiently random that one rejection hardly provides definitive information about the quality of the paper. Several colleagues report that after they had become discouraged by initial rejection, other authors published papers that an objective observer would agree were substantively identical to the rejected works.

If the paper is rejected by a second journal, what do you do with a two-time loser? Two rejections do not a bad paper indicate; but three, and certainly four rejections suggest something is seriously wrong with the work. At least rethink the paper completely. You may also realize that your time is better spent on new projects. Euthanasia—permanent commitment of the paper to the filing cabinet—is recommended for papers that are terminally ill; and most experienced economists have buried papers after repeated rejections. The problem diminishes with experience, not because one writes fewer bad papers, but because one gains increasing access to non-refereed outlets. (Those outlets are often indistinguishable from the filing cabinet.)

Assume your work was good enough (or you were fortunate enough), and you did not receive an outright rejection. Take a few weeks to mull over the referee(s') and editor's comments. Remember that waiting too long can result in your confronting a new, less sympathetic editor when you resubmit, or the same editor may reject your resubmission on the grounds that the result is now well-known. One journal editor states that a resubmission will not be considered if the delay exceeds one year.

The resubmitted paper should include all major changes that the referees and editor suggested, unless you are convinced that they are mistaken. In that case, a detailed explanation should accompany the resubmission (on which more below). For minor suggestions, appease the editor or referee if the change does not lower the quality of the paper. This is what produces the accretion of footnotes as drafts progress toward publication. If two referees make suggestions that conflict directly, you must sort out which (if any) is correct. The resubmission letter should clarify what you did and why.

The editor may indicate that the paper can be shortened, and may be explicit about the desired length. The ceiling should be strictly adhered to. Playing games with longer paper, single spacing, narrower margins, and so on, is transparent to the editor.

Between initial submission and resubmission you may have had some brilliant new insights on the topic. Isn't an invitation to resubmit also a chance to display the fruit of your additional labor? Don't succumb to this temptation. Minor changes can be included, with a justification in the resubmission letter. But if the new work is sufficiently different or extensive, it merits another

paper. Editors and referees react adversely to attempts to lengthen a publication by sneaking in additional material.

The resubmission letter should summarize and justify all the major changes you have made. Specific references to individual referees' comments help the editor reach a decision. One journal even suggests numbering each part of the referee reports and keying your letter to these numbers. Other than a final sentence like, "I look forward to hearing from you on this revised paper," nothing else is required. The letter need not exceed two pages, though I have seen longer ones that essentially restate the paper.

Do not make gratuitous comments about the referees, both because such comments are never justified, and because the editor may send your letter to the same referees along with the revised manuscript. On some Type II and III resubmissions none or not all the referees will be contacted; in rare cases new referees will be sought on Type II resubmissions.

Your second wait will end when you receive another editorial letter and perhaps additional referees' reports. If the editor and referees were satisfied with your revision, the letter will accept the paper. Most commonly it will request yet another resubmission. Or the letter may be a rejection, giving you the choice between euthanasia for the paper and submission elsewhere.

The same etiquette applies on the second resubmission, and usually the changes suggested are more minor. But what if the process seems nonconvergent? One editor invited a colleague to resubmit and enclosed two favorable referees' reports. The resubmission generated an unfavorable report from a third referee and another invitation to resubmit. A second resubmission produced a glowing report from a fourth referee. A third invited resubmission was rejected curtly with a negative report from a fifth referee! In the very rare case where the paper does not seem to be converging to publication, you should ask whether they will eventually publish your piece. If an explicit commitment is not received after the second resubmission, it may indicate the editor does not have the heart to deliver the *coup de grace*. You may be better off submitting the paper elsewhere.

Your paper is "accepted" when the editor writes that it will be published in some agreed-upon form. At that point or earlier the editor may suggest style changes and request that you rewrite your paper in accordance with the style of the journal. (Instructions are usually enclosed with the letter.) Always abide explicitly by the style requirements. The ease of making these changes on word processors gives no excuse for shirking, and you have the chance to build up capital with the journal's editorial staff.

The cover letter that transmits the final version to the journal should state that you have made the small changes requested. You might also ask when the editor expects the article to appear, and when you will receive galley or page proofs. Publication can be as quick as two months after final acceptance, or as long as two years (Yohe, 1980). (The economics profession is regrettably slow in

this area compared to the so-called hard sciences.) After that, your next contact with the journal (except with the few journals that ask you to check the copy-edited manuscript) is to examine proofs. All journals request an immediate turnaround on these; failure to honor the request does not (usually) jeopardize publication, but it does type you as irresponsible.

READ THE GALLEYS CAREFULLY! One press recommends, “Another person should read the manuscript aloud slowly while you read the proof. If this is not possible, you should proofread by reading word for word from the manuscript to proof.” One colleague had a reference to the New York *Jets* and ignored the error in the galleys that identified the New York *Jests*. Be especially careful checking mathematics, and watch out for transposed numbers, rows or columns in tables.

Checking galleys is not the time to amend the article; most journals threaten dire consequences for any changes, and some actually charge you for changes. Also, don’t buy the reprints the journal offers. They are an expensive throwback in an era of high quality photocopying. Having checked the galleys and filled out whatever forms are required, send the package back immediately and look forward to seeing your paper in print some months later. When the paper appears, make enough photocopies to supply people who gave you useful comments and others in the profession who might be interested in or benefit from seeing the published work.

If I Am for Myself Alone, What Am I?

Even as a junior person, you will receive drafts of papers from colleagues and graduate school friends. There is no obligation to comment on papers you receive, especially if you have nothing to say. If you have nothing to say on any paper you receive, though, you might question whether you have sufficient interest to justify remaining in the profession. Unless your comments are absolutely trivial, it is worth taking the time to write a letter, telephone or talk face-to-face with the author. Major comments are received all too infrequently by most authors, but even minor ones are rare.

Unless you are convinced that your research will generate a deluge of helpful suggestions, aiding others is the only way to build up the capital that will prevent you from doing your own work in an intellectual vacuum. No one has any obligation to pay attention to your research, not even your dissertation advisor, after you have headed out into the cold cruel world. This activity should not detract from your own research. Surely, though, there are times when your work is not progressing. A “morning person” like me can set aside evenings for this type of professional service. Pick times that fit your own diurnal or hebdomadal comparative advantage.

This sort of mutual intellectual aid society can be a lasting relationship. One individual and I have been commenting on each other’s work for over 20

years, though we have never been classmates or colleagues. Neither of us remembers who made the initial step; but I at least continue to benefit immensely from his comments.

Attending seminars is another aspect of reciprocity. You cannot expect people to attend your presentations unless you attend theirs. Seminars are good places to absorb research results, generate your own new ideas, and learn how to present your own work. In addition, economists are a verbal lot; the disputation in the best seminar situations has an almost Talmudic cast that sharpens the economic thinking of all participants. Some economists have gained reputations for brilliance from their comments at seminars, and a concomitant professional recognition, that far exceeds the impact of their written work.

How talkative should a young economist be at seminars? Save corrections of minor algebraic or statistical errors for a private talk with the lecturer after the presentation. Repeated silly interruptions will gain you the reputation of a fool; wait a few seconds before opening your mouth. One brilliant young colleague comments frequently but only occasionally sensibly at seminars; however, his useful comments are among the best any lecturer could get. The fraction of incorrect or idiotic remarks that is tolerated is directly proportional to the brilliance of the correct ones.

Refereeing is a more formal service to the research of others. As you become known, you will receive an increasing stream of requests to referee. (One editor explicitly states in acceptance letters that he will send you papers to referee and asks you to respond immediately if you do not wish to do so. The implicit threat of revoking the acceptance creates a powerful disincentive to decline!) Most editors ask that you respond within one or two months, and a few journals provide a small monetary incentive for compliance. Many editors request a referee's report that will be sent to the author and a cover letter with your recommendation about publication.

No junior person should ever decline a request to referee because of pressing commitments, as none can claim to be swamped with other professional service. At most schools this sort of service is expected, desired and even rewarded. However, if the paper is far removed from your own work, send it back to the editor *by return mail* stating this fact. Offer to referee a paper more in your area, lest the editor infer that you are shirking your professional responsibility.

If you have already refereed the manuscript for another journal, also return the request to the editor immediately. Double jeopardy should not be part of refereeing, even if the paper has been amended in response to your comments. If no one else is as capable as you of refereeing the piece, perhaps the editor should reject it as being of very limited interest.

Having decided to referee the paper, do it expeditiously. A delay exceeding two months is unconscionable, though regrettably common. Only the most brilliant young person should risk developing a reputation for slacking, and

being responsible ingratiates you with editors and editorial staff. It probably has no effect on whether they will publish your work, since editors strive to publish high-quality research regardless of the authors' peccadilloes; but it can affect their desire to push your paper through the refereeing process. Refereeing the paper should hardly be all-consuming, nor should it be broad-brush. The amount of time devoted to a paper depends on your interest in it and its difficulty. If your report is not at least one tightly written page, though, you probably did not give the paper enough attention.

In writing your report (to be seen by the author), lead off with a succinct summary of the paper, or move immediately to your major comments, criticisms and suggestions. Then deal with specific, less important problems and arguments. Do point out mathematical and econometric errors; but unless the central result of the paper depends on such an error, finding one is not by itself cause for a negative view of the work. If you recommend rejecting the paper, informing the author of a more appropriate outlet (if you believe the paper is publishable somewhere) is helpful. The proper tone of the report is conveyed well by one editor's admonition to referees: "The reports should ... be no more abrasive than absolutely necessary. Especially if the manuscript is to be declined, insert a kind remark if you can. It will shine like a good deed in a naughty world." A major purpose of refereeing is to improve research. Your constructive comments may be ignored if they are couched in a negative tone.

Never make your report part of a vendetta against another researcher. The temptation is often great, as you will be asked to referee papers by scholars who have criticized your own work, who have sharply conflicting views, or who have been patently nasty to you. Resist temptation. Do not make gratuitous comments about the author's morality. In one case, such comments led to legal action by the author against the referee. Never go beyond the refereeing process, as numbers of economists have done, by writing an unsolicited letter to an editor seeking to stifle publication of an article.

Your letter to the editor should mention briefly (not repeat) the major problems, strengths and contributions of the paper. It should also assess whether even a greatly revised version of the paper merits publication in that particular journal. A large fraction of rejections should result partly from cover letters that state something like: "Though there is nothing wrong with the paper, the original point is fairly minor and of insufficiently general interest to appear in a major journal." Keep this in mind when you receive a Type I letter despite what appear to be moderately favorable referees' reports.

Frankness is crucial in the cover letter, as the editor may lack the expertise to place the paper in the context of other research. If you recommend rejection, make it as clear as the colleague who wrote, "Let me state plainly that this is a very bad paper." Do not, though, base your recommendation on strategic considerations involving your own research, such as speculation that publication of the paper might diminish interest in your work.

In many cases, you will receive a resubmitted manuscript for further refereeing. Unless the author added new material or made a truly fundamental

mistake that you failed to catch in the original, your comments and criticisms should be limited to follow-ups. Otherwise, you are encouraging a nonconvergent refereeing process and being unfair to the author.

A Few General Rules

First, do not be hostile. People pay attention to correct and interesting ideas they read or hear. Hostility only reduces the attention your ideas receive by concentrating listeners on your style instead of your substance.

Second, be forthcoming and speak up; be assertive without being pushy. Each year roughly 800 new Ph.D.s in economics are minted. Unless you advertise your ideas, your work will be ignored.

Finally, and most important, the Golden Rule (biblical, not growth-theoretic) is a good guide for professional etiquette for young economists.

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