RecSys 2021
Guide to Reviewing Papers

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This document provides guidelines for reviewers assessing papers for the ACM Conference on Recommender Systems. These guidelines are partly based on the CHI 2020 reviewer guide. We hope they are also valuable to both reviewers and authors.

Key points:

- Reviewers should follow the "golden rule" and write the type of high-quality reviews they themselves would hope to receive.
- The main consideration should be whether the submitted work provides a strong, original contribution to the field of recommender systems.
- Desk rejection may be recommended for papers with basic errors (formatting, violation of anonymity, etc.) or that do not even attempt to provide an archival research result (e.g., no claimed contribution to the field, claims with no evidence, no discussion of related work or relationship to the state of the field).
- There are no longer separate short and long paper tracks; rather reviewers should evaluate whether a contribution is commensurate with a paper's length.
- Critically, short papers should be for *smaller* contributions, rather than works-in-progress or incomplete contributions.
- Reviewers should consider replicability, but should do so while recognizing the specific contexts and restrictions faced by (e.g.) industry versus academia.
- We have added a short clarification phase during which authors can respond to factual errors during discussion. These clarifications are short (1000 characters), and are not intended to argue subjective points or to introduce new results. It will be at the discretion of reviewers and meta-reviewers how to consider these.
- During the discussion and clarification phase, authors will be able to see reviews. Accordingly it is particularly important to ensure high quality reviews by the review deadline. Reviewers may modify their reviews during the discussion phase, and authors will see revised reviews and meta-reviews after decisions are announced.
- Authors also have the option to discuss the ethical implications of their work; as such reviewers should consider the broad impacts of the proposed work in their review.

Reviewing Process and Roles

Each paper will be assigned to three reviewers and one meta-reviewer.

Reviewers. Each reviewer is assigned to write an independent review of the paper. In general, reviewers will include two members of the program committee and one member of the senior program committee, matched to the paper based on their uploaded profile sample papers.

Meta-reviewers. The meta-reviewer for a paper is assigned to coordinate the paper's reviews, facilitate discussion among the reviewers (including discussion of any author clarification), write a meta-review that summarizes the consensus of the reviews (and may highlight points where there is no consensus), and makes a recommendation to the program chairs on acceptance or rejection of the paper.

Reviews will be visible to the authors when the discussion (and clarification) stage begins. Meta-reviews (and any revised reviews) will be visible to the authors when decisions are made and announced.

Scope

Your primary consideration when evaluating a paper should be *whether it provides a strong and original contribution to the field of Recommender Systems.* Ricci, Rokach, and Shapira described Recommenders Systems as "software tools and techniques that provide suggestions for items that are most likely of interest to a particular user" (*Recommender Systems Handbook*, 2nd Ed., p. 1). Such tools and techniques include models of user preference, item characteristics, and user-item affinities; algorithms for predicting user preference or selecting items likely to be of interest to users; interfaces for eliciting preferences or providing recommendations; studies and metrics related to the value and aspects of recommendation; and systems that apply these tools and techniques to different domains. We encourage a wide variety of contributions to RecSys, ranging from theoretical contributions to practical demonstrations of working systems.

Papers may be considered out-of-scope if they do not clearly argue this contribution. For example, a paper suggesting theoretical improvements to matrix factorization algorithms should be backed by experiments that clearly demonstrate effectiveness in recommendation scenarios. A paper presenting a new interface for displaying a set of songs should include design and evaluation showing how that interface affects recommender systems for songs specifically. Similarly, a presentation of a deployed system should present reusable findings, methods or artifacts that will benefit researchers in the community and designers of other systems. Contributions that do not make a generalizable research contribution backed by evidence may be more suited to the demonstrations or late-breaking results tracks.

High-Quality Reviews

Our basic guideline for reviewers is that their reviews should follow the "golden rule": that is, reviewers should write the kind of reviews that they would like to receive. As a guideline, an excellent review is typically about a page of written text; very short reviews are frustrating for authors and hurt the review process.

Even in cases where papers should clearly be rejected, we hope that reviewers will recognize the educational aspect of the peer-review process, and give feedback that will be useful in helping authors to improve their papers for future submissions. For example, when reviewing a paper that fails to cite relevant prior work (or even may fail to add a contribution over it), please provide a pointer to a couple of those pieces of prior work to help the authors better understand the field. When reviewing a paper that you feel has a clearly inadequate evaluation, please provide either the outline of what such an evaluation should look like, or a pointer to a paper or two that does the evaluation well. If you are reviewing a paper where you feel the writing is unclear, try to determine whether this is just a need for copy-editing (and perhaps an issue of a non-fluent English writer) or a problem fundamental to the work itself; make it clear in the review what you feel is unclear and what could be done to remedy the problem.

Certain things simply do not belong in a review. Reviews should not question or attack the motives or capabilities of the authors -- it is fine to critique work, but not individuals. Reviews should also not belittle particular institutions or countries. (Sadly we have seen reviews that have made statements about applications in certain countries "being irrelevant and not worth reading about" -- a statement like that does not belong in a RecSys review.) Perhaps the most common problem in reviews are "conclusory" statements not backed by evidence or even detailed argument. Review statements such as "there is nothing new here" or "the studies reported don't provide compelling evidence" cannot stand alone. If there is truly nothing new, then spend a few minutes pointing citations or products where the claimed work was done before. If the studies don't provide compelling evidence, explain why in a manner that can help the author conduct appropriate studies.

Desk Rejection Criteria

Reviewers are invited to flag papers that they believe may be candidates for desk rejection (i.e., rejection without full review). Reviewers should communicate such issues to the paper's meta-reviewer, who will advise as to whether a full review is required. Criteria for desk rejection include:
- Papers that are outside the conference scope, that are incomplete, or that fail to claim a contribution to the field, present evidence, or discuss the prior work relevant to their contribution.
- Papers that violate formatting guidelines, in particular those that exceed the 14-page limit.

- Papers that do not describe original work or are under review elsewhere (including as another paper submission for RecSys); note that papers previously published in workshop proceedings may be submitted to RecSys only if the submission includes at least 30% new content.
- Papers that are not properly anonymized to enable double-blind review.
- Papers that are found to include plagiarized content.

Double Blind Review

RecSys reviewing is double-blind. Authors do not know the identity of their reviewers, and reviewers do not know the identity of the authors. The responsibility for double-blind review is a shared one between authors and reviewers:

- Authors must not identify themselves in the papers. No names or affiliations should appear on the paper. References to identifying institutions should be obscured (e.g., instead of "We carried out this study in Ebay" the authors could write "We carried out this study in an online auction site" -- that can be re-identified after review if the paper is accepted). If referring to and building on an author's own prior work, the work can be referred to in the third person, or anonymized, whichever seems most appropriate. (E.g., "We carried out this study in our XXX system (anonymized)" or "We build upon Kim's taxonomy of recommender tasks" (without noting that we include Kim on our team)). Authors should also not take steps specifically to make their authorship of the paper known. For example, you should not put out an announcement (in a venue that RecSys reviewers would likely read) that "I just submitted 'a new linear approach to matrix factorization using quantum Eigenfactors' to ACM RecSys -- wish me luck!"

  RecSys does support open science. Authors who wish to deposit preprints of their work on sites such as arXiv or in technical report archives are allowed to do so.

- Reviewers are expected to avoid attempts to seek the authors of work. Do not search for the work online. Do not contact specific authors to find out if this is their work. If you routinely follow lists of arXiv deposits or tech report updates, you may wish to delay reading those during the period when you are reviewing. If in reading a work you feel that you likely have a conflict of interest with the author (e.g., one of us once recognized the writing style of one of our former graduate students -- even though we didn't know of the work), please contact your meta-reviewer or the program chairs to voice your concern. If there is a conflict, we can re-assign you to another paper.

Plagiarism

Plagiarized papers will not be accepted for RecSys 2021. We will be checking the plagiarism level of all submitted papers to ensure content originality using an automated tool. Automated tools, however, have limitations. If you suspect plagiarism in a submission you are reviewing, please let us know (an email to program2021@recsys.acm.org with the details would be helpful).

Paper Length

Starting in 2021, there is no longer a separate track for long and short papers. Rather, we allow authors to submit papers of any length (up to the 14 page limit), and reviewers should evaluate whether a paper's contribution is commensurate with its length. As a guideline, shorter papers should generally report on advances that can be described, set into context, and evaluated concisely; they are not "work-in-progress" reports but rather complete reports on a smaller or simpler-to-describe but complete research work. Longer papers should reflect more complex innovations or studies and should have a more thorough discussion of related work.

Replicability

Replicability is a critical component of recommender systems research. Replicability is to be assessed in the context of the work itself — we recognize that a set of customer interviews (for example) may not be shareable, but the interview scripts can be provided as may be response coding protocols. Sharing of data sets and code is encouraged, and authors presenting work that was tested on proprietary data may wish to include a secondary analysis on a public or shareable data set.

As such we ask reviewers to carefully consider replicability in the specific context of the work they're reviewing. For instance, in cases where authors make use of proprietary data, do they also report results on public data that would allow comparison? If source code will not be released, is the standard of presentation in the paper sufficient that a knowledgeable reader could reproduce the main results?

Author Clarifications

Starting in 2021, we have added a short author response, which we hope will help authors to clear up misunderstandings about their papers, and aid the program committee in decision-making. As opposed to a "rebuttal", responses will be short-form (up to 1000 characters) so as to limit them to simple clarifications and to respond to factual errors in the reviews. These responses will be provided to the reviewers and meta-reviewer of the paper during the discussion phase of the review process.

Our goal with these responses is that they should be used to correct factual errors or misunderstandings in reviews; they should not introduce new results, nor are they intended to rebut subjective criticisms. Ultimately it will be at the discretion of reviewers and meta-reviewers as to how these responses are considered during the discussion phase.

Ethical Considerations

ACM RecSys expects all authors to comply with ethical and regulatory guidelines associated with human subjects research, including research involving human participants and research using personally identifiable data. Papers reporting on such human subjects research must include a statement identifying any regulatory review the research is subject to (and identifying the form of approval provided), or explaining the lack of required review. Note that requirements vary from country to country (and in some cases within countries). Reviewers are asked to consider whether the research was conducted in compliance with applicable ethical and regulatory guidelines.

Final Notes

Reviewing is one of the most important forms of service to the research community. High-quality reviewing is essential not only to selecting research papers for publication -- for ensuring that what we publish can be believed and relied upon -- but also for helping develop emerging researchers and research efforts through critical and constructive feedback. We are grateful to everyone who undertakes the task of reviewing.

Each year we recognize a set of outstanding reviewers with awards. Top reviewers also are the main source of nominations to the senior program committee.