

Editorial: Refereeing Revisited

Last spring we conducted a survey of our readers, and received nearly 6000 responses from people in all areas of physics and regions of the world. Thanks to all who took the time to respond. We value your feedback.

More than 80% of you feel that PRL provides good coverage of all fields. Also, not surprisingly, journals, conferences, and the arXiv remain the most important ways you learn about developments both in your own area and in physics in general.

Submissions arrive at PRL in large numbers, and we publish many excellent Letters. We thank you for this, and are gratified to learn from the survey that in selecting a journal you give much weight to quality of reviews, quality of editorial handling, and fairness of editors, in addition to impact factor and perceived prestige. At the same time, the critiques most clearly raised in your responses address the quality of referee reports, followed by the quality of editorial handling. These are not new. Sam Goudsmit, the first PRL Editor, wrote that “there are still authors who believe that referees and editors are biased against them” [1], so these were already long-standing concerns in 1970.

This is explained by John Ziman [2], who describes peer review as “a highly reflexive and convoluted social activity” that requires balance among the interests of authors, editors, and referees. Ziman points out that peer review works because scientists play all of these roles, but the competing goals of the roles can sometimes lead to conflict.

This is not a basis for complacency. Since PRL raised standards two years ago we have increased deliberation throughout the review process, asking more of authors, referees, and ourselves. We seek more advice from colleagues, and more input from PRL’s Divisional Associate Editors. We also ask authors to justify “why PRL?” based on our four major criteria, and we query referees if key questions are not sufficiently addressed by their reviews.

We all cherish peer review, but tend to focus on research and teaching. Still, we owe it to ourselves to review the work of our colleagues with the same level of professionalism and care that we expect for review of our own work. Further, we must remember that training the next generation of reviewers is an integral part of our students’ education. PRL accepts joint reports, and we strongly encourage you to take the time to mentor your junior collaborators in this key aspect of our profession. To quote Goudsmit once more [3], “...we need the support of our colleagues, especially in the role of unbiased and conscientious referees.”

Peer review is not and will never be a perfect process, but a concerted and sustained effort by authors, referees, and editors will allow it to work at its best.

Pierre Meystre
Editor

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[1] S. A. Goudsmit, Bias, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **25**, 419 (1970).

[2] John Ziman, *An Introduction to Science Studies: The Philosophical and Social Aspects of Science and*

Technology (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1987).

[3] S. A. Goudsmit, Editorial, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **21**, 1469 (1968).