



How to handle tricky peer reviewer comments



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01

The essentials of responding to peer review comments

The way authors respond to peer review feedback can influence the editorial decision to some extent. An author's positive outlook, openness to criticism, and willingness to improve the manuscript can leave a lasting impression on the reviewers and editor. What's more, clear and well-organized responses make the downstream processing of the manuscript faster and more efficient.

1.1

Have a plan

In cases of outright rejection or acceptance without changes, you would not need to provide a response. A response is warranted in three of the six possible outcomes:

- Reject without review
- Reject following review
- **Major revision**
- **Minor revision**
- **Provisional accept**
- Accept

- Organize changes as most to least important, big to small, those you agree with (major and minor), those you disagree with (major and minor), and those in different sections of the paper.
- Plan your time according to the additional work needed, e.g., new experiments, reframing the discussion in light of added references.
- Organize your responses according to a system, e.g., use different typeface and/or colors to differentiate between the reviewer comments, your responses, and the revised text.

1.2

Be patient

Once desk rejection is ruled out, you wait for reviewers to be assigned and peer review to begin; it could take weeks or months before you finally receive peer review comments. If you have waited this long, do not be impatient and start writing your responses as soon as you receive the comments. Read the reviewer report and sleep over it. Get back to it later to avoid impulsive or emotionally charged responses.



The meaning of some comments might not be clear at the first glance. Some comments might be overly long and unclear. In the first round, you might even misinterpret feedback as negative when it is not (or vice versa). When you go through the report carefully several times, you will be able to interpret the reviewers' perspectives better.

1.3

Keep a positive outlook

Even before you start penning your responses, take a moment to inwardly thank the editor and reviewers. Accept that reviewers will not go out of their way to praise your manuscript; they want to point out gaps that need to be addressed. If you don't perceive the criticism as negative, it will help you keep an open mind when responding to the comments.



Now that you have the three Ps on your side (positivity, patience, and planning), let's get down to the actual process.

02

Crafting a resubmission cover letter

Create a short cover letter with important information about changes you've made and any other points you want to highlight. Here is a template with the essential elements of a resubmission cover letter.

Date

Dr John Doe
Editor-in-Chief
ABC Journal

Dear Dr. Joe,

I would like to resubmit the attached manuscript (MS ID abc123), titled “Article Title.”

Be sure to provide all details like the article title and manuscript ID from earlier correspondence.

The manuscript has been carefully rechecked, and the necessary changes have been made in line with the reviewers’ suggestions. I have used the Track Changes mode in MS Word/My changes in the revised manuscript are marked in red.

Responses to the reviewers’ comments have been prepared and are attached in a separate file/appended in this letter.

All the coauthors agree to the changes made and the responses provided.

To avoid conflicts later, please ensure that all coauthors agree with all changes made and have gone through the revised manuscript.

I thank you and the reviewers for all the valuable recommendations and insights, which we believe have enriched the manuscript and produced a more balanced account of our research. I hope that the revised manuscript is now suitable for publication in your journal.

Sincerely,
Your name

Contact address
Email
Telephone number

You can even use this letter to address issues such as perceived biases or conflicting requests from different reviewers.

03

Framing and formatting your responses

Always begin by thanking the reviewers, with a sentence like “*We would like to thank the reviewer for taking the time to review our manuscript.*” An overview of the changes, pointing out new data and new analyses performed in response to the major criticisms of the reviewers, will follow. Thereafter, the response letter should contain the complete set of reviews with your responses.

The length of the response document will depend on the number of reviewers and the number of questions. Further, depending on the complexity of the question, a response can be a one liner, a paragraph or even a page. If the responses are too many, you could even consider indicating page numbers for ease of reviewing.

	Page
Reviewer: 1.....	1
Reviewer: 2.....	3
Reviewer: 3.....	3
Reviewer: 4.....	10

- Restate each reviewer's comments and provide your answer below each comment. Use a new set of numbers for each reviewer.
- For the convenience of the editor/reviewer, paste the exact text that you have added or modified in the manuscript (rather than only listing the page and line numbers). In case of a large chunk of modified text, however, you may provide the heading of the section or line numbers only.
- If one or more reviewers have similar comments, do not ask one reviewer to "*see response to Reviewer 1.*" It is fine to repeat the response.
- Address every comment. You may choose to make the change or not but acknowledge the comment and justify your choice. Ignoring a difficult point will not make it go away!
- Do not use repetitive phrases, e.g., every response need not begin with "Thank you for this comment." Try to use varied word choice and phrasing (see text box).
- Be polite but not ingratiating.

Here is a collection of phrases you can use in your responses. Vary the language to keep the responses readable and interesting!

- Thank you for pointing this out...
- We apologize for this error...
- We are glad that you spotted this gap. We have addressed this, and it has helped...
- We thank the reviewer for pointing out the discrepancy...
- Thank you for pointing out important references that we had missed. The inclusion provided newer perspectives from which to interpret our findings...
- This made us look at our findings in a different light...

Avoid comments like "OK" or "Done" even for minor mistakes or typos. Try these instead:

- We have removed...
- We agree and have updated...
- We have fixed the error...
- This observation is correct. We have changed...

After you have revised your manuscript, wait for another day or two and give it another read. Make sure that your revisions gel well with the rest of the paper. Re-read your comments and ensure a polite and professional tone. Put yourself in the reviewers' shoes: what sort of responses would you like to see?

04

What to do when there are requests for...

While reviewers are essentially specialists in your field, it is important to carefully assess their requests and think of the best way to respond to them. At times, you may find yourself disagreeing with certain comments, especially if they're out of the scope of your study. You may also get requests for major revisions or conflicting comments from multiple reviewers. Here are some pointers on how to respond to such comments.

4.1

What to do when there are requests for major changes

Word count reduction

Always make sure your manuscript meets all word count requirements to begin with. However, if journal editors request you to shorten the text owing to a shortage of space, you will have to comply.

Request for extra data

If the suggested changes are within the scope of your study and you agree with them, you may consult with the journal editors to determine whether space constraints allow you to make the additions. If additional experimental work is requested and it will enhance the paper, make sure that there is enough time to meet the requirement. Request the editor for a deadline extension if necessary.

However, if you feel that a reviewer has requested an analysis that does not fit your study, it will stand you in good stead if you do what the reviewer asked anyway, report the results in your response, and then explain why you believe the results do not belong in your manuscript.

Revise and resubmit

If the revisions involve extensive rework, the editor might ask you to revise the paper and resubmit it as a new submission altogether. Some authors may feel frustrated and want to switch the journal, but it is a [good idea to revise and resubmit to the same journal](#). If you do choose to submit it to another journal, do not ignore the comments received. Try to incorporate as many suggestions as possible before resubmission to maximize chances of acceptance.

4.2

What to do when there are requests that you disagree with

When you disagree with a reviewer's comment, provide references, figures, and/or tables to support your case. Do not be dismissive; be mindful of your tone and choice of words. Emphasize any part of the reviewer's comment you agree with, and then explain why you chose not to make the change. Here are some pointers for framing such responses.

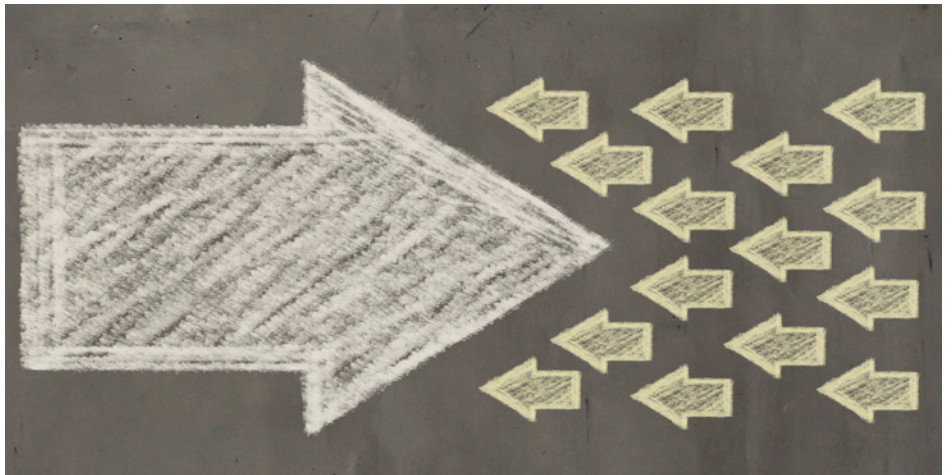
"In this study, we did not set out to directly _____, as you mention. While we have cited some recent studies on _____, we are not currently at a point where it is possible to calculate _____ due to resource/time limitations"

"We agree with the reviewer that _____. However, we believe that _____ would not significantly support our argument. Therefore, we chose not to make this change, but we added the following sentence to indicate the need to explore this in future studies."

"We appreciate the reviewer's insightful suggestion and agree that it would be useful to demonstrate that _____; however, such an analysis is beyond the scope of our paper, which aims to show that _____. Nevertheless, we have added the following sentence recognizing this limitation."

4.3

What to do when there is conflicting feedback



Reviewers can have differing opinions on a particular paper. Sometimes they may give diametrically opposite instructions.

- In your responses, see which reviewer you agree with more and follow his/her suggestions. The comment to the opposing reviewer can be something like *“As we received conflicting advice from another reviewer, we decided to make the change they suggested, because...”*
- In the covering letter to the editor, explain that you had to choose between some of the comments as they were conflicting and that you have provided clear reasons for your choice.

05

Handling tricky situations: Examples and tips

Peer reviewers' comments can range from minor questions about data to requests for additional data/experiments or questions about the methodology. Addressing peer reviewers' comments can be quite stressful, particularly when the comments are exhaustive or worse, confusing or tricky. Here are some do's and don'ts to help you deal with peer review comments confidently.



**I feel that the reviewer is biased against me
or
The reviewer was particularly harsh and rude**

Occasionally, an author might encounter hurtful comments or unreasonably strong criticism. While such comments might be open to interpretation due to unclear language, they could indicate some form of bias (geographic location, institution, gender, etc.) or hostility because of professional competition.

Do not take such comments personally; deal with them objectively. Your reply should still be polite and courteous. If the comments are extremely negative and hostile, suggestive of prejudice, write to the journal editor that the reviewer's comments are not constructive and that you suspect bias. You could request the editor to ask for more detailed recommendations from the reviewer or ask that another reviewer be assigned.



I just cannot do what the reviewer has asked

For unfeasible requests (e.g., collecting data from scratch for a retrospective study), be upfront and mention to the editor that while you agree with the reviewer's suggestion, it is impossible to provide what is being asked. Provide a legitimate argument and offer feasible alternatives that could address the reviewer's concern.



What do I do if a comment is vague or too general?

Sometimes reviewer comments might not be specific or particularly helpful, e.g., “*improve the discussion.*” In such cases, revisit the section being referred to (in this example, the Discussion). Problems with the Discussion could broadly point to an inadequate literature review, insufficient discussion about what is known about the topic, or poor interpretation of your findings.

Brainstorming with coauthors or colleagues can help deal with such comments. Together, you can work your way towards improving the section overall. Once you are convinced that you have significantly improved the section, indicate so in your response letter. You can mention that the exact changes were not outlined by the reviewer, but you added certain crucial points that you realized were missing. Be sure to specify the changes made.



I noticed errors that were not mentioned by the peer reviewers!

While revising your peer-reviewed manuscript, you might come across mistakes that the reviewers didn't comment on. It is important that you correct the mistakes and bring the additional changes to the attention of the editor and reviewers in the resubmission cover letter and in your response file.



**The reviewer commented on the language of the paper
or
We were asked to have our paper edited for language**

It is natural to feel peeved that a reviewer focused on the language than the actual work. However, relying on self-editing alone may not be enough. It is a good idea to have your manuscript checked by a colleague or use a [professional editing service](#) before resubmission. You may also want to attach an editing certificate ([Editage](#) issues such certificates for every edited manuscript) to your response letter indicating to the reviewer that you've taken their comments on language quite seriously and have thoroughly improved it. In the response letter, you can add a comment like "We have carefully corrected all the mistakes and typographic errors pointed out by the reviewer(s). The corresponding changes are listed below. Furthermore, we have carefully revised the whole manuscript for language/we have had the manuscript edited by a professional scientific editor."

In fact, you may even have your responses and resubmission letter checked for language and grammar.

Responding to peer review is and will continue to be a crucial part of the manuscript development phase. Peer reviewers have an important gatekeeping role in the progress of science. Think of them as the unnamed supporting cast in your "production"! Every author will be a reviewer at some point too. Getting to be on the other side, critiquing papers of other researchers, can help one appreciate the process better.

While commonly encountered problems and their solutions have been covered above, there could be other tricky situations that might confuse researchers. Do not hesitate to get expert guidance with [Editage's Scientific Editing](#) service (which comes with end-to-end support, including responding to reviewer comments). In fact, with Scientific Editing, you will also receive a detailed technical review which will prepare you in advance for potential peer review comments. In addition to professional scientific editing, this service also allows you to directly connect with a senior editor qualified in your field of study through an exclusive [Editor Consultation on Call](#) feature. Expert-led services like these can also help you resolve challenging peer review comments faster and maximize your chances of a favorable final verdict from your target journal.





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