# A Dataset for Expert Reviewer Recommendation with Large Language Models as Zero-shot Rankers

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#### Abstract

The task of reviewer recommendation is increasingly important, with main techniques utilizing general models of text relevance. However, state of the art (SotA) systems still have relatively high error rates. Two possible reasons for this are: a lack of large datasets and the fact that large language models (LLMs) have not yet been applied. To fill these gaps, we first create a substantial new dataset, in the domain of Internet specification documents; then we introduce the use of LLMs and evaluate their performance. We find that LLMs with prompting can improve on SotA in some cases, but that they are not a cure-all: this task provides a challenging setting for prompt-based methods.

#### 1 Introduction

Peer reviewing is critical to many processesincluding scientific publication-for maintaining adequate standards (Thurner and Hanel, 2011; Bianchi and Squazzoni, 2015), and even a small numbers of poor-quality reviews can have considerable impact on the peer-review process (Robert, 1968; Triggle and Triggle, 2007; Squazzoni and Gandelli, 2012; Thurner and Hanel, 2011; Thorngate and Chowdhury, 2014; Wicherts, 2016). As the numbers of submissions and reviewers increase, manual reviewer assignment becomes infeasible (Shah, 2022). This sparks growing interest in methods to automate the reviewer assignment process (see Stelmakh et al., 2019, for an overview). While factors such as reviewer experience and conflicts of interest play a role, the core of most approaches is computing a relevance score for a reviewer-paper pair, usually via the similarity between the text of the paper and some text that characterises the expertise of the potential reviewer (e.g., previous papers authored or reviewed). The approach is therefore quite general, and can be extended to many related tasks: finding reviewers for other text types e.g., grant proposals; consultants in commercial settings; or topic experts for journalists .

However, even recent reviewer recommendation systems still have relatively high error rates (Stelmakh et al., 2023). One reason is that relevant public datasets are quite small (with just a few hundred papers/reviewers). Another may be that pretrained large language models (LLMs), which sometimes achieve good performance with little task-specific fine-tuning data on a range of tasks (Brown et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2023), have not yet been applied to this task, and it is not clear how best to apply them.

We aim to address these gaps. First, our primary contribution is a new silver-labelled reviewer recommendation dataset, much larger than existing resources (Section 3). Second, we use retrieval-based generation and pairwise prompting to apply LLMs to the task, and evaluate this on diverse available datasets to provide a preliminary benchmark for LLMs in reviewer recommendation (Section 4). Our code and data are publicly available.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Related work

**Reviewer recommendation** Factors affecting peer-review and choice of reviewers include (lack of) reviewing experience (Stelmakh et al., 2021), conflicts of interest (Resnik and Elmore, 2018), and the Matthew (rich get richer) effect (Robert, 1968; Squazzoni and Gandelli, 2012), but most automated paper-reviewer matching approaches rely on a measure of text similarity between a paper and a reviewer candidate, usually represented via the text of their papers. Simple but effective approaches can be found in the Toronto Paper Matching System (Charlin and Zemel, 2013), relying on count vectors and regression models. Topic models can also be used, e.g., latent Dirichlet allocation (Blei et al., 2003) and advanced variants e.g., Mimno and McCallum (2007)'s Author - Persona - Topic model or Anjum et al. (2019)'s Common Topic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>https://github.com/sodestream/revrec

Model. Some approaches use non-text features to characterise papers/reviewers: Tran et al. (2017) use citation networks, and Rodriguez and Bollen (2008) co-authorship graphs. Some combine multiple sources of information and/or consider multiple recommendation goals (e.g., reviewer authority). However, the appropriateness of these non-text features depends on the domain; here, our interest is in general relevance as captured from text.

Neural models Recently, results have been improved by embedding the text using pretrained neural language models, e.g., ELMo (Peters et al., 2018)'s generic embeddings; SPECTER (Cohan et al., 2020), designed for scientific documents and exploiting the citation graph; and the Multifacet-Recommender (MFR) approach of Chang and Mc-Callum (2021), which improves SPECTER by constructing separate embeddings for different facets of the paper (and is used by the OpenReview platform). Stelmakh et al. (2023) compare these and show them to be strong baselines, but still with high error rates, from 12%-30% for easy cases to 36%-43% for hard cases. However, we are not aware of attempts to apply more recent large language models (LLMs) to this problem, although they achieve good results with limited data in related tasks (Hou et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023; Qin et al., 2023).

**Existing Datasets** Here, we compare against the standard benchmark NIPS dataset (Mimno and McCallum, 2007), with paper/reviewer pairs labeled using binary relevance labels; and Stelmakh et al. (2023)'s dataset with expertise labels for paper/reviewer pairs on a 1-5 scale. A third publicly available dataset (Karimzadehgan et al., 2008), is not directly usable: it provides manually labeled topic vectors for each paper/reviewer, but no gold-standard relevance or expertise labels. Other datasets exist (e.g. Rodriguez and Bollen, 2008; Anjum et al., 2019), but not publicly available.

#### **3** Dataset construction

To develop a large-scale dataset that can be publicly available we use data provided by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF).

**Overview of IETF** The IETF is a decentralized organization that develops the technical standards, known as *RFCs* (Request for Comments), that underpin the Internet. These standards are developed by IETF working groups (WGs) in the form of

documents called *Internet-drafts*.<sup>2</sup> These are formally reviewed several times prior to publication as an RFC, and subject to extensive informal review discussion on mailing lists. This process is open and well documented (Bradner, 1996), and the documents, mailing list archives, and metadata about the participants is publicly available<sup>3</sup> and accessible via a REST API.<sup>4</sup> The dataset we develop contains Internet-drafts, candidate reviewers, and corresponding silver relevance labels, along with corresponding email discussion text and participant metadata. It is intended to complement the other two datasets by providing a larger freely available dataset from a different domain, including both abstracts and full documents.

We consider 3,075 Internet-drafts, comprising the final pre-publication drafts for RFCs published by the IETF between January 2010 and April 2022 inclusive. To avoid manually labeling all reviewers for relevance, we use heuristics based on the available metadata to generate three tiers of reviewer candidates,  $T_1$ ,  $T_2$ ,  $T_3$ , for each draft, D, in which all candidates in  $T_N$  should have higher expertise relating to D than all candidates in  $T_{N+1}$ :

- $T_1$  candidates are the authors of draft D and the chairs of the WG developing D. The authors are guaranteed to have very high expertise in D's area; they would obviously not be potential reviewers in practice, but are useful as training/evaluation examples of highexpertise candidates. WG chairs are selected based on a combination of technical expertise and management skills, so they can be expected to be familiar with the technical content of drafts from their WG.
- T<sub>2</sub> candidates are participants in the WG developing D who, during D's discussion period: (1) sent no messages in mailing list threads about D; (2) were active in at least one thread not about D; and (3) were not IETF Area Directors<sup>5</sup>. We define the discussion period as the period from D's first submission time S<sub>1</sub> to final submission S<sub>2</sub>; active partici-

<sup>3</sup>https://www.ietf.org/about/open-records/
<sup>4</sup>https://datatracker.ietf.org/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>An RFCis a term for the final state of an Internet draft once it is accepted and published.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>WGs are organized into *areas* based on topic. Area Directors manage WG chairs and are selected for their management skills and technical breadth but are not necessarily subject matter experts in each WG they oversee; we therefore do not consider them for  $T_1$  but also prefer to exclude them from  $T_2$ 

Dataset	#papers	#reviewers	#paper-reviewer pairs
NIPS	148	364	650
Stelmakh	463	58	477
IETF	3075	1846	17562

Table 1: Dataset statistics

Dataset	abstracts	full-text	emails	participant metadata
NIPS	$\checkmark$	-	-	-
Stelmakh	$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$	-	-
IETF	$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$

Table 2: Data availability

pants in a discussion thread as the top 20% by message-count; and that a thread is *about* D if it has the title of D in its subject.

•  $T_3$  candidates are selected from a randomly chosen WG that is in the same area, but is not the WG that worked on D. Other conditions are identical to  $T_2$ .

The goal is that the three tiers have decreasing expertise when it comes to reviewing draft D. The expertise of  $T_3$  is the least, as participants only in a WG that was not engaged with D;  $T_2$  were not engaged with D but are from its WG (thus more topically related to D); and  $T_1$ , as authors and WG chairs, are experts in D's area.

**Heuristics details** If a participant qualifies for both tier N and N + 1 they are assigned to tier N.  $T_2$  and  $T_3$  are sometimes much bigger than  $T_1$ ; if so, we subsample them to be the same size in  $T_1$ . The heuristics say nothing about the relationship of candidates within the same tier; their purpose is to provide between-tier pairs of candidates for training and evaluating models.

**Validation** We validated these heuristics against expert judgements from two IETF participants familiar with the draft areas. We asked them to rate a randomly sampled subset of between-tier pairs as correct or not. This included 19 drafts and provided ratings for 191 pairs of candidates; the experts agreed on 183; in total only 7 were rated as wrong by at least one expert (i.e. 96% agreement).

**IETF Dataset Summary.** A comparison with other datasets is given in Table 1 and available data in Table 2. The IETF dataset is now the largest dataset for this task by an order of magnitude.

## 4 Experiments

#### 4.1 Experimental setup

We frame the task as a retrieval problem where the set of queries  $Q = \{q_1, ..., q_n\}$  are representations of documents to be reviewed, and the set of targets  $T = \{t_1, ..., t_m\}$  are representations of reviewer candidates.<sup>6</sup> The task of the model is, given an element of Q, to order elements of T appropriately. As the paper representation  $q_i$  we use the string concatenation of its title and abstract; a reviewer representation is the string concatenation of all the paper representations authored by that reviewer.

In addition to Q and T we also have a set of annotated pairwise relevance judgements P = $\{p(q_k, t_i, t_j)\}$ . Where p represents an indicator function that has the value 1 if  $t_i$  is more relevant w.r.t.  $q_k$  than  $t_j$ , and 0 otherwise. There are two ways to obtain p. First, it can be labelled directly by assigning a value to each triple depending on the correct ordering of  $t_i$  and  $t_j$ . Second, if numerical relevance scores  $r(q_k, t_i)$  and  $r(q_k, t_j)$  are available the value can be inferred by comparing them. We also define error weights  $w(q_k, t_i, t_j)$  which describe the severity of ordering  $t_i$  and  $t_j$  incorrectly. If numerical relevance scores are available we set  $w(q_k, t_i, t_j) = |r(q_k, t_i) - r(q_k, t_j)|$ ; otherwise if p was labelled directly we set w to 1 for all triples. Furthermore, the labels for information retrieval datasets are almost always incomplete, as only a fraction of all possible documents is annotated for each query. To account for this case, it is also allowed for the value of r and the corresponding wto be unknown for some triples.

To evaluate all models we use the metric from (Stelmakh et al., 2023) which considers all triples  $(q_k, t_i, t_j)$  for which the corresponding p and w are known. If the model put  $t_i$  and  $t_j$  in the wrong order this incurs a penalty of  $w(q_k, t_i, t_j)$ ; a tie incurs half that penalty. The error is summed and normalized by the error of the worst possible model (i.e. ordering all pairs incorrectly gives an error score of 1). Intuitively this gives the percentage of annotated pairs that a model orders incorrectly, but weighted such that mistakes on target pairs with high difference in gold scores have more influence on the final score. For significance testing we use bootstrap resampling (Efron and Tibshirani, 1994) on the set of test queries. As baseline comparisons we follow

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>The Stelmakh dataset frames Q as the reviewers and T as the documents, but our methodology is easily adapted to this.

Stelmakh et al. (2023) and use our own implementation of TPMS. We report the SPECTER+MFR results from (Stelmakh et al., 2023).

The IETF dataset has a prohibitively large number of candidate pairs. We experiment on a sample of 4,000 triplets (similar size as the other datasets).

### 4.2 LLM methodology

To test the potential advantage of LLMs over previous methods, we choose a single representative lastgeneration LLM, rather than exhaustively testing options. We selected LLaMA (Touvron et al., 2023) due to its open-source nature, relatively low resource requirements, and competitive performance compared to larger commercial alternatives.

There are three main approaches to ranking pointwise, pairwise, and listwise (Xia et al., 2008). Both pointwise and listwise approaches have been shown to be challenging for LLMs (Qin et al., 2023). Therefore we adopt the pairwise approach.<sup>7</sup>

**Retrieval augmented generation (RAG)** Most query/target representations are too large to fit into a single prompt; however, much of the text is irrelevant for rating expertise. We therefore take the RAG approach (Lewis et al., 2020) to retrieve the most relevant parts of the text. We split  $q_k$  and  $t_i$  into sentences and compare them using embeddings derived by SentenceTransformers (Reimers and Gurevych, 2019). Each sentence in  $t_{i/j}$  is scored by its average similarity to all sentences in  $q_k$ , and we take the top N (here, N=10) sentences to form the prompt  $t'_{i/i}$ ;  $q_k$  is included as is.

**Prompting** Here we aim to convert a triple  $q_k, t_i, t_j$  into a preference for  $t_i$  or  $t_j$ . We therefore prompt LLaMA-2 to solicit this information. The prompt is "[INST] Description of the paper to review is  $[q_k]$ . Description of candidate A is  $[t_i]$ . Description of candidate B is  $[t_j]$ . Which candidate is more relevant to review this paper (your answer must be "Candidate A" or "Candidate B")? [/INST] My answer is: "<sup>8</sup> The model also receives an additional system prompt: "You are an expert pairing reviewers with suitable papers to review." If "Candidate A" or "Candidate B" appears in the model response we consider that was the better candidate, in very rare cases where this fails we

	Stelmakh	NIPS	IETF
TPMS	.27	.29	.23
TPMS (prompt)	.29	.26	.25
Specter+MFR	.24	-	-
LLaMA2-7b	.39*	.41*	.47*
LLaMA2-70b	.21*	.34*	.31*
LLaMA3-8b	.34*	.35*	.30*
LLaMA3-70b	.23*	.28	.24

Table 3: Model performance (see 4.1, lower is better). \* marks statistically significant difference wrt. TPMS.

consider the model decision was a tie. In this way an overall ordering between targets is established.

#### 4.3 Results

Results are given in Table 3. Performance on the IETF dataset are comparable to the other datasets: despite its labels being generated heuristically, it is still adequately challenging for ranking models. Expectedly, across all datasets, the larger LLaMA variants outperform the smaller ones; and LLaMA3 variants show considerable improvement over LLaMA2.

LLaMA2-70b achieves a new state of the art result (0.21) on the Stelmakh dataset, outperforming the Specter+MFR (Cohan et al., 2020) result (0.24) obtained by Stelmakh et al. (2023). However, all our LLMs fail to beat the TPMS baseline on the other two. Interestingly, LLM performance is better when the task is choosing between two papers given a reviewer (Stelmakh), than when choosing between two reviewers given a paper (NIPS, IETF). This result is consistent across LLMs and indicates the latter setting is more challenging.

We further investigate whether this issue is caused by prompts having inadequate information or by the LLM underperforming. Denoted as 'TPMS (prompt)' in Table 3, we apply the TPMS approach but with the same text representations  $t'_{i/j}$ ;  $q_k$  as used in the LLM prompts. This gives TPMS less text information, and thus had a small detrimental effect for the Stelmakh and IETF datasets; but improved scores for NIPS, and outperforms LLMs in all settings but one, indicating that the set of prompts includes the relevant information but the LLMs are unable to fully exploit it in our completely zero-shot setting.

#### 5 Conclusion

We introduced a new large-scale dataset with high quality silver labels for reviewer recommendation, and explored ways to apply large language models

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Our dataset could, in principle, be used for either of the three approaches (e.g., by assigning relevance scores of 3,2, and 1 to reviewers from T1,T2, and T3, respectively).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>[INST] tags separate user and model utterances.

(LLMs) in a zero-shot setting. While LLMs beat the state of the art on one dataset, the others remain a challenge; we hope this will encourage further research into applying LLMs to this task.

Future work could look into approaches that would utilize the available full document texts and other available data, especially long-context LLMs. Another avenue for improvement, which is enabled by the size of the dataset, would be to apply LLMs to this task in a few-shot or fully supervised setting. An interesting development in this vein would be investigating domain transfer between the IETF data and the standard paper peer-review domain.

# **6** Limitations

One limitation of the work is that we used only one family of language models. This seems sufficient for our purpose of demonstrating the challenge associated with the task and our new dataset; we have no doubt that further performance improvements could be gained by investigating other models and ways of applying them, and we hope that this will follow in future work, by ourselves or others. Another limitation is that the subset of drafts that we test the heuristic on may be biased towards the expertise of the annotators, even though we tried to include drafts from various IETF areas. Finally, our results are heavily dependent on the prompt used. While we did not have the computational resources to experiment with a wide range of prompts, we did try out several (3) variants in preliminary experiments, and selected the best one to use in all subsequent model runs.

## 7 Ethical Considerations

The IETF is an open standards body. Participation is dependent on accepting policies<sup>9</sup> that explicitly state that data about the standards process will be made public. Our analysis uses only this publicly available data. We discussed our work with IETF leadership to confirm it ensure with their policies. Our work is reproducible and we will release the code and data publicly upon acceptance.

# 8 Model training budget

For all experiments we used a pair of Quadro RTX 6000 GPUs with 24GB of video RAM each. A run over around 4000 candidate pairs with the largest (70b) models requires around 23 hours to complete.

We used oLLaMA (https://oLLaMA.com/) to run the LLMs.

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<sup>9</sup>https://www.ietf.org/about/note-well/

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