

EDITORIAL

Dealing with reviewers' comments?

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Much guidance exists on what constitutes good research practice and generally journal websites give clear and helpful instructions on what type of manuscript is suitable for submission as well as on how to prepare manuscripts for submission. There appears to be much less, however, in the literature with regard to replying to referees' comments when the manuscript is returned.¹⁻⁴ It is every author's hope that the manuscript is accepted without any changes but in reality this is incredibly rare. More commonly, one of the following occurs:

Accept with minor revision

The advice here would be to proceed with all changes without argument, aiming to get the revised manuscript back to the editor as quickly as possible to generate speedy acceptance.

Major revisions required

It is important to *read carefully* all the comments/suggestions that have been made by usually more than one referee. Normally, it will take days to address all the requests so do not underestimate the task involved. Obviously the authors could decide to submit the manuscript elsewhere, which is understandable but they should try and improve the manuscript based on the referee's comments. It could be that the same referee may be chosen by another major speciality journal and it is unlikely to bode well if he/she observes that the referee's previous comments have been completely ignored! The advice, therefore, would be to tackle all the comments made in the referee's report and to re-submit to the same journal.

In some cases a complete re-write is required based on suggestions made by the referees. The authors need to get over any feelings of personal attack and instead concentrate on dealing comprehensively with the referee's reports. A complete re-write will take considerable time and needs to be done systematically so that the re-submission is a definitive 're-write' and not just a collection of 'minor' revisions. The latter is unlikely to receive favour from the editor or from the referees who invariably will be asked to peruse the manuscript again.

Reject but invite to re-submit

This is an opportunity to re-submit and should not be perceived in dim light. If you are unsure about 'reading between the lines' in the editor's letter or referee's

reports, it is wise to write to the editor seeking further clarification. In any case, be hopeful.

Outright rejection

Typically this results from the manuscript not being suitable for the journal or because of some intrinsic major methodological error that renders it irredeemable. Usually the editor's decision is final, so no appeals are permissible. The only option is to revise the manuscript, if possible, based on the referee's comments and consider re-submission elsewhere. But if the study is really intrinsically flawed, the prospects of acceptance are negligible.

General advice on dealing with editor's/referee's comments

In dealing with editor's and referee's comments, it is essential that authors adhere to the following: answer completely, answer politely and answer with evidence.⁵ Itemising the points made in the reports and indicating your response(s) is a great help to the editorial team when the manuscript is returned. It is also more likely to win you a favourable response.

It is fine to disagree with referee's comments when replying but this should be done courteously. Arrogance should be avoided. Your reply should be systematic and scientific. Try to avoid phrases like —'we totally disagree with the referee's comments...'. It may be more diplomatic to say something like 'While the referee makes an interesting point with regard to..., however we feel that...'. This is unlikely to irritate the editor who values his/her referee's time and effort in producing reports in their own time and unpaid. If you really do *totally* disagree (and this is unusual) with the referee, provide evidence to back up your claim with some facts supported by references.

If the referee is obviously wrong and has made a mistake, you are entitled to a good argument and this is best delivered in a covering letter with facts that can be referenced. Where comments on one or more aspects of the manuscript by two referees reports are conflicting, it is reasonable to go with one referee's comments, justifying your reasons for doing so.

Sometimes authors are asked to reduce considerably the length of the manuscript. Here the authors must not feel 'too attached' to their precious words and cut through the text to remove all redundancy. If you feel that you cannot decide what to cut,

ask an experienced colleague to assist with ‘word surgery’!

In the cover letter for re-submission, ensure that what you say you have done to the manuscript, has in fact been done, and do make sure you follow the journal’s guidance on layout. It is incredibly irritating for editors to find that comments made in the letter do not match what is evidenced by the manuscript. This just causes the editor or referee more concern and may end in disappointment for the authors.

The process of getting a paper published in a scientific peer-reviewed journal is a challenge but a rewarding one when all your hard work finally pays off and the reprints arrive.

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