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Top 10 Tips for Responding to Reviewer and Editor Comments

Thomas M. Annesley*

Like it or not, many aspects of our lives involve a review process. In college, your professors were reviewers who evaluated and graded your work. When you apply for a loan, the bank uses appraisers and accountants to review your application. When a US senator writes a new piece of legislation, there are many other reviewers who will want to change the document. When a company wants to apply for a patent, an army of attorneys reviews the application to find any reason to decline the request.

So it should be no surprise to anyone who submits a scientific paper for publication that the editor and several reviewers will nearly always find problems or want to see changes in the paper. It is a normal part of the path to publication. You cannot control what the reviewers say. But you can control how you respond to their comments. So here are my Top 10 Tips to help you navigate through the response process.

1. Get Mad. Then Get Over It

The rare scientific paper is the one accepted without any need for revision. So, as an author you should expect that your submitted papers, if they make it past the first peer review cycle, will require some sort of modification to satisfy the critiques of the reviewers. It is both the editor's and the peer reviewer's job to make sure, on behalf of the journal, that your paper is scientifically sound, factual, clear, complete, and original. To do so, these individuals must often point out what is *wrong* with your paper. And for you as the author, that hurts.

When you see the criticisms that the reviewers have about your paper, go ahead and get mad. Go ahead and vent your frustration to a colleague. Then get over it before you take any future action to revise your paper and respond to the reviewers. Poor judgment at this point will produce a poor outcome. Responding to reviewer comments in an argumentative fashion usually does nothing but polarize the opinion of editors and reviewers against you.

2. Consider What the Editor's Decision Letter Really Says

In nonaccept decision letters, editors usually send a message about how interested they are in seeing this work again (see Examples box). If the editor has decided to reject your paper, as the first example shows, it is best to just accept the decision and consider another journal.

Some rejection letters (Example 2) offer an opportunity to resubmit. You still have your foot in the door, but you need to carefully consider whether there is a realistic chance that you can improve the paper to the reviewers' satisfaction. After finding numerous deficiencies, reviewers sometimes stop providing comments because their recommendations are clear by the time they are partway through the paper. If you decide to resubmit, it is possible that (1) the reviewers already have a poisoned view of the work and (2) you will receive additional criticisms of your work when the reviewers look at other parts of the paper they did not read carefully during the first round of reviews.

The third example is also a revise-and-resubmit letter, but it tells you that the paper should be acceptable after you have satisfactorily responded to the reviewers' comments. In that case, it is in your best interests to improve the paper and send it back with minimal delay.

3. Wait and Gather Your Thoughts

After you read the decision letter from the editor and see the reviewers' comments, take at least a day to allow yourself to process what both the editor and reviewers have said. Then take a fresh look at the comments to determine what the reviewers want to see in a revised paper. You can develop a game plan by categorizing the reviewer comments, as follows: (1) requests for clarification of existing text, addition of text to fill a hole in the paper, or additional experimental details; (2) requests to reanalyze, reexpress, or reinterpret existing data; (3) requests for additional experiments or further proof of concept; and (4) requests you simply cannot meet. Seeing the spectrum of what you need to accomplish

University of Michigan Health System, Ann Arbor, MI.
* Address correspondence to the author at: University of Michigan Health System, Room UH2G332, 1500 East Medical Center Dr., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-5054. E-mail annesley@umich.edu.
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Examples of Decision Letters

Example 1. Rejection, do not resubmit.

Your paper has been examined by 2 expert reviewers. Unfortunately, we must decline this manuscript for publication. The reasons for this decision are indicated in the reviewers' comments.

Example 2. Declined for now, future acceptance possible.

Your paper has been examined by 2 expert reviewers. For the reasons explained in the comments, we cannot accept this manuscript for publication in *Clinical Chemistry*. We would consider a revised version that takes these criticisms into account but cannot offer assurance that submission of a revised manuscript will lead to acceptance.

Example 3. Declined for now, future acceptance very likely.

Your paper has been examined by 2 expert reviewers. As you will see in their comments, each reviewer finds merit in the work but makes constructive suggestions. Please consider the suggestions carefully, as the changes will produce an article that better serves you and our readers.

to improve the paper helps you prioritize your efforts. If additional data analysis or statistical analysis is requested, decide whether you have the resources to do so or need to set up a consultation with a professional statistician. If additional experiments need to be performed, begin to design experimental protocols and to set them in motion. If there are reviewer requests that you cannot meet, you need to gather your thoughts here as well. You need to satisfy the reviewer somehow, so begin to develop a logical explanation for how or why the study is not affected by a failure to include what the reviewer requested.

4. Even If the Reviewer Is Wrong, It Does Not Mean You Are Right

Sometimes reviewers miss something and then ask about it in the comments. Sometimes the reviewer is not an expert on everything you presented in the paper and misjudges the importance of something that they ask to be removed. Sometimes a reviewer misinterprets a result. Sometimes a reviewer does not completely understand your message and therefore questions it. In other words, reviewers can be wrong.

But even if a reviewer appears wrong, that does not mean you are right. You, the author, could be the source of the reviewer's misdirected comment. If the reviewer is confused or misjudges something in the paper, they might have unintentionally identified something you did not explain with the proper clarity, forgot to include, or failed to emphasize sufficiently. So, look first at what you can do to improve the paper and satisfy the reviewer, not explain to the reviewer how he or she is wrong.

5. Choose Your Battles Wisely

If your scientific paper is typical, the reviewers will ask you to make more than one modification. Some changes you will agree are worthwhile, some you will think are irrelevant, and some you will disagree with. Even if you do not fully agree with the reviewers on some points, you need to choose your battles wisely. If a change to a sentence or paragraph requested by the reviewer does not affect the intended meaning, do your best to make the change. It does not hurt you and sends the message that you took their suggestions seriously; however, if you believe that a requested change will negatively affect the paper, go ahead and respectfully disagree. It is your name on the title page. But do not respond by stating that the reviewer is wrong without allowing the reviewer, wherever possible, to save face. Explain where the reviewer may have misinterpreted the section and that you want to keep the text intact. You might find, however, that as you explain the rationale for keeping the text as is, some of the wording and logic you use to respond to the reviewer might be worth adding to the paragraph in question to help the reader better understand the paper.

6. Do Not Pit One Reviewer against Another

One argument you should never use when responding to reviewers is that only one reviewer took issue with an aspect of the paper whereas the other reviewer saw nothing wrong with it. Reviewers are often selected because they have different areas of expertise and will look at a paper from 2 different points of view. This approach helps the editor achieve the goal of thor-

oughly evaluating the entire paper. So, do not consider the absence of a criticism to be the same as tacit agreement with your statements. Respond to each reviewer as if the review were the only one you received.

In some situations the reviewers will make diametrically opposed recommendations. For example, one reviewer may suggest the addition of more information to a figure, whereas the second reviewer may suggest that the figure could be removed from the paper. In these situations you must decide which suggestion will improve the paper; however, do not ignore either suggestion by using the argument that the reviewers could not agree. Provide a logical explanation to both reviewers for why you feel that one of the suggestions would be more effective in improving the paper.

7. Be Grateful for the Reviewers' and Editor's Time

Reviewers volunteer their time when they agree to evaluate a scientific paper. Although the comments may sometimes appear harsh, most reviewers are authors themselves and try to point out ways to improve the paper. So, be grateful for their time as well as the editor's time. State as much when you resubmit the paper.

Be polite and thoughtful in all of your responses to the comments you received. If a reviewer compliments you about some aspect of the paper, thank the individual. If the reviewer made a good observation that you had not considered, thank the reviewer even if you have a reason why the observation is not relevant to the paper.

8. Restate the Reviewer's or Editor's Comment When Responding

Clarity on your part is essential if the editor and reviewers are to understand your responses. They will not recall the order in which the comments were written, nor will they remember the exact wording they used. Make their jobs easier by restating a reviewer's comment before describing how you modified the paper. The page number for the text in question may not be the same in the revised version as in the original version, so in each of your responses state the page and line number of the revised version where any corrections were made, any new text was added, or any text was moved within the paper. Copy the exact text from the revised version into your response. Also, in your revised version do not retain the original text with a strike-through line or use the track-changes function to identify it.

Even if a reviewer has numbered his or her comments, do not simply write down "Comment 1" followed by a response. Restate the reviewer's comment. If the reviewers had similar comments, do not ask one reviewer to "see response to Reviewer 2," or simply write "Comment 1: See response to comment 4 from Reviewer 1." Each comment from each reviewer deserves an individual response, even if you use the same text in your separate responses to the 2 reviewers. Don't be concerned about the length or word count of your responses. The goal is to help the editor and reviewers easily understand what you did to improve the paper.

9. Be Prepared to Cut Text

A journal is expensive to produce, and the editor is responsible for balancing content and costs. So don't be surprised if the editor asks you to condense your paper by removing text, or even removing a table or graph. Take this request seriously, and make an honest effort to help the editor. Look for overlap in the content of the Introduction and the beginning of the Discussion. Figure legends often restate experimental details that have already been presented in the Methods. Columns in tables can sometimes be combined or eliminated and replaced with footnotes. In today's electronic-publishing environment, informative but nonessential figures, tables, and experimental details can be supplied as online supplemental files. Substitute short words for longer ones. Consider using the active voice rather than the passive voice to save words (e.g., "lisinopril lowered blood pressure" instead of "blood pressure was lowered by linisopril").

10. Do Not Submit the Same Version to Another Journal

If your paper is rejected by the first journal you submitted your work to or if you decide not to send a revision back to that journal, do not send the paper to a second journal without attempting to address the concerns of the original reviewers. Reviewer comments often help improve a paper, so why not take advantage of the reviewers' advice if it can improve the paper? The same flaws that the original reviewers identified are likely to be detected by the new reviewers. Even worse, the second journal might send the paper to the same reviewers who first saw your paper. Why take chances instead of devoting the time to revise the paper before you send it off to another journal?

Final Thoughts

There is an old adage, "less is more." In many cases that is good advice to follow; however, when responding to reviewer and editor comments, more is definitely better. More time is better than less to gather your thoughts before you respond. More consideration of how the reviewers' and editor's suggestions might improve the paper is better than less. More thought about the final goal, which is an accepted paper, can help you

choose your battles wisely. More detail in your written responses is better than less detail. And perhaps most important of all, expressing more humility and gratitude is wiser than what you might really want to say.

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