Neurobiology Systems 204 Exam

Hand out: 30 April 2007
Due: 5PM, 7 May 2007 in the inbox of nicholas_price@hms.harvard.edu

Write one News and Views type report for a single paper chosen from the first list below, and one referee’s report style critique for a paper from the second list. The instructions for each style are on the following page. Note that the absolute upper word limit for each is 2000 words, but don’t feel that you need to write this much - 1500 words would be fine. The papers will be on the website by Tuesday, or else you can find them yourself.

Please save the reports in separate files labelled something like nb204Exam_YourName_FirstAuthor so we can easily tell which paper you wrote about e.g. nb204Exam_Price_Fiorillo.doc.

News and Views

Referee’s report
A) a referee's report

Please evaluate the paper as if you were a referee reviewing this manuscript for an editor at a journal. Your referee's report must contain two parts:
- a brief summary of the paper (<500 words). Summarize the major question(s) addressed by this study, the study's major methods, and their major results/conclusions.
- a critique of the paper. The goal of this critique is to assess the positives and negatives of this study, and to help the editor decide whether to publish it. Some instructors may choose papers that are clearly flawed or clearly quite good, and so some of your reports may be much more positive than others. Your critique must explicitly address the following:

1. Is the major question addressed by this study an interesting one?
2. Are the authors' conclusions supported by their results? (Consider whether different interpretations would be equally plausible.)
3. Are additional experiments required before the authors can persuade you of their interpretation? If so, what?
4. As a referee, would you recommend publication of this study in the journal where it ultimately appeared?

Focus your critique on the scientific substance of the paper, and avoid dwelling on superficial issues (like the tone, style, or grammar of the manuscript). If you prefer to intermingle summary and critique, that's OK, but make sure you spend at least half your review in critique mode.

B) a "news and views" essay

Please write a commentary on this paper. Pretend that your essay will appear in the same issue of the journal as the paper you are discussing. The goal of this commentary is to help readers understand the context of this study. These essays generally have a positive tone, although they often point out (diplomatically) an important caveat of the paper. Your commentary must explicitly address the following:

1. What is the major question addressed by this study?
2. Why is this question interesting?
3. What is the background to this paper? (In other words, what gap in the literature does this study fill, or what controversy does it help settle? As a non-expert, this may require a little bit of outside reading on your part.)
4. How did the authors go about answering this question? Briefly summarize the design, experimental methods, and conclusions of the most important experiments in this study.
5. What overall conclusions did the authors reach regarding the major question they undertook to answer?
6. Point out major caveats in the study (if any), and outline obvious future directions of this research (if any).

Feel free to address these points in whatever order makes the most sense.