HOW TO RESPOND TO PEER REVIEWERS’ COMMENTS

Writing workshop
May 30, 2017
Duke Kunshan University
AGENDA

• Peer review: what’s the point? Does it work? What’s the relationship between the editor and the reviewers?

• Decision letters from the editor

• What to do about rejections, if you disagree

• “Revise and resubmit” letters: how to respond

• Open discussion
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"THAT'S IT? THAT'S PEER REVIEW?"

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“In addition to being poor at detecting gross defects and almost useless for detecting fraud it is slow, expensive, profligate [wasteful] of academic time, highly subjective, something of a lottery, prone to bias, and easily abused.”
DOES PEER REVIEW “WORK”?  

- 19 studies of the effects of peer review  
- “Remarkably few well-designed studies assessing the effects of this process”  
- Peer review “should be regarded as an untested process with uncertain outcomes”  
- Some evidence that it improves readability
• Meta-analysis of 48 studies of peer review (of about 20,000 submitted papers)
• The researchers estimated the inter-rater reliability
• Kappa was just 0.17
• “A Cohen's Kappa of .17 indicates that the reviewers agreed in their evaluations for 17% more of the manuscripts than would have been predicted on the basis of chance alone”
MY EXPERIENCE OF THE VALUE OF PEER REVIEW

• Helps me as an editor assess the paper:
  • Is it important enough, new enough, robust enough?
  • Scientifically sound?

• Important input into my decision-making process

• Helps authors craft a better paper
  • Scientifically more robust (perhaps)
  • Better situated with respect to the existing literature
  • Better presented
IT IS THE EDITOR WHO DECIDES!

• Remember:
  • The role of the editors is to decide on your paper
  • Editors will be guided by the scientific expertise of their peer reviewers
  • In the end, however, the decisions are EDITORIAL

• So keep this in mind when it comes to your response to an editor’s letter
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"Dear Professor Smith

Thank you for submitting your paper to our journal. We have decided that your beautifully written paper, and perfectly conducted study, are worthy of immediate publication without any changes.

Sincerely,

The editor."
DECISIONS FROM THE EDITOR

Gentlemen,
Enclosed please find
my latest short story.

U.S. MAIL

U.S. MAIL
TYPES OF DECISIONS FROM THE EDITOR

1. Reject without review
2. Reject after peer review
3. Revise and offer to see a revision
   - major revisions needed
   - minor revisions needed
4. Accept
   - accept subject to final minor revisions
   - accept

How to respond
COMMON REASONS FOR REJECTION

Box 1. Common reasons for rejection:
• Contents outside scope of the journal or inappropriate.
• Incomplete submission.
• Poor methodology.
• Faulty experimental design.
• Major flaws in interpretation of results.
• Major flaws in deduction.
• Extremely poor writing.
• Duplicated or plagiarised work.

Peh WC, Ng KH. Dealing with returned manuscripts. Singapore Med J 2009; 50: 1050-52
COMMON REASONS FOR REVISION REQUESTS

Box 2. Common reasons for revision requests:

- Minor faults in methodology.
- Minor inaccuracies in data.
- Inconsistencies in data.
- Inconsistencies among different sections of the manuscript.
- Faulty deductions.
- Data do not support conclusions.
- Excessive data or text (i.e., manuscript is too long).
- Poor or excessive illustrations.
- Poor but salvageable writing.

Peh WC, Ng KH. Dealing with returned manuscripts. Singapore Med J 2009; 50: 1050-52
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Dear Sir,

Many thanks for asking whether we would like to publish your paper.

Your paper is good and original, but unfortunately we are simply not willing to publish it.

The trouble is that the good bits were not original and the original bits were not good.

Yours faithfully,

The Editor
HOW TO RESPOND TO REJECTION

- If the editor’s rejection letter is convincing, and it is clear that your paper is not a good fit for that journal → move on to your 2nd choice journal

- If the rejection is accompanied by peer review comments, use these to strengthen the paper before you submit to 2nd choice journal
  - the flaws may well be spotted at the 2nd journal; it might even by chance go to the same reviewers!
If you think the editor or peer reviewers have made a mistake:

REMEMBER: Most editors are not content experts → if they didn’t get an expert peer review, they genuinely might have got it wrong.
SUBMITTING AN APPEAL

Write a polite, factual letter that points out why you think the editor may have missed your important study.

“We would be grateful if you could reconsider your decision. Our study is the first to have looked at X and we feel the public health community will find it valuable because of Y.”
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"Thank you for your detailed and lengthy criticism of my manuscript. I will be sure to incorporate your suggestions in my next draft."

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HOW TO RESPOND TO PEER REVIEWERS: MY TWO DAY RULE

Day 1
• Be angry just for one day, but then get over your anger and frustration
• Never, ever let your frustration affect your response
• The tone of how you respond will make a big difference
You have a wonderful opportunity to revise and resubmit: maximize your chance of success!
Day 2

• Take a fresh look at the reviewers’ comments, calmly, and make a **game plan**:
  • Points of clarification/explanation – should be easy to address (“quick wins”)
  • Request for re-analysis of the data – decide if you can do this (if you cannot, you will need to explain why)
  • Request for additional research – do you have time/resources?
  • Requests that are impossible to meet (you’ll need a rationale)
HOW TO RESPOND TO PEER REVIEWERS

“CHOPP”

Answer **Completely**, point by point (copy and paste comments), be specific and precise
Answer **Humbly**, stating where your paper was indeed weak
Answer **Objectively**, with evidence
Answer **Promptly**
Answer **Politely**
ANSWER COMPLETELY

• Be very organized: copy and paste each comment, and then give your reply (e.g. in italics)

• Be very specific

• State exactly how you responded and where you responded (give the page number, line number)

Reviewer’s Comment: “The discussion was not clear enough about how the policy implications of this new study.”

Bad reply: We have now fixed this

Good reply: We thank the reviewer for this helpful comment. We have now addressed this weakness by adding in a new paragraph on page 17, lines 25-32, in which we lay out what our findings mean for national and international policymakers.
EXAMPLE OF POINT BY POINT RESPONSES

Reviewer: I suggest saying 'grassroots civil society engagement' rather than 'civil society engagement.'

Our response: Thank you for this suggestion. We have now changed this to ‘grassroots civil society engagement’ as suggested, which you will see on page X, line Y.

Reviewer: What is an example of a successful health care agenda in a low or middle income country (LMIC)?

Response: Thank you for suggesting we mention a successful agenda. We’ve added the example of newborn survival in Nepal, and added two additional citations. In the discussion, we now state:

“A better understanding of the opportunities to prioritize surgery on the agenda of LMICs can also come from comparing our study results with those of other studies that examined national advocacy for a specific health issue. To give one example, Smith and colleagues recently examined why neonatal mortality had been prioritized or neglected in Bolivia, Nepal, and Malawi, three countries with high neonatal mortality but very different levels of prioritization (77). Since 2000, neonatal mortality has steadily risen to the top of the national agenda in Nepal; in contrast, attention stagnated then grew in Malawi and grew then stagnated in Bolivia. The factors associated with successful advocacy were “(1) advancing solutions with demonstrated efficacy in low-resource settings, (2) building on existing and emerging national priorities and (3) developing a strong network of domestic and international allies.”
It is helpful to be honest in admitting where the paper was weak, and then you can thank the editors and reviewers for helping you to strengthen it.

“We agree with Reviewer 2 that we were unclear about X. We are grateful to Reviewer 2 for pointing out this weakness. We have now addressed the reviewer’s concern by rewriting Section Y (pages 34, 35), adding in much more detail about A, B, and C.”
Back up your assertions with evidence, especially if you disagree with the reviewer.

Don’t just say “we disagree with Reviewer 1”; state why you disagree and cite the evidence (you may even add the evidence to the revised paper).

Reviewers often point out key studies that you may have missed → I generally add these in if they are relevant.
ANSWER PROMPTLY

It shows enthusiasm if you respond promptly.

The editor usually gives you a deadline → if you know you will miss it, write to her and say you need more time (this shows that you are keen to revise and resubmit).

If your response is very delayed, the editor may lose faith in you!
Never be rude or personal (“reviewer 1 is crazy and reviewer 2 does not know what she is talking about”)

It is totally fine to disagree with a reviewer, but you should be polite and respectful when you disagree and you should explain your thinking, e.g.

- “We acknowledge Reviewer 2’s concern about our choice of a case control design. However, we respectfully disagree on this point. We feel that a case control design was appropriate because of X, Y, and Z.”

ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS THANK THE EDITOR AND REVIEWERS FOR THEIR TIME AND COMMENTS
If the reviewer has made a positive comment about your paper, you MUST include this in your point-by-point response and use it to show the positive aspects of your study.

Reviewer: This study has major novelty, and I think readers of the journal will find it very valuable.

Response: Many thanks to the reviewer for this positive feedback, which we appreciate. We agree that the readers will likely find our paper new and interesting.
Dear Editors,

We thank the reviewers for their generous comments on the manuscript and have edited the manuscript to address their concerns.

In particular, all of the code we wrote is available and I have included multiple links throughout the paper to the appropriate code repositories.

We believe that the manuscript is now suitable for publication in PeerJ.

Sincerely,

Dr. Robert A. Edwards
Associate Professor of Computer Science and Biology

On behalf of all authors.
IN SUMMARY

“Answer completely, answer politely, answer with evidence”

Special Article

How to reply to referees’ comments when submitting manuscripts for publication

Hywel C. Williams, PhD
Nottingham, United Kingdom
DON’T PIT ONE REVIEWER AGAINST ANOTHER

• Editors hate it when you do this (e.g. “While reviewer 2 criticized us for X, we note that reviewers 1 and 3 were not concerned about this issue at all”)

• Editors often choose a range of reviewers with differing expertise, so they are deliberately getting a wide range of viewpoints

• If the reviewers have said totally opposite things, decide which suggestion will improve the paper and then respond to both (an alternative is to ask the editor for guidance)
DON’T BATTLE THE EDITOR ABOUT WORD LENGTH

• Editors often ask you to shorten your paper; shorter is usually much better (Mark Twain: “I didn’t have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one instead”)

• This is a battle you will lose – it isn’t worth fighting
  - Remove unnecessary figures, tables and check for overlapping content in the Introduction and Discussion
  - Use a short Introduction (just 2 or 3 paragraphs) and a Structured Discussion
  - Move material into online appendices (supplementary files)
  - Change passive tense to active (“the diuretic lowered blood pressure” instead of “blood pressure was lowered by the diuretic”)

CENTER FOR POLICY IMPACT IN GLOBAL HEALTH
SUBMIT 4 THINGS!

1. Cover letter to the editor (be thankful and polite)
2. Formal point by point rebuttal letter
3. Tracked revision
4. Clean revision
• Sometimes, in addition to peer review comments, the editor herself also includes her own critique

• Make sure to respond to her comments (not just the peer reviewers’ comments)
USEFUL PHRASES TO START YOUR RESPONSES

We agree with the referee that ___, but...
The referee is right to point out ___, yet...
In accordance with the referees' wishes, we have now changed this sentence to ___.
Although we agree with the referee that...
It is true that ___, but...
We acknowledge that our manuscript might have been ___, but...

Williams H. How to reply to referees' comments when submitting manuscripts for publication. I Am Acad Dermatol 2004; 51:79-83.
USEFUL PHRASES TO START YOUR RESPONSES

We, too, were disappointed by the low response rate.
We agree that this is an important area that requires further research.
We support the referee's assertion that ____, although...
With all due respect to the reviewer, we believe that this point is not correct.

Williams H. How to reply to referees' comments when submitting manuscripts for publication. I Am Acad Dermatol 2004; 51:79-83.
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.” Now state the changes and where they are

EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO REVIEWERS

**WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY**

“No one knows the answer to that question”

**WHAT YOU SHOULD SAY**

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

EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO REVIEWERS

“That experiment would take forever!”

“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.”

EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO REVIEWERS

**WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY**

“We’re not saying we proved 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.”

Now state the changes and where they are in the revised paper.
EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO REVIEWERS

“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 corrected conclusion here].” Now change some text to appease the reviewer. State what & where the changes are.

EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO REVIEWERS

“YOU WANT TO SAY”  “WHAT YOU SHOULD SAY”

“You are being so picky about grammar or formatting!”

“We apologize for this error, and we have corrected the text as suggested.”

“A request for revision should be viewed positively, as it means that there is a possibility that the manuscript may still be potentially publishable, provided that all the editor’s and reviewers’ comments are addressed”
Peanuts

By Charles Schulz

Gentlemen, Regarding the recent rejection slip you sent me.

I think there might have been a misunderstanding.

What I really wanted was for you to publish my story, and send me fifty thousand dollars.

Didn't you realize that?
THANK YOU

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