

Tips and good practices for reviewing

The following is a collection of tips and best practices for reviewing gathered from the community during SIGCSE TS 2021.

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Reviewing

Start reading early, submit reviews after reading all assigned submissions

It is of course a good idea to start reading the assigned submissions as early as possible (not start on the last day). Still, I recommend, perhaps, **composing** the review for the first assigned paper after you have read it, but **not submit it until you have read the others**, especially if this is one of the first rounds of reviews for you.

The first paper may contain aspects - positive or negative - that you miss on reading, but will find after you noticed them in one of the other submissions. It's easy to adjust your review - even in EasyChair - in this case; but if you do it in EasyChair, the other reviewers and the APC of that submission will also see the superseded review. And other reviewers and APCs always spend some time trying to figure out "what changed" between two reviews.

Advice for a first time reviewer

- Read every word of material on the website that has to do with reviewing and submission (that is relevant to your track(s)) - call for papers, instructions for each submission type, etc. <http://sigcse2021.sigcse.org/reviewers>, <http://sigcse2021.sigcse.org/authors>.
- You need to **know what was expected and required of the authors**. Here's an example: Research papers should (normally) have **research questions** clearly stated as they "report on work that addresses one or more research questions". Experience Reports and Tools papers "typically don't have research questions". What about Position and Curricula papers? Well, nothing is said about them w.r.t. RQs. So, maybe they do, maybe they don't. This will (well, should) affect how those tracks are reviewed. These tracks are different because they are not the same :) They should not be reviewed exactly the same.
- Don't assume that you "know less" or "have less experience" than the other reviewers.
- Don't not question things. Discuss (using the "comment" feature in EasyChair) particularly during the discussion period.
- Another thing that comes to mind is not comparing normatively - that is, comparing all submissions you are reviewing to each other and thinking things like, "well that's the best one I saw so that should get accepted". It's much better to engage with discussion with the other reviewers and APC who are also reviewing that submission. Read the other reviews. **Any one reviewer will only see a miniscule fraction of submissions**. It's a good idea to be familiar with recent proceedings in terms of what got accepted in the past and what did not. Everything in the proceedings did :)
- I feel that my job as reviewer is first and foremost to check whether the **paper adheres to scientific principles**, such as:
 - Do they present the settings and methodology well enough so that I could reproduce the "experiment" and verify the results?
 - Do they point out threats to validity? Is there a critical reflection on their own work and results?
 - Do I understand what kind of problem they tackled, why the authors feel their contribution is important?

- Is the argumentation sound? Does the data actually support the conclusions?
- Note that, as long as the paper fits into the overall venue, my question is not whether I think the paper addresses an important issue, but rather whether the authors point out their own motivation, rationale or what they hope to achieve. Sometimes this is part of a "state of the art" or "contributions" section, sometimes it takes the form of a proper research question (as already mentioned above: some tracks require one form or another, others are more open). It is well possible that you might get assigned papers that are outside your area of research/interest. I think it is therefore best not to judge a paper on whether you as a reviewer think the paper necessarily solves the most pressing issues (it should still fit the overall topics of the SIGCSE TS, though).
- Concerning a **sound argumentation and threats to validity**: I have already seen quite a few papers that struggled with very basic statistics. For instance, having ten students in the test group and asking each of them 30 questions to arrive at 300 data points, or statements such as "30° is 50% hotter than 20°". If you just quickly read over these things, they might sound right, but I think this is one of the jobs we have as reviewers: check whether it only sounds right, or whether it actually makes sense. And, of course, but just to be perfectly clear here: having ten students is not wrong as such, but the claim to have 300 independent data points from that is.
- As a final point: actually, I really like the discussion period after having written the reviews. Sometimes other reviewers have found a major flaw I did not see, or they see a very innovative and ground-breaking contribution that you might not have noticed. This gives you the opportunity to reconsider or argue for your own review. So, do **take this opportunity and engage in the discussion after having written the reviews!**
- An APC is assigned to oversee and coordinate the discussion of each paper. Feel free to ask questions during the discussion phase.
- Please keep in mind that depending on the track, some papers might not have a *problem statement*. Even for research papers this is normally accomplished with *research questions* that are sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly stated. Many papers such as many experience reports, curriculum papers, position papers, and some tools papers *might not be building solutions*. They might be presenting curricula, positions, tools, etc. Please be familiar with the paper review process and guidelines:
 - <http://sigcse2021.sigcse.org/reviewers/paper-review-process/>
 - <http://sigcse2021.sigcse.org/reviewers/paper-review-guidelines/>
 There are three tracks, each with their own guidance.
- Also note that non-paper tracks (workshops, special sessions, etc.) may have different processes/guidelines. They are all listed here: <http://sigcse2021.sigcse.org/reviewers>.

Also it's best to be familiar with what is expected of authors
<http://sigcse2021.sigcse.org/authors>

Elements of the best reviews

One of the practices I see in what I consider the "best" reviews (in my opinion as an APC and author) is **offering concrete, actionable ways to improve the paper**.

This is particularly important in Research Papers. Reviewers often find some weaknesses in the experimental design and/or analysis, but the best reviews always offer how either could be improved.

For example, I've seen many papers that depend too heavily on just having a single end-of-term survey or exam and try to extrapolate those results as evidence of **learning**. Many reviewers will point out the flaw in this conclusion, but **better reviews point out alternatives**, such as:

1. capturing pre/post intervention data to measure learning,
2. designing a controlled trial comparing an intervention to de facto standards,
3. reshaping the paper with more qualitative analysis (and/or rewriting it as an experience report),
4. rewording the interpretation to acknowledge the issues with external validity

Score on a submission's worth

Score on a submission's worth, not its outer form (but mention it where necessary). Some papers are interesting and worthwhile, but have some fatal flaw that you see. In some cases, this can be unfixable (flaws in the setup of an experiment prevent any conclusive findings), in others, they can be addressed.

It is not appropriate to give a low score for things that should be mentioned -- to the authors and/or in the private comments -- but do not directly affect the quality of the paper. Similarly, reviews that say "great ideas, great experiment, it would be 4 out of 6 - but not submitted anonymously (or a few lines too long, ...), so I will give it 1 out of 6".

Other reviewers, the APC, and Program Chairs want to see what **score the paper deserves on its merits** in the overall evaluation (see review forms below) and read the rest in the review or private comments. (When and if it's accepted, it will be published with the author details, in any case, and have the same merits as before. However, having a low(er) average score may prevent it from being considered for its actual worth.)

Decisive vs. “friendly” grading

If you think a submission is worth considering, let your evaluation score reflect it. Similarly, if you don't think it's acceptable as it is - **keep in mind there is no “review - revise - review - accept” process** - don't give a “good” (e.g., 4 out of 6) score in order not to hurt the authors' feelings. This will only make the decision to accept or reject harder (and perhaps lead to more discussion between reviewers), and potentially less understandable to authors. Also, keep in mind that authors do not see the overall evaluation score, that is for reviewers, APC, and Program Co-Chairs to discuss and make a final recommendation.

In addition, it's easy to focus on the feelings of the reviewed, but please try to keep in mind the experience of those who attend a presentation that is incoherent, insignificant, insufficiently informed by the literature, etc. As reviewers and APCs, our job has to be to value and make the best possible use of our audience's time.

Free Yourself from the Recommendation for Acceptance or Rejection

My favorite part of the SIGCSE paper reviewer guidelines is this one (emphasis added):

While your review text should clearly support your scores and recommendation, please do not include your preference for acceptance or rejection of a submission in the feedback to the authors. Instead, use the provided radio buttons to make a recommendation (the authors will not see this) based on your summary review and

provide any details that refer to your recommendation directly in the confidential comments to the APC or track chairs. Remember that as a reviewer, you will only see a small portion of the submissions, so one that you recommend for acceptance may be rejected when considering the other reviewer recommendations and the full set of submissions.

This means that **as a reviewer you can focus on synthesizing and providing feedback on the paper** rather than on making the sometimes-painful choice to accept or reject. **Write your review first** as if it were a candid, clear, and constructive review for a colleague who is thinking this work may be good for the SIGCSE Technical Symposium and requests your feedback. **Then, look back over what you wrote and score it** based on your thoughts.

Whether the paper is rejected or accepted is, happily, not your responsibility or your fault. Instead, **your responsibility is to write valuable commentary and feedback that will benefit both the SIGCSE TS APCs and the paper's authors.**

It is also the **responsibility of reviewers to help the APC come to their recommendation.** Therefore it is really not that helpful to have reviewers who are "right on the fence". If possible, a clear lean one way or the other is much more actionable than a "right down the middle" opinion. I say this with the ultimate respect for reviewer opinion - if a reviewer is truly on the fence, so be it. Hopefully the discussion period would help them lean one way or another. But if not, that is totally OK - it is however, more difficult to deal with! In the end the APC will lean one way or another anyway, so the reviewers might as well make the tough decision themselves - at the least, then it is their decision that is more likely to be put into action.

While APCs/meta-reviewers will not force reviewers to change their reviews during discussion, you **can** change your review during discussion. So, if you avoid the middle-of-the-road ratings and, say, recommend rejection but then in discussion realize you've changed your mind, you can alter your review.

EasyChair

Write Reviews Outside of EasyChair!

When writing reviews, copy the review questions into a text or word processing file and create a template for each paper. Then write your reviews in those files! **EasyChair will time out** if you write the review in the browser and then you'll lose all the great feedback that you're providing.

Once you have the review written, it's a quick copy and paste in the EasyChair form.

The questions asked in the review form!

For your convenience and in response to previous suggestion, below you'll find the questions asked in the review form

Paper Track: Computing Education Research

- **Summary.*** (Required text field) Please provide a brief summary of the submission, its audience, and its main point(s).
- Rate your personal **familiarity** with the topic area of this submission in relation to your research or practical experience. **Range is from 5 for Expert to 1 for None**
- Either Yes, Somewhat, or No for each of the following:
 - The work has a **theoretical basis**.
 - The work has one or more **research questions**.
 - The research questions are grounded in **relevant prior work**
 - The **work addresses the research questions**
 - The submission provides enough detail to support **replication of results**
 - The **process/methodology** described in the submission is a valid way to answer the research questions
 - The **contribution** is clearly described. For novel projects, the contribution beyond prior work is explained. For replications, the contribution includes a discussion on the implications of the new result when compared to prior work
 - The **threats to validity** or study limitations are clearly stated and appropriate for the study process/methodology
 - The **presentation** (writing, graphs, or diagrams) was clear

- **Feedback on grammar.** (Optional text field) Include constructive feedback to improve the grammar used in the submission.
- **Strengths and Weaknesses.*** (Required text field) Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the CS Education research paper. Substantiate your critiques by drawing upon the content of the submitted work, references to prior work, principles of research methods, threats to validity, and your ratings on the review criteria above. If you selected Somewhat or No on one of the criteria, please explain that rating. Replications, null results, or negative results should not be considered weaknesses of the work. A small number of subjects in qualitative work should not be considered a weakness of the work.
- **Consider for Best Paper?** (checkbox). Should the conference chairs consider this paper as a candidate for a best paper award? If so, please make sure you briefly explain why in the confidential remarks for the program committee (bottom of the form, last field).
- **Overall evaluation.*** (Required score and text field) Please provide a detailed justification that includes **constructive feedback that clarifies your scores**. Both the score and the review text are required, but remember that the authors will not see the overall recommendation (only your review text). **You should NOT directly include your preference for acceptance or rejection in your review.**
 - 6: Must Accept: Candidate for outstanding submission. Suggested improvements still appropriate
 - 5: Clear Accept: Content, presentation, and writing meet professional norms; improvements may be advisable but acceptable as is
 - 4: Marginal Tend to Accept: Content has merit, but accuracy, clarity, completeness, and/or writing should and could be improved in time
 - 3: Marginal Tend to Reject: Not as badly flawed; major effort necessary to make acceptable
 - 2: Probable Reject: Basic flaws in content or presentation or very poorly written
 - 1: Reject: Content inappropriate to the conference or has little merit
- **Confidential remarks for the program committee.** If you wish to add any remarks intended only for PC members please write them below. These remarks will only be seen by the PC members having access to reviews for this submission. They will not be sent to the authors. This field is optional.

[Paper Track: Experience Reports and Tools](#)

- **Summary.*** (Required text field) Please provide a brief summary of the submission, its audience, and its main point(s).

- Rate your **personal familiarity** with the topic area of this submission in relation to your research or practical experience. **Range is from 5 for Expert to 1 for None**

- Either Yes, Somewhat, or No for each of the following:
 - The **contribution** is clearly described.
 - The **innovation** proposed by the work is **clearly stated**.
 - The **innovation** proposed **addresses a need or problem**
 - The **work is of interest to members** of the broader SIGCSE community
 - The submission discusses **relevant prior work**.
 - The relationship between prior work and the submission contributions are clearly stated.
 - The implications for **future work/use** are clearly stated
 - The **presentation** (writing, graphs, or diagrams) was clear

- **Contribution.*** (Rating) This submission has valuable contributions for members of the broader SIGCSE community (not necessarily you). Range is from 4 (Strongly Agree) to 1 Strongly Disagree.

- **Feedback on grammar.** (Optional text field) Include constructive feedback to improve the grammar used in the submission.

- **Strengths and Weaknesses.*** (Required text field) Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the submission. Substantiate your critiques by drawing upon the content of the submitted work, references to prior work, and your ratings on the review criteria above as appropriate for the review criteria for this track. If you selected Somewhat or No on one of the criteria, please explain that rating.

- **Consider for Best Paper?** (checkbox). Should the conference chairs consider this paper as a candidate for a best paper award? If so, please make sure you briefly explain why in the confidential remarks for the program committee (bottom of the form, last field).

- **Overall evaluation.*** (Required score and text field) Please provide a detailed justification that includes **constructive feedback that clarifies your scores**. Both the score and the review text are required, but remember that the authors will not see the overall recommendation (only your review text). You **should NOT directly include your preference for acceptance or rejection in your review**.
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Paper Track: Position and Curricular Initiatives

- **Summary.*** (Required text field) Please provide a brief summary of the submission, its audience, and its main point(s).
- Rate your **personal familiarity** with the topic area of this submission in relation to your research or practical experience. **Range is from 5 for Expert to 1 for None**
- Either Yes, Somewhat, or No for each of the following:
 - The **innovation** proposed by the work is **clearly stated**.
 - The **innovation** proposed **addresses a need or problem**
 - The **work is of interest to members** of the broader SIGCSE community
 - The submission discusses **relevant prior work**.
 - The relationship between **prior work** and the submission contributions are clearly stated.
 - The implications for **future work/use** are clearly stated
 - The **presentation** (writing, graphs, or diagrams) was clear
- **Contribution.*** (Rating) This submission has valuable contributions for members of the broader SIGCSE community (not necessarily you). Range is from 4 (Strongly Agree) to 1 Strongly Disagree.
- **Feedback on grammar.** (Optional text field) Include constructive feedback to improve the grammar used in the submission.
- **Strengths and Weaknesses.*** (Required text field) Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the submission. Substantiate your critiques by drawing upon the content of the submitted work, references to prior work, and your ratings on the review criteria above as appropriate for the review criteria for this track. If you selected Somewhat or No on one of the criteria, please explain that rating.

- **Consider for Best Paper?** (checkbox). Should the conference chairs consider this paper as a candidate for a best paper award? If so, please make sure you briefly explain why in the confidential remarks for the program committee (bottom of the form, last field).
- **Overall evaluation.*** (Required score and text field) Please provide a detailed justification that includes **constructive feedback that clarifies your scores**. Both the score and the review text are required, but remember that the authors will not see the overall recommendation (only your review text). You **should NOT directly include your preference for acceptance or rejection in your review**.
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- **Confidential remarks for the program committee.** If you wish to add any remarks intended only for PC members please write them below. These remarks will only be seen by the PC members having access to reviews for this submission. They will not be sent to the authors. This field is optional.

Panels and Special Sessions

- **Summary.*** (Required text field) Please provide a brief summary of the submission, its audience, and its main point(s).
- Rate your **personal familiarity** with the topic area of this submission in relation to your research or practical experience. **Range is from 5 for Expert to 1 for None**
- **Discussion of virtual mode.** Check this box if the authors addressed how their event will be delivered in a virtual format of the technical symposium.
- **Relevance and Interest.*** (Yes/Sort of/No and a text field) Is the proposed session interesting and relevant to the SIGCSE community and the TS participants? Please comment on both the strengths and weaknesses with respect to structure and participation, considering the prompts in the track-specific review guidelines.

- **Structure and Audience Participation.*** (Yes/Sort of/No and a text field) Does the proposed session have a clear and engaging structure and plan for audience participation, including a strong plan for a fully virtual session? Please comment on both the strengths and weaknesses with respect to structure and participation, considering the prompts in the track-specific review guidelines.
- **Panelist/Presenter considerations.*** (Yes/Sort of/No and a text field) Do the panelists/leadership team have appropriate expertise, represent a variety of viewpoints (if relevant) and include members from diverse groups? Please comment on both the strengths and weaknesses with respect to structure and participation, considering the prompts in the track-specific review guidelines.
- **Feedback on grammar.** (Optional text field) Include constructive feedback to improve the grammar used in the submission.
- **Overall evaluation.*** (Required score and text field) Please provide a detailed justification that includes **constructive feedback that clarifies your scores**. Both the score and the review text are required, but remember that the authors will not see the overall recommendation (only your review text). You **should NOT directly include your preference for acceptance or rejection in your review**.
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 - 2: Probable Reject: Basic flaws in content or presentation or very poorly written
 - 1: Reject: Content inappropriate to the conference or has little merit
- **Confidential remarks for the program committee.** If you wish to add any remarks intended only for PC members please write them below. These remarks will only be seen by the PC members having access to reviews for this submission. They will not be sent to the authors. This field is optional.

Workshops

- **Summary.*** (Required text field) Please provide a brief summary of the submission, its audience, and its main point(s).

- Rate your **personal familiarity** with the topic area of this submission in relation to your research or practical experience. **Range is from 5 for Expert to 1 for None**
- **Discussion of virtual mode.** Check this box if the authors addressed how their event will be delivered in a virtual format of the technical symposium.
- **Who is the expected audience?.*** Who is the expected audience?
- **Appropriateness of Title.** (Yes/No and text field) Does the title accurately describe the proposed workshop content? If not, provide constructive advice.
- **Advice about Abstract.*** (Required text field) The abstract for the workshop is what will appear in the conference proceedings. Please provide constructive advice for the workshop presenters on the abstract.
- **Anticipated Interest.*** (Yes/No/Not sure and text field) Is the topic relevant and significant to the SIGCSE audience, or a subset(s) of the SIGCSE audience? In particular, would people be willing to pay to attend a workshop on this topic? Please explain your rationale. In particular, if you answered Yes, describe the group to whom it is relevant and if you answered No or Not sure, explain why you feel the topic may not attract paying participants.
- **Agenda.** (Yes/No and text field) Does the agenda and scope of the proposed workshop seem realistic for a 3 hour session? If no, please explain if the agenda and scope is too conservative (might not fill 3 hours) or too ambitious (might not fit in 3 hours). If yes and you have advice about the agenda, please provide it here.
- **Experience of Leaders.*** (Extensive/Adequate/Insufficient and text field) Give your evaluation of the suitability of the experience of the presenter(s) in this topic area.
- **Advice about Advertisement.*** (Text field) The advertisement for the workshop is what will appear on the conference webpage to attract participants. Please provide constructive advice for the workshop presenters on the advertisement.
- **Materials.*** (Yes/No and text field) Does the submission provide participants with materials and/or ideas that are immediately useful in the classroom? Explain your answer and provide constructive suggestions on how presenters can improve their materials.
- **Feedback on grammar.** (Optional text field) Include constructive feedback to improve the grammar used in the submission.

- **Strengths and Weaknesses.*** Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the submission.

- **Overall evaluation.*** (Required score and text field) Please provide a detailed justification that includes **constructive feedback that clarifies your scores**. Both the score and the review text are required, but remember that the authors will not see the overall recommendation (only your review text). You **should NOT directly include your preference for acceptance or rejection in your review**.
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 - 1: Reject: Content inappropriate to the conference or has little merit

- **Confidential remarks for the program committee.** If you wish to add any remarks intended only for PC members please write them below. These remarks will only be seen by the PC members having access to reviews for this submission. They will not be sent to the authors. This field is optional.

Start of discussion phase and option to update a review

Tip for 'newer' reviewers, reminder for the 'older' reviewers, on what is visible and when in EasyChair, and changing reviews

Reviewers initially can't see any other reviews or comments (from other reviewers or the paper's associate program chair (APC)) until they submit their first review. At that point, all reviews and comments, from all reviewers and the APC, entered up to that point in time will become visible, as will any and all reviews and comments that come in at a later time.

Often the discussion (through anonymous comments) or reading other reviews, lead a reviewer to want to change their original review. This is allowed, and encouraged. When a review is changed, the old version is superseded but still visible to all reviewers and the APC, as is, of course, the latest version. Changes to scores from the old version are not counted - the new ones are. Authors will not see superseded reviews, only the latest ones (one from each reviewer). It is important to make sure that your latest review is consistent with your comments and thoughts. In the end it is the review that counts, and the only thing the authors get! So if you say something in your comments that doesn't really align with your review due to a change of mind, 'seeing the light', because you missed something, or whatever, make sure you change your review to accurately reflect your current feelings.

Minimize logins and navigation

The following is particularly useful for the discussion phase, or for APCs that want to check in on things multiple times a day. **EasyChair logs you out after a few hours**, and you can waste a lot of time logging in, re-logging in, messing with tabs, and re-navigating to places. Here's what I do that I have found to be quite effective.

1. Open EasyChair in a new tab (in a fresh window) and get used to it, cause it's gonna stay open for a month or so.
2. Navigate in above tab to (something like) SIGCSE TS 2021 -> Reviews -> Assigned to me (you're looking for a list of papers assigned to you).

3. **Open each paper there in a new tab** in the same window. So if you have n papers, you're going to have $n+1$ tabs open. The one from 2 above and then one for each paper.
4. Do whatever you need to do with your papers (check in, add comment, add review, etc.).
5. When you come back tomorrow, go to the first tab (from 2 above). Hit reload and log in.
6. Thanks to your setup, leaving it there, and each time you come back completing step 5, you can now just reload the other tabs without re-navigating and re-logging in. I normally reload them all in a row straight away, then visit each one as required.

Also (in Chrome at least) if you **put bookmarks in a folder**, after logging in, you can open all of the bookmarks in that folder in new tabs.

About once a week I make sure that I haven't accidentally closed or lost a tab. I find that even after a paper is "done" it's best to leave it there. I get used to the ordering and find it unnerving when the arrangement changes. So I leave them all as is until the whole review process is over.

Use the watchlist

Make sure that whatever submissions you review (or have been assigned as an APC) end up on your "Watchlist" (see, e.g., <https://easychair.org/help/watchlist> for details on how to do this). This will cause EasyChair to copy any comments, reviews and review updates to you by email, so you should not miss anything even without constantly checking EasyChair.