

In Response

Referees are the heart of the peer review process. They are experts in their fields who provide independent evaluations of a manuscript, and they are anonymous to the authors. In their written reviews, referees offer comments on the technical content of a manuscript, opinions about its significance, novelty, and potential impact, and a recommendation as to whether or not the manuscript should be considered for publication.^{1,2} At *ACS Nano*, we greatly value our referees—their expertise, their input, their time, and their dedication. They are our authors, our readers, and our editorial advisors, and they are an integral part of our journal's extended family. What then does one do, as an author on the receiving end of anonymous peer review, when one does not agree with the comments of the referees?

As authors, we have all been there. Reviews that are returned to us sometimes offer conflicting opinions, or there are inaccurate or inappropriate comments, or the content of the reviews indicates that the reviewers “just didn't get it”. As editors, we do our best

to arrive at a decision on a manuscript based on the aggregate of available feedback rather than on singular or anomalous comments, but we cannot change the comments of the reviewers, so their feedback reaches the authors unfiltered. How should authors respond to such reviews?

As part of a revised manuscript, authors are expected to address each and every referee comment explicitly. This reply is fairly simple when an author agrees with a comment and has made the suggested change to the manuscript. But what about those other comments with which we disagree? What is appropriate? There are a number of questions that an author should ask before getting upset with a reviewer who “doesn't get it”:

(i) **Were we, the authors, clear when making the critical point that the reviewer did not understand?** This point requires a good hard look at one's own paper. We notice that much of the time, a reviewer's “misunderstanding” actually points to a lack of clarity in the manuscript that arises from inexact language or overly convoluted arguments. Before getting angry with the reviewer, please consider the origins of the misunderstanding. It is typically best to clarify the manuscript to prevent future readers from having the same confusion (*vide infra*).

(ii) **Could the reviewer actually be correct, but in a way that we, the authors, had not considered?** Again, we suggest taking a deep breath and giving the reviewer the benefit of the doubt. Was there another aspect that had not been considered? Discuss the possibility with co-authors and others to work through it. Like the point above, it is better that these new perspectives be considered and incorporated now than to have future readers arrive at the same conclusions as the reviewer.

(iii) **Is the reviewer wrong?** After having *patiently* gone through (i) and (ii), it can certainly be the case that the reviewer is wrong. One possible reason is the type of problem mentioned in part (i) (above), so we suggest the following. In a few lines, in professional and polite language, state that you believe that there is a misunderstanding, and clarify the manuscript. Briefly but succinctly write what you believe to be the situation, and assist the reviewer (and the editors) in understanding your point. Once you have completed this effort, have a look back at your manuscript, and think about how the reviewer could have arrived at their conclusions. Is there something you can change or add in order to prevent future readers from coming to the same conclusions as the reviewer?

Authors have the freedom to choose any appropriate format for the letter that details their responses to the reviewers' comments. However, we believe that a straightforward and clear

What then does one do, as an author on the receiving end of anonymous peer review, when one does not agree with the comments of the referees?

Published online May 22, 2012
10.1021/nn3019046

© 2012 American Chemical Society

approach is to copy every comment into a new document and to answer each point individually in a different color or font. For example, below we put the reviewer comments in **bold** and our responses in green where we agree with the referees. (Occasionally, we will disagree with the referees, and will contrast that reply in a different color.)

Reviewer 1

This manuscript provides important information about the self-assembly and self-replication of nanoscale rabbits. I have a number of concerns, however, related to the characterization of their fur.

1) The authors state that the fur appears brown, but the UV-Vis spectra suggest that it is usually white. Please explain.

We thank the referee for noticing this oversight. The referee is correct, in that the nanorabbits are white in the winter, and brown in the summer. We did not label the effects of the seasons on the UV-Vis spectra of the nanorabbits, and thus we have added these labels to the revised manuscript on page 6. This clarification does not change the conclusions of the work because the color of the fur has no effect on their dual-auricle morphology.

Some authors will try to respond to the reviews by rehashing all of the positive attributes of the review while discounting, or even attacking, all critical comments. By adopting the letter structure we suggest above, all of the comments are addressed systematically, with no avoidance of the more challenging queries.

Upon receipt of your revised manuscript and your response to the reviewers' comments, it is important to remember that, depending upon the issues being addressed during the revision, an author's response may be sent back to the reviewers, along with the revised manuscript. We value the service that our reviewers provide, and even though errors and misguided comments can sometimes find their way into reviews, we are not about to send back to the reviewers a ranting response that attacks them or that is offensive, belligerent, or just plain angry. It is completely acceptable to disagree with some of the reviewers' comments, but rarely are **all** of a reviewer's comments invalid. Rebutting comments in a respectful way goes a lot further than does a long, ranting, emotional response.

It is important to remember that we look at the ensemble of reviewer comments holistically. In cases where a manuscript is rejected based on the collection of reviewer comments and the authors strongly disagree with the outcome, we sometimes see comments similar to those discussed above, such as "clearly none of the reviewers understood the importance of the work" or "the reviewers missed the point". While this can happen on occasion, rarely are several consistent reviews completely off target. If none of the reviewers "got it", there is typically a bigger underlying issue. Was the overall importance of the work clearly communicated? Was the manuscript organized or presented in a way that obscured these aspects?

One further point is on the anonymity of the referee process. Authors sometimes try to guess the identities of referees (and are nearly always incorrect). There is no point to this exercise. We are fortunate to be able to have the top scientists in our field review manuscripts for us (and expeditiously!). We assure you that each referee is carefully selected as an expert in the specific area of the manuscript under consideration. That is one of the advantages of having practicing scientists as editors and having us handle manuscripts personally.³

The reviewers are taking their valuable time to try to help you, the author, improve your paper.

We hope that this editorial underscores the need both for reviewers to take the review process and the contents of their reviews seriously and also for the authors receiving the reviews to put them into perspective. We have been greatly impressed with the care and quality of the reviews that we typically receive. We find that the vast majority of

reviewers are trying to be constructive and that most authors appreciate the feedback and wisdom in referee reports. The reviewers are taking their valuable time to try to help you, the author, improve your paper. We hope that everyone recognizes that reviewers, like all people, have different ways of expressing themselves, and that it is necessary to respond to them in an appropriate and respectful way. We, at *ACS Nano*, are always there to help and we greatly value your contributions, both as an author and as a reviewer.



Jillian M. Buriak
Associate Editor



Raymond E. Schaak
Associate Editor



Paul S. Weiss
Editor-in-Chief

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Weiss, P. S. The Best Referee Report. *ACS Nano* **2008**, *2*, 177.
2. Publishing Your Research 101 – Ep. 6 (ACS Publications). The Review Process for Authors and Reviewers; <http://pubs.acs.org/page/publish-research/episode-6.html>.
3. Sweedler, J. V. Professional Editors or Scientist Editors? Both Perspectives Have Value. *Anal. Chem.* **2012**, *84*, 2095.