

## GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

### 6.10 Responding to Peer Reviews

Once a painstakingly crafted manuscript has finally been sent off to a journal editor a load may seem lifted from the shoulders of the main authors but, of course, the relief is temporary. Perhaps six weeks or so later it will return with a journal response, including detailed and often painful critiques from peer reviewers. Here we discuss some ways to cope with this stage.

#### *Opening the letter*

Other than for short subject review articles it is almost unheard of to get full acceptance with the first review, so read the editorial letter with this in mind. Editors filter manuscripts before sending to peer review and will return a manuscript without review if it is outside the scope of the journal or of insufficient interest to the editor. This type of rejection arrives rapidly (perhaps a couple of weeks), since peer review is not needed. In this case the editor may suggest the manuscript be sent to a sister journal for consideration.

If the manuscript was peer reviewed, then the editor will apologetically inform the authors that the journal will not accept the manuscript, then go on to indicate whether the journal will consider an amended manuscript. If they will, then it can be considered a conditional acceptance, so is good news. If not then it is bad news, a rejection and (after taking account of the peer criticism) the manuscript must be sent elsewhere.

#### *Rejecting a rejection*

If authors feel that a rejection is unfair due to (say) a badly misinformed peer reviewer who totally missed the point, the authors may consider a letter of appeal to the editor. Such a letter must be short, and demonstrate the flimsiness of the reviewers' criticisms, while indicating how the manuscript can be easily improved to counter such criticism.

All arguments should be calmly stated (not angry), logical and concise. If a particular contentious point was brought up by a reviewer strategies include

citing strong supportive evidence from the literature regarding, logical inconsistencies between reviewers, and whether the journal previously published work that accepted the point that is now contended. Such appeals usually do not stand a good chance of success (it is hard to generalise) but sometimes it works, so may be worth the effort.

#### *General considerations and the editor perspective*

Editors are looking for manuscripts that are going to boost the reputation and impact factor of the journal, i.e., papers in the journal that will be well cited. Manuscripts that are clear and compelling to the editor (and so the journal audience) will be treated well, so must be well crafted.

Correspondence with an editor also needs to be respectful and clear. Note that disagreements between reviewers may oblige the editor to go to an additional reviewer, which can take time.

#### *The peer reviews and the types of criticisms (minor, textual, actionable and arguable)*

Identify reviewer points that are very minor (e.g., a typo) or that can be dealt with by altering the text and deal these immediately. Where a reviewer is very negative about a point it should be addressed in the letter along with corresponding amendments to the text. Where a reviewer objection is raised that requires more work, e.g., undertaking further analysis or adding another study then (if that is feasible and reasonable) it should be done without further ado. Do not simply state that the work will be done in future studies, especially if it looks easy to do; this is a red rag to an editor.

When a reviewer demands something that is arguable or wrong, craft a direct response to this with the help of experienced mentors to try and get the editor onto your side. It can be a good strategy to demonstrate the inanity of a demand to do some pointless work, only then to partly concede (for purposes of goodwill) to add a little extra material.

#### *Framing arguments*

All discussion of reviewer points must be good natured and scholarly, with an assumption that the reviewer is acting in good faith. Over-politeness and lengthy anguished arguments are of little use where a straight and simple response can be made, as editors are busy. If the reviewer (or editor) is wrong on a point then say so but be prepared to back up the argument with literature references or other argument. The central substance of a reviewer objection should be clearly addressed, and if the objection has merit then concede it and try to repair the manuscript accordingly.

If reviewer demands go well beyond the scope of the work, say so and explain why. If the reviewer demands the manuscript work must answer a question it was never intended to address, say so and explain why. If a reviewer demands work that would give open ended answers (so would not provide any conclusive outcome) say so and explain why. If the reviewers demand is simply unreasonable (e.g., too much difficult work) then say so but be prepared to submit the paper elsewhere if the editor does not agree.

Lastly, on rare occasions a reviewer critique might be a firehose of weird questions and objections: this may indicate lack of good faith after all – the reviewer intends to kill your manuscript. A response to this problem may need input from an experienced hand to draft a letter to the editor raising the possibility that the reviewer may have a conflict of interest. It happens.

#### *Dealing with textual changes*

Manuscript text alterations should be carefully documented in the rebuttal letter and indicated in a copy of the manuscript according to the instructions provided by the journal.

#### *Writing the rebuttal letter*

The response letter to the editor should be sent within the prescribed period and start with manuscript details (reference number, author, title), then a short and polite summary of how the reviewers concerns have been addressed and how this has made the manuscript stronger. The rebuttal should quote each reviewer point one by one, and under each of these put the author rebuttal or response to that point. This includes details of any text alterations, arguments and additional work done to address the point.

If a point raised by reviewer 2 was dealt with in response to reviewer 1 simply indicate this and do not repeat the material. Where text was amended exactly as the reviewer requested, indicate this. Do not constantly thank the reviewers for ‘raising important points’, but equally do not be impolite or caustic.

#### *Substantial alterations and extra work*

If there is a demand for a lot of extra work to be done, it needs to be considered whether it is better to comply or to withdraw manuscript from review and submit elsewhere. This needs extensive consultation with the co-authors.

#### *Second stage reviews and later*

Upon returning the manuscript after the first peer review (and rebuttal) the hope is that the editor and reviewers will scan the list of points raised (and responses given), note that all review points have been addressed then then wave it through with only minor quibbles. There is tacit contract with journal editors (except for the elite journals) that if all of the points raised in the first peer review are addressed, then the manuscript should be accepted for publication. Points that were not brought up in the first review should not be raised in the second without good reason, especially if further author response to critique is not allowed. The elite journals such as Nature do as they as they wish regarding peer review questions.

After second review the manuscript will again return to the authors. With any luck there will only be an editor request for minor revision, which often does not involve the peer reviewers further. This

which makes it easy to get acceptance with the final resubmission. It is not so common to get a rejection after second review but it can happen of the editor is really not happy.

*And finally*

At last final unconditional acceptance is received the burden is almost lifted but not quite. Administrative matters remain, such as bill payments and checking of proofs. However, it is not an unreasonable point to celebrate.

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