

Introduction to International Relations Research Methods
SIS 206 Prof. Powner

You Be the Reviewer: Ramstad, “Effects of Scientific Uncertainty and Issue Symmetry”

Imagine that you and a classmate are reviewers for a prestigious journal of international relations. Ramstad has submitted his thesis to the journal, essentially intact (though in an article-length manuscript of course), and the journal editors have asked you to review it.¹

In groups of 2-3, your task is to write a review of Ramstad’s piece and, ultimately, to advise the journal’s editors whether to accept the piece as is, accept with minor revisions, revise and resubmit, or reject. You should plan to have one letter to submit in hard copy (over both of your signatures) to the editorial assistant (Prof. Powner) by 11 AM; we will spend the last 10 minutes having a class discussion of the reviews. By the end of class, we will need to have a consensus recommendation from the reviewers to the editor about the disposition of the manuscript and what, if any, changes are required before it is accepted.

Your review should generally be about 4-5 paragraphs long. Most reviewers follow a fairly standard format. The first paragraph summarizes the piece’s main hypotheses and findings, and concludes by raising the one or two main points of concern that the review will highlight and providing a summary evaluation (reject, R&R, accept, etc.). The second paragraph usually highlights things that the paper does particularly well. The third and fourth paragraphs normally raise the reviewer’s most salient criticisms and provide support for the concern, and often make concrete requests for things to change or suggestions for improvement.² The final paragraph makes a recommendation to the editor to accept, reject, or do something in between, and if the decision is R&R or accept with revisions, it identifies which of the changes are most critical.

You might consider some of the following questions in your evaluation of the piece:

- **Theory:** Does the author make a convincing claim for why s/he expects the relationship s/he does? Is the argument grounded in the literature? Does it fundamentally make sense, and is it well-explained?
- **Measurement:** Are the indicators valid measurements for the concepts? That is, do they capture the concept the author intended, or are they perhaps measuring something else (besides or instead of the intended concept)? Is the measurement strategy (the sources consulted and the manner in which the data was gathered) sound, or does it perhaps produce biased measurements by over- or under-representing some set of cases or variable values?
- **Analysis:** Does the author present an appropriate justification for the methodology choice (both qual/quant and specific technique)? Do you agree with the choice? If qualitative, are the case choices explicitly justified? Do you agree with the case choices (do they follow the principles for case selection that we’ve discussed)? If quant, do you agree with the method of analysis used, and do you believe that it was applied properly? For all, does it adequately assess/address alternative explanations?
- **Evidence:** Does the author present the evidence for his/her claim in a logical manner? Does the evidence support the claim that the author makes from it, or is the author overstating the strength of the evidence? What other evidence might the author provide to make the argument more convincing? Are there other observable implications that the author could address?
- **Conclusion:** Is the conclusion an accurate assessment of the evidence, or does it overstate? Does it express an appropriate amount of uncertainty about the strength of the conclusions? Does it identify appropriate avenues for future research?

¹ In the real world, you would not know who wrote the manuscript, nor would the author know who reviewed it. This is called a ‘double-blind’ peer review process.

² An optional paragraph here lists any minor items of concern such as key uncited publications; we do not normally remark on grammar or style unless the issues are so severe that they significantly interfere with the reader’s ability to follow the argument.