

How to Write an Effective Response Letter to a Journal Editor and Reviewers

AMWA National Meeting, Roundtable #7 on Nov 3, 2017

Most authors agree that revisions due to peer reviewers' comments and suggestions improve the quality of the final article. Top tier journals reject 90-95% of submitted manuscripts. Most manuscripts are published in other journals.

Who are the reviewers?

Editor-in-chief / editors decide whether to send it for peer review. Reject up to 80%.

Peer reviewers: Assistant, associate, and full professors and industrial scientists.

COPE has published Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers in Sept 2017:

https://publicationethics.org/files/Ethical_Guidelines_For_Peer_Reviewers_2.pdf

Consider the peer review as free consultation with 2-3 subject matter experts.

What are the review criteria?

- Most journals ask reviewers to assess similar characteristics.
- Radiology checklist (<http://pubs.rsna.org/page/radiology/reviewer-checklist>)
- Note, a suspicion of ethical violations is sent directly to the editor and not to authors.

Five types of decision letters

1. **Acceptance as is.** Very few articles are accepted outright, except for J Exp Med.
2. **Rejection**
3. **Rejection**, with suggestion to submit to specialty journal or another journal by the same publisher.
4. **Resubmission with minor revisions**
5. **Resubmission with major revisions**

Five issues that affect flexibility of editors and reviewers

- Journal prestige
- Document type (original research, review, case series, brief report,)
- Research question (Is there a race?)
- Controversy in the field
- How authors respond to reviewers' comments and suggestions

How to respond?

- Read, calm down, reflect, wait a day or two before responding, get author input.
- Always thank the editor and reviewers
- Reviewers are asking questions so that the answers can help improve the manuscript. Authors must also add changes to the manuscript.

Minor revisions:

- Thank the reviewer, and accept the request(s) and make the modifications.

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- If detrimental, clarify the reasons why the authors think it would be detrimental to the paper to comply. It is best to meet at least halfway, if possible. Examples:
 - a. "I am pleased to report that your submitted manuscript has been accepted for publication subject to minor revision. You have too many citations - Please reduce number to[of] references to 80." Med Hypotheses. The original paper contained 134 references. Final version 98
 - b. "The authors did not mention articles a, b, c, d, e," (all from same author) Examine the relevancy of the requested articles for the actual manuscript. Usually the manuscript can be improved by citing 1 to 3 of the requested articles.

Major revisions:

Disparate reviews: Example

Reviewer #1: The paper is written in good medical style. Current citations, wide spectrum of issues touched. In my opinion it is ready for publication.

Au: I thank the first reviewer for his comments and thoroughly agree with his summary.

However, to also adequately address the concerns of reviewers #2 and 3, I have revised and focused the manuscript on the

When and how to disagree and / or argue?

- Pick your "battles" carefully
- Agree with most of the comments if possible, and make changes.
- Clarify rather than argue.
- Agree with reviewers as much as possible and then state, with evidence, the reasons the changes should not or can not be made.

- Common scenarios with reviewers' comments:
 - Reviewers did not understand the research or arguments. Then the information / rationale should be clarified in the cover letter but most importantly, in the text of the manuscript.
 - Request for different statistical analysis but the analysis is correct. If clinical trial and the biostatistical analyses were described and approved as correct, then authors should more fully explain the reasoning behind the choice of their method of biostatistical analysis. Consider showing both types of analysis.
 - The reviewers request primary cells to be used as controls. Authors should consider using both primary cells and cell lines for some assays, compare the results, and explain authors' rationale for using cell lines.
- In cases of disagreement of significance:
 - If reviewers did not fully understand the logic and significance of the studies, consider rewriting and possibly reorganizing the flow of ideas to more easily explain the full rationale behind the studies and the impact of the studies.