

How to face (difficult) referee reports?



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Partially based on Michael Murphy presentation.

Available at: <http://asa2013.monash.edu/assets/Astronomy/HWWS-presentations/Michael-Murphy-Presentation.pdf>

When you submit a paper...

Author(s)

Submit to a journal



Editor

Look for potential referees

In very few cases, the Editor can immediately reject the paper and doesn't look for referees.

Very unusual, but it can be common for Science and Nature

ApJ, AJ, A&A, MNRAS:

1 referee

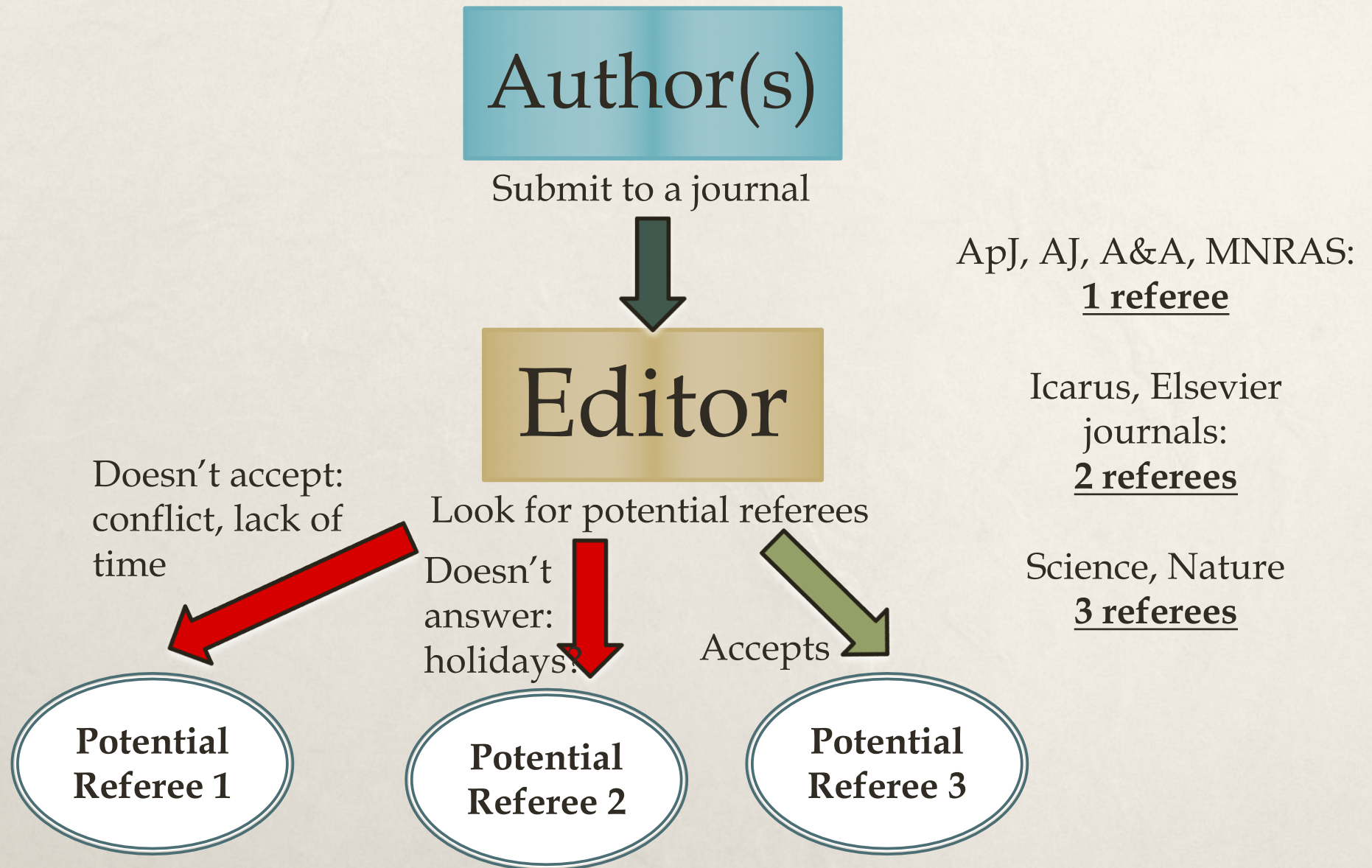
Icarus, Elsevier journals:

2 referees

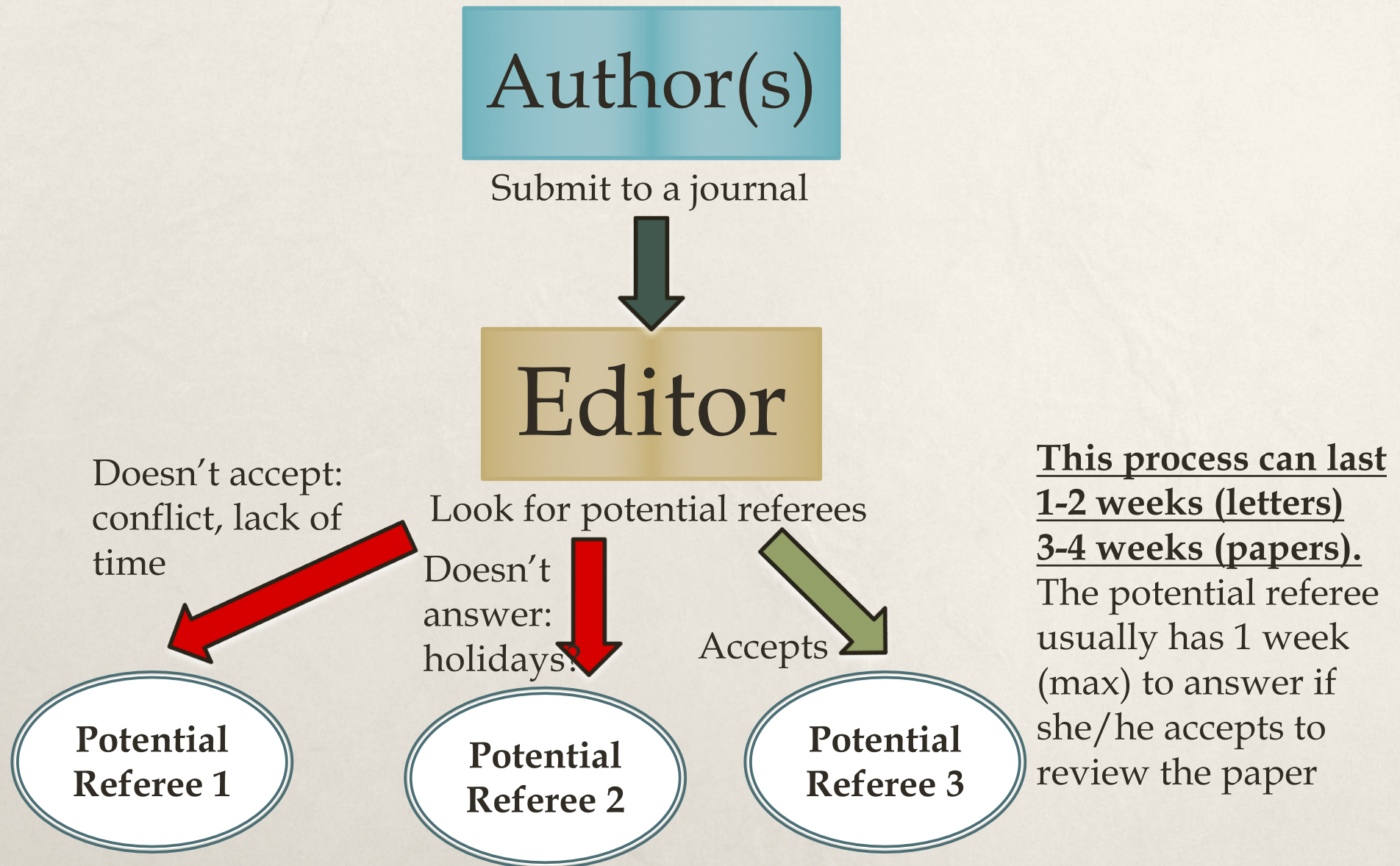
Science, Nature

3 referees

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The authors usually should:

Address referee concerns

Write respond

Re-submit

Timescales: depend on the report.
Some journals give a deadline to the
authors to answer (MNRAS and
ApJ 6 months for a normal paper, 3
months for a MNRAS letter, 6
weeks for ApJL)

Timescales between first submission and acceptance

- * **In the best case:** 1 month or less.
- * **Average case:** 2-4 months. If you address most of the referee concerns during the first respond, it is likely that the second iteration is much shorter.
- * **In the worse cas:** 1-2 years! (Perhaps the opinion of another referee is needed)

The role of the referee

- * Evaluate quality (Referees play “devil’s advocate”; rigorous but fair.)
- * Clarify
- * Accept, reject, ask for minor or major changes

The referee is asked for

*Quality

- ✓ Originality: relevant and novel?
- ✓ Motivation: scientific interest
- ✓ Repetition: have significant parts of the paper already published?
- ✓ Length: Does the content justify the length?

The referee is asked for

* Technical

- ✓ Scientific merit: rigorous, accurate, correct?
- ✓ Appropriateness: is the material appropriate for the journal?
- ✓ Clarity / Balance
- ✓ (Sometimes) English

The referee is asked for

* Presentation

- ✓ Title: adequate?
- ✓ Abstract: real summary? Complete? Too long?
- ✓ Figures, tables, captions: are they clear?
- ✓ Check formulas

When you get your report

Avoid:

- × Read once & instantly respond (specially if you haven't shared the report to the co-authors).
- × Make extra work that is not related with the report? This will give the impression that the original version was incomplete.
- × Question referees' motivations.
- × Accuse anyone of anything, or sound arrogant
- × Be afraid to admit you're wrong or don't know.

When you get your report

Avoid:

- × Take too long.
- × Ignore journal's rules.
- × Share report too broadly or talk badly about the referee (astronomical community is a small world)
- × Aim response at a guessed-at referee identity or imply you've guessed identity.

Shouldn't accept from the referee

- * Unreasonable requests. Examples
 - Full 3D radiative-MRI-dust/chemical evolution simulations to show your point [impossible]
- Normal to answer: “beyond the scope of this paper ...”
 - But there are requests that can sound difficult but they may be simple. Example: a simple radiative transfer calculation? MCMC for a fit?
- * If she/he asks you to write specific text with specific citations.
- * Excessive changes that you don't agree.

When you get your report

Suggestions:

- * *Digest it*, consult your co-authors, take some time to react. Don't be emotional (keep it professional). If the report affected your psychology, just leave it and go through it again a couple of days later or a bit more.
- * Try hard to understand and address each referee's concerns
- * Don't neglect her/his comments. This can really annoy the referee. The referee took valuable time to read your paper.

When you get your report

Suggestions:

- * Plan respond: do I need more simulations? Do I need something specific from one of the co-authors? Do extra work, improve the paper. Is possible to have everything before the deadline? (ApJ, ApJL, MNRAS)
- * Write respond. Thank the referee if the suggestions improve the paper
- * Respond (make sure that all your co-authors agree)

If you address most of the concerns of the first report

The second report should be short and positive. Perhaps minor comments from the answer. Possible soon acceptance.

However, referee can bring up new, major points (annoying but possible)
Are they unreasonable?

If the referee rejects the paper

- * Try to convince the Editor and referee one more time with good arguments. Most journals accept one appeal.
- * Ask the opinion of a second referee. New referee usually sees previous correspondence. Don't worry, this is more common than you imagine!

(if this doesn't work)

- * Try other journal: warn the Editor about previous experience.
- * Work on the paper, re -write, re-submit.

In short words

Keep it Civil
Professional &
Scientific.

In most of the cases, one learns a lot from referee processes