# Term Paper: Research Proposal /Referee Report

*Guidelines for Writing a Research Proposal*

A research proposal should be a short paper that develops the idea, details the tools, and gives a (preliminary) analysis of some interesting research question. This is a great way of getting started into your MA project, or a first step towards original PhD work.

The topic of the research proposal can be anything roughly related to the content of our class. For example, you might have an idea to apply the formal modeling tools you learned about to an applied problem of your own choice. Contractual issues underlie many problems not only in industrial organization and regulation, but also in banking, international trade, etc. Instead, you can also embark on a more applied project such as researching and analyzing a case study, or to bring some applied idea to the data.

The proposal should be about 8-10 pages long; you should give a brief overview of the related literature, start out with a question, and detail the appropriate methods to answer this question. The proposal should also provide some preliminary – though not necessarily formal, 'narrative analytics' is often fine – analysis of the issue you are exploring. It should (if possible) give an outlook on expected results, and their relation to those found in the literature. Note that it is absolutely necessary to cite and list references as thoroughly as possible. When you go for this option to write your term paper, I encourage you to seek my advice along the way, especially regarding the choice of a topic.

*Guidelines for Writing a Referee Report*

A referee report is usually about 2–4 pages long. For the purpose of this class, it should be no longer than 4 pages. I will provide you with a pool of suitable papers, but you are very welcome to discuss any paper (related to the class content) of your own choosing. You can referee either an already published paper (the papers in the pool usually are), or a paper that is currently in the discussion paper stage. Please talk to me before making your choice.

The idea behind a referee report is to recommend to an editor whether a manuscript is suitable for publication or not, possibly after revision. Whether the paper is good or not, and you think it deserves publication or not, your job is to document for the editor the reasons for accepting, rejecting, or requesting a revision. Usually, a referee report includes an executive summary of the paper, then develops three to four main points (positive or negative) and potentially 4-5 smaller points that request clarification or addition.

Given that most papers you might deal with have already been published in prestigious economic journals, your report may well be tilted towards the positive side. However, the fact that a paper has been published by no means always implies that it is good, novel, interesting, or even correct.

First, you need to read the paper carefully, checking all the arguments, whether mathematical or not, for correctness. Point to any problems that you find, and comment more generally on the paper. In this respect, a very important issue are the assumptions the paper makes to come to its conclusions.

You should not be mean but you should be critical, pointing out errors and suggesting improvements is your job. At the same time, you can't ask an author to write a paper that is different from the one he/she intended to write, and hence there is no point in suggesting extensions that go beyond strictly improving the paper in its own purpose. Make sure to cast a balance between being to lenient and asking the author to write a different paper altogether.

I will evaluate your report based on its thoughtfulness, its clarity, and helpfulness to the editor.

## 1. Summary

Write a short summary of the paper, using your own words. What is the question asked by the author? What is the main modeling strategy? What are the results?

The purpose of this section is to summarize the paper for the editor in a way that let him/her understand its essence and contribution, without actually having to read it.

## 2. Major Issues

You then take 3 or 4 major positive or negative points that you have on the paper, one at a time. In order to do this, check carefully the question, the theory/model, and the link to existing literature. (Note: I expect you to read related literature, as cited in the references or suggested by me).

For a positive point, your may want to argue why the question is particularly novel and/or important, the approach interesting, the assumptions appropriate, the answer intriguing, etc.

For a negative point, look for the lack of correspondence between the idea and the model, the model and the empiricism, unreasonable assumptions, or inconsistencies between model results and the author's conclusions from it.

Another argument for being critical of a paper is that there is nothing wrong with it, but its idea and execution do not go beyond of what has already been stated in the literature. If this is one of your points, then you need to refer to other works to show why this is all well known and already done.

## 3. Other issues

If your major concerns with the paper lead you to recommend rejection, you do not even need to do a section on less important issues. However, hopefully the papers that you will be reading this time are not so bad, and you may have some less important but useful suggestions on how to improve the paper.

**Checklist:**

**The question:**

- is the topic clearly explained? Could the question have been made more precisely?

- Does the author do a good gob of motivating the question in the Introduction?

- Is the answer to the question obvious in advance, i.e. do you need a model?

- Is the question original? What is the contribution of the paper? Does the author pose a question of reasonable scope (i.e. can he/she reasonably hope to answer the question in a his/her paper?)

**The Model:**

- Does the model formalize the argument given by the author in the question?

- Does the model incorporate those aspects of reality the author seems to think are important?

- Is the question posed by the author answered within the context of the model?

- Is the model elegant? Is it too simplistic? Is it perhaps unnecessarily complex? Could the author attack the question with a simpler model?

- is the notation clean and intuitive?

- is the model internally consistent?

- is the analysis correct?