

# PEER REVIEW: HOW TO RESPOND TO REVIEWERS

The peer review system is simultaneously rewarding and frustrating, with good suggestions for improving your manuscript often hidden among less useful comments. What do you do when responding to a reviewer who clearly didn't read part of your manuscript or completely misunderstood one of your conclusions?

It can be tempting to simply tell the reviewer that they didn't read the paper thoroughly and not leave any other response. However, peer reviewers are working in good faith and provide a critical service to the advancement of discovery worldwide, so give them a thoughtful and thorough response. Reviewers offer a fresh take on your work and can sometimes find critical flaws before

your manuscript reaches a broader audience. In the end, the author gets the credit for the final product, but reviewers often contribute substantially to the shaping of the manuscript. Of course, you do not have to agree with every suggestion that a reviewer makes, but responding politely will help you when you want to refuse a suggestion or two.

## A STEP-BY-STEP WRITING PROCESS

How you respond to reviewers and editors can also go a long way toward a favorable decision about your manuscript.

When you engage in a civil and objective discourse with reviewers, you signal your commitment to scholarship and willingness to allow the peer review system to improve your manuscript. It is likely that you have reviewed papers from other authors (and if you haven't yet, you will soon), so make your responses a chance to treat your reviewers the way you would like to be treated! These tips and examples are just ideas; you should form your specific comments in your own words based on the specific comment you received.

## TIPS FOR RESPONDING TO REVIEWERS:

- Do not use an aggressive or defensive tone.
- Never use one reviewer's response against another.
- Say things like "we agree" or "this is an excellent point" if you are going to change your manuscript as suggested.
- Thank reviewers for good suggestions.
- Pick your battles! If you can make some changes easily, go ahead. Then, if you refuse other suggestions, it looks like you are compromising with the reviewer instead of fighting them.

## FOR EACH RESPONSE:

- Number the responses. Use a new set of numbers for each reviewer.
- Restate the reviewer's question or concern OR quote the reviewer's comment.
- Write each response so it can be ready by itself. Never refer to other responses (do not say "see the response to Reviewer 2").
- Try to acknowledge something that can be improved. For example:
  - Say your text may have been unclear or that you could provide more detail
  - Say that the suggestion is valid but would belong in another paper

## EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO REVIEWERS:

*What you want to say:* You just didn't understand what we wrote!

**What you should say:** Several statements that we made were more ambiguous than intended, and we have adjusted the text to be clearer.

*What you want to say:* You are being so picky about grammar or formatting!

**What you should say:** We apologize for this error, and we have corrected the text as suggested.

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*What you want to say:* No one knows the answer to that question.

**What you should say:** This is a valid question, and we are actively pursuing the answer.

OR

This is a valid and important question, and we are curious what the results would be. However, we are unaware of any studies that provide the answer.

*What you want to say:* That experiment would take forever!

**What you should say:** The suggested experiment is interesting and would provide additional information about..., but we feel that it falls outside the scope of this study.

*What you want to say:* We're not saying we provided anything - that's just our hypothesis!

**What you should say:** We agree that this explanation is speculative at this time, and we have edited the text to state that our conclusion is only suggested by our results.

*Note: Try to make some changes to the text to clarify your thoughts.*

*What you want to say:* You didn't even read what we wrote!

**What you should say:** We did not intend to indicate [insert reviewer's mistaken assertion here], and we have therefore altered the text to specify that [insert correct conclusion here].

*Note: Change some text to appease the reviewer.*

Have questions about how to respond to a particular reviewer comment?

**SEND US AN E-MAIL AT [ASKANEXPERT@AJE.COM](mailto:ASKANEXPERT@AJE.COM)**

**WE WOULD BE HAPPY TO OFFER OUR SUGGESTIONS!**

<sup>1</sup> Annesley, T. 2011. Top 10 tips for responding to reviewer and editor comments. *Clinical Chemistry* 57(4): 551-554. Available at <http://www.clinchem.org/content/57/4/551.full>

<sup>2</sup> Cummings, P. and F.P. Rivara. 2002. Responding to reviewers' comments on submitted articles. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 156: 105-107. Available at: <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=191489>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Mudrak is the Global Communications Manager at AJE, where he has worked since 2007. He graduated from Duke University with a PhD in Molecular Genetics and Microbiology and performed over eight years of research on pathogenic bacteria at Duke and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to his current position, Dr. Mudrak led a number of webinars and workshops on academic writing and publishing as part of AJE's Author Education program.



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