

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

## Responding to Reviewers: Guidelines and Advice

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Responding to those who have read and critiqued your work, such as editors and reviewers, is a central part of academic exchange. To be able to explain and defend the choices you have made in a response letter is also a key skill that takes time to develop. It is my hope that this essay will help you reflect on the process of writing these responses and provide some useful tips toward getting published.

Apart from a “desk reject,” which means that a paper has not been reviewed, there are generally four verdicts on a paper submission: “reject,” “major revision,” “minor revision,” and “accept.” The decision of acceptance is often “conditional” and generally is only given after one or more rounds of reviews. Both major and minor revisions mean an “R&R,” the common lingo for the opportunity to “revise and resubmit” your manuscript. Receiving an R&R is therefore a real achievement, as it is the first step toward a peer-reviewed output.

These decisions, communicated by email, will generally be accompanied by an introduction by the editor and reports from two or more reviewers. These verdicts invoke in most of us mixed feelings of hope and dread or anticipation and anxiety (see Shaw 2012). Often, these reports appear daunting at first sight. They may ask for things that are contradictory or even challenge your intent with the work. It is important to digest the feedback carefully and return to the content many times while revising the paper. Changing your manuscript to meet these reviews is a long process that can be perceived as equally difficult (and time-consuming) as writing the first draft of the actual article.

Besides the delicate process of actually altering your work, you need to document to reviewers and editors what you have done. Inability to respond to these comments might get the paper rejected. There are myriad guides on how

to respond to reviewers. This short essay aims to consolidate this plethora of advice and present my own take on this process.

Editors have observed that there are often deficiencies in how prospective authors answer reviews. For example, Nahata and Sorkin (2019) summarize six flaws in authors' responses: (1) ignoring or incompletely addressing comments, (2) not being specific about what exactly was changed in the manuscript, (3) not knowing how to address differing suggestions, (4) providing inadequate evidence as justification for not making changes, (5) expressing frustration or impatience with the process or reviewers, and (6) not clearly explaining why and how the revised manuscript makes a contribution.

Hopefully, my advice will help early career researchers avoid some of these pitfalls by prompting you to think of how to improve response letters. As noted by Woolston (2015), as well as other authors in this Critical Perspectives section, responding to editors and reviewers is a skill that is seldom a part of formalized training in graduate schools. The process is partly generic to academic writing, and therefore it is potentially useful for aspiring scientists across disciplines.

### Assessing the Verdict

Think of the decision letter as consisting of two parts: (1) the editor's comment or summary of what they are asking you to focus on in your revisions and (2) the reviewer reports. My suggestion is to spend time on the editor's comments and the way they frame what you are asked to do. That is, pay special attention to what the editor says. If they weigh in, their comments should shape the direction of your revisions. The editor is, in the end, the person who will decide whether your manuscript moves forward, and the few lines that are given should be seen as very valuable information. If you think the review reports are too contradictory, I suggest you email the editor to ask for advice. This question must be informative (recall that these people will not remember every detail of your manuscript), and they must be to the point (they are also extremely busy). (See Franceschet, Krook, and Wolbrecht 2023 for more information on the editorial process.)

### Mindset When Revising: Open and Constructive

Several guides on this theme agree that adopting a certain attitude will help you when revising. Often, you may initially perceive comments to be incomprehensible or provoking, but find them less so the next morning. Shaw (2012) recommends a "cooling off period" of a few days to get some distance from these reports.

I think an essential approach is to be open to altering your work and to see this as a process of academic exchange. A particularly good exercise is to reread your manuscript in light of the comments, to try to see the reviewers' points from their perspective (see Morse 1996). A general point in guides on this theme is that an author should try to recall that reviewers do their best to improve your text. Most reviewers mean well, and in fact, they have devoted time they could have

spent on other tasks to help colleagues in the discipline. A general insight is that “in most cases, the reviewers are trying to help the author improve the manuscript, and the comments should be taken as helpful recommendations for making it a stronger and more meaningful article” (Robbins et al. 2016, 253).

A similar insight that I think is useful to bear in mind as an author is that these reviewers might be right, after all. While that could mean you are wrong, often this is about tweaking your work toward this new perspective. And if you still think the reviewers are not right, chances are that they will still be representative of others who will read your text in the same way. As stated by Nahata and Sorkin (2019, 959), “some readers of the journal may misinterpret the content of the paper in similar ways if it is not revised or clarified as suggested by the reviewers.” Hence, use these reviews as an indication of whether the audience understands your argument.

The more challenging situation arises when you are asked to make changes you do not agree with. Most academics can understand why this creates conflicting feelings (see Mikal 2021). In guides on this theme, the strategies for addressing such suggestions seem to differ. On one end of the spectrum, authors such as Guyatt and Haynes (2006, 905) recommend a strategy of always pleasing the reviewer: “Go along with it. It’s seldom worth fighting with the reviewer. We happily make changes that we do not believe improve a paper.” On the other end is the perspective that you should stick to your original idea, that “you don’t have to make changes you firmly believe would detract from the purpose of the manuscript” (Robbins et al. 2016, 253). You will have to find your own way to strike this balance.

### **It Is Fine to (Subtly) Disagree**

When you approach reviews, you might find that there are situations in which the reviewer is impossible to satisfy. In the end, you might need to communicate that some points were left as they were for one or another reason. In this case, it is generally much better to be constructive (see Woolston 2015) and to explain why you chose not to make a suggested change. You can oppose reviewers, but, as Linton (2019, 2) notes, “when you find you need to disagree do so diplomatically and skillfully.” Even if you receive language from a reviewer that goes beyond disagreement to offensive, do not use language that is unfitting. Instead, contact the editor if you think there are problems with the tone of the reviewer. As Noble (2017) notes, a rude review does not justify a rude response.

### **How to Use the Response Letter/Memo**

The review reports require that you write a separate document in which you outline how you incorporated suggestions and identify specifically in the manuscript where—and how—you inserted each change. Personally, I use this document as a “to-do-list” that I write while revising the manuscript. This is a process of several steps. First, I create an empty master file, where I more or less paste the full review reports, which I then start to distill. Second, I craft these points into

bullets that are action points for me in revising the manuscript. Third, I turn these bullets into things that I have done as I proceed with the revision. Thus, the to-do list turns into a have-done list (with specific references to things altered in the manuscript) that I use in the response letter.

Remember to always go back to the original comments in the decision letter when you are done, to reflect on whether your response is ready for resubmission. You should make sure to respond to all the comments in the review, including those where you decided to refrain from implementing a suggested change. This is important, as failing to address some comments (making the reviewer feel that not all points in the review were addressed) is sometimes a cause of rejection (Linton 2019). A crucial mistake that Linton (2019) discusses is to say that “you took care of everything” without providing detailed evidence, as very few editors or reviewers will appreciate a vague and unrealistic response. Remember that reviewers will forget the details of your manuscript and, indeed, their own comments. So be very specific in discussing which comment you received and on which section.

### What the Response Letter/Memo Should Look Like

A general feature of the response letter is that they can be lengthy. In fact, it can be longer than your manuscript, though some journals restrict its length. A response letter is also anonymous. It normally has an introductory heading that is addressed to the editor and includes the title of the manuscript.

The letter should consist of three parts. First, the author appropriately thanks the editor and the reviewers for their time and helpful comments. Next, the author gives a high-level response to the main concerns about the paper and how these have been addressed (try to summarize the changes made in a few descriptive sentences). The second part is where the actual, detailed response is outlined. This is the main content of this letter. Finally, the author signs the rebuttal on behalf of the coauthors.

When you outline the complete set of changes you have done, there are a couple of ways to structure your response. While some prefer to present the comment and then a response (Guyatt and Haynes 2006), others argue that it is more efficient to simply state what you have changed. You can think of three types of letters here, in terms of details: (1) the “cut and paste of comments,” where the full comment is met by your response (creating lengthy letters); (2) the “point-by-point summary,” where you condense the comment by a reviewer with your own words, followed by your response (with the risk that reviewers might feel your summary is inaccurate or dodging the most difficult aspects); and (3) the “editor-only” style, where you refer broadly to points from reviewers and focus more on your response (potentially resulting in a response letter that is overly broad and lacking in specificity).

Another choice is the structure. You could either follow your manuscript’s chronological order and mention thematically the comments from each reviewer on a given section (e.g., the suggestions they had for your methods section and how you addressed them). A second approach is to first address one

of the reviewer's full list of views from A to Z and then the second reviewer's. Regardless, I suggest you start with bigger and crucial points and move to the smaller things at the end of the letter, as this mirrors the way that review reports are often structured. While these letters do not have to be beautifully written, they need to be direct and clear. Try to diversify your language, using different versions of the following comment: "We are thankful for this comment that reviewer 2 posed and we addressed it in the following way..."

You could end the letter by declaring that you have not exceeded the size limit and that you hope the text is now suitable for publication. Many letters will also include supporting code or tables if this is information not included in the appendices of the manuscript.

### Concluding Remarks

The process of revising your work is tough, and I want to remind you that a response letter is that place to communicate how much effort you spent on the revision. As should be clear, I recommend that you think of this letter as a companion to your revised manuscript and one that you should spend concentrated effort and time on. Do try to see these reviews as an opportunity to get valuable feedback from peers. And see your rebuttal as a chance to fine-tune your "sell," explaining why your work is novel and rigorous. You will soon find your own voice when mastering these types of letters, which are an important part of our profession of academic exchange.

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