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What's Bothering the Reviewer?

The art of responding effectively to a reviewer's comments, and avoiding missteps along the way.

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Imagine running a marathon, seeing the finish line, sprinting toward the end—and breaking your ankle before completing the race. That pain and frustration mirrors how an author might feel after performing a research experiment and submitting their results for publication, only to be rejected for not responding “satisfactorily” to the reviewer’s comments. This not-uncommon occurrence can be heartbreaking, especially for young researchers.

Many submitted manuscripts are not accepted or rejected outright, but receive comments from anonymous reviewers that must be addressed. The topical editor relies

on reviewers in making decisions, and it is uncommon to overrule a reviewer, making the anonymous reviewer quite powerful in determining the fate of a paper. Remember, the reviewer can be seen as your manuscript’s best friend, most careful reader and last line of defense. Rejection is not the worst thing that can happen to your paper—not compared with having it published containing errors.

Don't panic

At first glance, the reviewer’s comments often look much worse than they really are, so don’t panic. When receiving

reviews, there is often the initial feeling of shell shock, followed by dread that there is no way to change the paper without redoing much of the work. However, more often than not, comments can be responded to in a surgical way, so that the resulting manuscript changes are coherent, short and directly address the query.

Perhaps the most important part of responding effectively to a tough review is to initially try your best to determine, “What is bothering the reviewer?” Reviewers are busy, smart people, and crafting an elegant, clear review is typically *not* their first priority. The reviewer has found something of concern about your manuscript, and your job is to figure it out and address it head on. Otherwise, your manuscript may be destined for rejection.

For example, a reviewer might claim that something doesn’t make sense and even ask for more experimental data, which is usually not practical to provide. Don’t panic! Often the reviewer simply needs a scientifically sound, clear and compelling statement backed by references to make the intellectual point.

Respond strategically

So how do you respond to a reviewer’s comments? First, remember that this is *not* a dialogue between you and the reviewer. When a reviewer asks, “What is the loss of the device?” the reviewer is not asking a question out of curiosity. The reviewer read the manuscript and, as a reader, thinks that this is useful information to include. Therefore, simply tell the reviewer that this information is now in the manuscript, and give the exact changes to the text. The reviewer or editor will be trying to determine if you addressed the key issue in a satisfactory manner, and they have very



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limited time and attention. Your job is to make it extremely simple for them.

Second, what happens if you think the reviewer is wrong in an assumption? Think carefully and creatively since you may not truly comprehend the reviewer’s (potentially valid) point. Deciphering a cryptic comment can be quite challenging, so enlist help. Ask a colleague to read the comment and your response to determine if you are truly addressing the issue raised by the reviewer. Keep in mind that you have seen your paper countless times, whereas the reviewer may have read the paper only once. A colleague may possess the necessary distance to interpret the reviewer’s intent.

Even if the reviewer is wrong in an assumption, then the odds are that a future reader might also make the same mistake. Give credence to the reviewer’s comment, and state clearly

how the changed text might make the issue clearer to the reader. Even one of the deadliest comments that you can receive, “The work is not novel,” can be addressed tactfully by thanking the reviewer and adding two-to-three sentences and a couple of references that hopefully highlight the novelty to the reviewer’s satisfaction.

Perhaps one of the few times to engage the reviewer directly rather than describe your changes is if you truly, deeply disagree with a point. In this case, acknowledge the reviewer’s issue, politely point out the technical discrepancy in the review comment, consider quoting from an authoritative reference that supports your view and offer to clarify your position in the manuscript. This approach is risky, but sometimes unavoidable.

Plan of action

I suggest the following approach to composing the accompanying letter to your revised manuscript:

- ▶ Segment the review into individual, numbered comments that can each be understood as a single idea.
- ▶ Provide a short response directly underneath each comment that outlines how and where you have addressed it, specifying page, paragraph and line numbers.
- ▶ Copy and paste the changed text under the response.

Hopefully, by trying to figure out what is really bothering the reviewer and addressing it insightfully, your research will graduate from reviewer limbo to acceptance and will be enjoyed by our community. **OPN**

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