

## **How to... respond to reviewers' comments?**

*By Jennifer Bansard and Carole-Anne Sénit*

In the life of every researcher comes a moment when their (first) paper is, after many many hours of work, ready to be submitted to a journal. Yet, even though publishing research results in peer-reviewed journals is key to any academic career, it remains a daunting process. Most senior researchers concede that one never quite loses the apprehension felt upon opening the email from the editors informing you of the fate of your manuscript.

First, it is important to realize that the answer you should be waiting for is not “congratulations, your paper is accepted” but rather something along the lines of “we think there is value in your manuscript and invite you to resubmit a revised version addressing the following comments.” Not only is it very rare to get an “accept” upon first submission, remember that receiving comments from reviewers and editors means that a number of scholars with valuable expertise on your subject matter took the time to read your manuscript and that their comments will (ideally) help you to further improve your paper.

Possible responses slightly vary from one journal to another, but generally reflect the following spectrum:

- a manuscript can be rejected, either as a “desk reject” when the decision was made by the editor(s) without being sent out to reviewers, or it is rejected subsequent to reviewers' comments;
- “revise and resubmit” and “accept subject to major revisions” indicate that significant changes need to be made to increase the likelihood of the manuscript passing the subsequent round(s) of review;
- “accept with minor revisions” indicates that addressing the reviewers' comments doesn't require major changes to the substance of the manuscript; and
- “accept with no revisions” would be an occasion to pop a bottle of champagne.

The distinction between what constitutes a “revise and resubmit” and an “accept subject to major revisions”, respectively major and minor revisions is hereby not always clear cut. It is also noteworthy that manuscripts revised after a “minor revisions” will in some journals be reconsidered only by the editor(s), while in other journals they would be send again to the reviewers.

In this brief we will take as a starting point that you got some form of revision request – **Congratulations!** – and walk you through the “R&R process”. The information we provide here is based on advice we received from our supervisors, discussions with colleagues, and our own experience trying to navigate the peer-review process. While there arguably are already a number of pages online that address this topic, we hope this will contribute to making the ESG Early Career Resources a sort of “one stop shop” that early career scholars can consult when looking for advice on typical ECR questions.

We assume you might feel a bit overwhelmed after reading the “letter from the editor”, but don’t panic or feel discouraged! Any researcher with some experience with the peer-review system will advise you to take a few days to digest and reflect on the comments.

Once you actually get to the job, start by carefully re-reading the letter. Then, to structure the revision process, create a table with separate sections for each reviewer, and a number of distinct columns:

- In one column you should distill the comments/recommendations made by the reviewers, inserting one recommendation per line. Sometimes the reviewers will suggest specific changes, in which case you could simply copy-paste what they wrote, other times you might want to summarize the main point of a long narrative recommendation;
- A second column is dedicated to your response to the specific recommendation; and
- You could add other columns to further help you keep an overview of the revision process, e.g. a “status” column to highlight whether you already treated the suggestion or have yet to address it, a column in which you insert the textual changes you made, and a column to identify what section of your manuscript the recommendation relates to.

Use the response column to delineate how you addressed the reviewer’s comment, preparing a response for each recommendation. While the bulk of the work will consist in addressing critical points, don’t forget to include positive points raised by the reviewers to retain the full picture of their assessment of your manuscript. At times you might disagree with a reviewer’s criticism (*see the box on “Reviewer 2” at the bottom of the page*), while you can choose not to make the according changes, you should nevertheless highlight that you reflected upon each recommendation and explain why you decided not to follow it. While reviewers oftentimes make similar recommendations, their points can also contradict each other or pull the paper in very different directions. It ultimately is up to you to navigate this and decide how to reconcile their recommendations.

*Don’t forget that you can ask your supervisor(s)/other researchers with publishing experience for advice on how to proceed!*

When making the actual revisions to your manuscript, you might want to follow the order of the paper, i.e. starting with all reviewers’ recommendations on the introduction, or you could identify minor revisions that are easy to tackle and start with those. Don’t forget to keep track of which recommendations you have yet to address!

Once you are done revising the paper, use your table to prepare the response letter. The letter typically starts with a short summary (possibly addressed to the editor), and then features distinct sections addressing each reviewer. In the summary you should thank the reviewers and editors for their comments, highlight if you collected new data or performed new analyses, and point to the most important revisions.

In the ensuing sections make sure to address each of the reviewers' recommendations. For long lists of reviews you might decide to omit minor revisions, but keep in mind that the reviewers expect their points to be addressed and that you should especially justify why you did not follow up on certain recommendations. For each point, start by restating the reviewer's recommendation and explain how you addressed it. Make sure to specify the page and line (in the revised manuscript!) in which you made the changes. While long changes can be alluded to (e.g. "following your recommendation, I have included a more detailed description of XYZ in section X on page Z"), small textual changes could be directly inserted in the review letter. The letter should be as "stand alone" as possible so that the reviewers/editors don't have to move back and forth between the letter and the manuscript to understand what changes you made.

Your responses should show that you took the recommendations seriously and that you value the time and effort the reviewers spent assessing your manuscript. Tone is therefore of the essence and your response should be polite, even if you feel a reviewer's comments were not constructive (#Reviewer2). Keep in mind that the letter will greatly help the reviewers and editor(s) make an informed decision about whether or not to recommend/accept your manuscript for publication.

Below are some typical phrases to give you an idea of how to formulate your letter:

- Thank you for the opportunity to submit a revised manuscript
- Thank you for the constructive comments on my manuscript
- I have addressed all of the suggestions made by Reviewer 1
- I am delighted to read that Reviewer 1 finds that my manuscript makes an important contribution to the literature on XXX
- I believe these revisions have resulted in a significantly improved manuscript
- Below, I outline how I have handled the reviewers' comments
- Your comments made me reconsider how I XXX
- I agree with your suggestion to XXX and made the according change on page X
- You make a valid point that the paper should focus more explicitly on XXX
- I take your point that XXX. However, thinking carefully about the issue, I ultimately decided to XXX
- You ask some critical questions about XXX. While I agree with you that XXX, I argue that XXX

Once you are done drafting your response letter, re-read the letter from the editor and make sure you did not miss any of the reviewers' comments. Also re-read your revised manuscript to make sure the revisions are well integrated and that it overall flows well. *Now would be another good moment to have someone else read over your work.*

With all this done, you are ready to throw your hat back into the publishing game! Send in your revised manuscript and the response letter, and keep an eye open for the next email from the editor.

We wish you the best of luck – and lots of perseverance and patience – to navigate the peer-review process and eventually get your article published. Always keep in mind that the

review process will significantly improve your manuscript, ideally because you got constructive and helpful feedback from the reviewers, but in any case because they challenged you to make a case for your paper and convince them of its value.

As always, if you have other useful advice to share on this issue please send us an email at [jennifer.bansard@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:jennifer.bansard@uni-potsdam.de)

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### **“Reviewer 2”**

In an ideal world, reviewers would always provide constructively phrased comments that serve as a helpful guidance for further improving your paper. But that would be counting without Reviewer 2.

Reviewer 2 is neither a specific person, nor necessarily the second person that reviewed your paper, it is a dreaded persona haunting the peer-review system with vague recommendations, discourteous critiques, suspiciously strong affinities for a particular author whose work you should cite more, or a general dislike for your methodological approach.

A reviewer’s theoretical, methodological, and empirical background will necessarily have an influence on the type of recommendations they provide, some reviewers however have obvious difficulties making abstraction of their own research when commenting on someone else’s paper. The resulting Reviewer 2-type of comments generally display a lack of openness towards other approaches and can give the impression that the reviewer merely glossed over the paper instead of truly engaging with it. The reviewer might bluntly dismiss a method without providing a clear argument for it, request consideration of bodies of literature that appear unrelated to the research topic, or overall use an aggressive tone to convey criticism.

While there are malevolent reviewers (such as those that take advantage of the peer-review system to artificially inflate their own citation rate), other times someone generally well intentioned might turn into a Reviewer 2 for banal reasons such as: lacking the expertise needed to properly review the paper; not making sufficient time to provide a detailed review; lacking the language skills to convey recommendations more benevolently; or simply having had a bad day.

However packaged, you should try to understand the perspective of the reviewer, keeping in mind that your goal is to improve your paper and have it clearly delineate the relevance of your topic, the approach you took, and what your findings are. If you are in doubt about how to deal with some of the recommendations received in the peer-review process, ask advice from your colleagues. In all likelihood they will be able to help you sort out which are the most critical revisions and to identify off-base comments.

Finally, if you feel like venting about nasty reviews, know that you are not alone: your colleagues will have their own stories to tell and the internet is full of academics voicing their frustration with the peer-review system (have a look on this [Tumblr](#) for example).

