

What to tell and never tell a reviewer

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Abstract

The specialized literature abounds in recommendations about the most desirable technical ways of answering reviewers' comments on a submitted manuscript. However, not all publications mention authors' and/or reviewers' feelings or reactions about what they may read or write in their respective reports, and even fewer publications tackle openly what may or may not be said in a set of answers to a reviewer's comments. In answering reviewers' comments, authors are often attentive to the technical or rational aspects of the task but might forget some of its relational aspects. In their answers, authors are expected to make every effort to abide by reviewers' suggestions, including discussing major criticisms, editing the illustrations, or implementing minor corrections; abstain from questioning a reviewer's competence or willingness to write a good review, including full and attentive reading and drafting useful comments; clearly separate their answers to each reviewer; avoid skipping, merging, or reordering reviewers' comments; and, finally, specify the changes made. Authors are advised to call on facts, logic, and some diplomacy, but never on artifice, concealment, or flattery. Failing to do so erodes the trust between authors and reviewers, whereas integrity is expected and highly valued. The guiding principle should always be honesty.

Keywords

Standards; Publications; Research report; Writing; Reviewing

Introduction

Receiving a review report, hopefully with "conditional acceptance," on the manuscript that you have submitted to a journal is a positive step, though it implies some additional work. Indeed, the accompanying letter often recommends, "Kindly provide point-by-point answers to the reviewers' comments."

Given the "good news," the authors decide to deal immediately with each point and prove their goodwill and mastery of the research topic. However, after a thorough reading of the report and a few short discussions with the closest co-authors, the authors discover a number of difficult questions or troubling comments and remember an uncomfortable sentence in the editor's letter: "The submission of a revised version does not mean the journal is committed to publish it."

Received: December 16, 2022

Accepted: February 13, 2023

Epub: April 28, 2023

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The authors then become no longer sure that the manuscript will not be rejected after the first or even a later revised version, but decide, nevertheless, to continue with the revision.

Now, although the authors have planned the answers and started to draft them, there are still a few recommendations, beyond the strict scientific or technical framework, that are worth keeping in mind.

Guidelines for Judicious Responses

Accept without complaint

Accept all, or almost all, major criticisms

Unless very perfunctorily or unclearly written, it can be presumed that a criticism has been pondered by the reviewer who took time and effort to formulate it [1]. Such a criticism cannot be lightly discarded. Ignoring it would suggest that the authors do not want to provide an answer, which, if repeated within the set of responses, would seriously expose the article to the risk of rejection. Besides, there are very few situations in which a criticism might be refuted: either it was inspired by an ambiguous argument or odd sentence the authors have written, in which case the argument or sentence should be clearly rephrased, or it is completely unrelated to the subject, in which case this should be politely explained [2].

Accept nearly all suggestions to improve illustrations

Suggestions to improve illustrations are made simply because the reviewer did not have, like the authors, his or her nose stuck to that illustration for weeks; instead, he or she first looked at that illustration with a certain detachment, and that first look sought for more simplicity or efficacy. Furthermore, the reviewer is keen to see and convey one or only a few messages from a given illustration, rather than scrutinizing it for all possible information available. This concerns mostly the flow charts, drawings, photographs, and maps from which the message is expected to leap almost immediately to the reader's eye [3].

Accept all minor corrections

Minor corrections usually concern a set of formulations, a few points of terminology, and, mainly, English usage, grammar, and punctuation. Though some corrections are debatable (e.g., UK vs. US English or the places of particular parts of speech), refusing to make them would not reflect a good spirit and open mind [4]. On the contrary, abiding by them denotes consideration for the reviewer's attention to the quality and details of the text (see below for how to describe any amendments).

Never ever tell a reviewer

They have not read the manuscript or part of it

This may be true (!), but think twice about the possibility it is

not. In almost all cases, a reviewer who is not willing to read or continue reading a manuscript will simply decline the review or reject the manuscript (obviously, with arguments). In almost all cases, a reviewer goes through a manuscript several times and concentrates long on the most difficult parts of it; thus, he or she will surely not appreciate a suspicion of neglect.

They have not understood what the authors wrote

This too might be true [5], but be extremely cautious and insinuate that possibility in the most politically correct way possible [4,6,7]. The text might contain a lot of (highly) technical jargon, phrasing or style might be unclear, or sentences might be too long and convoluted. Avoid submitting for publication a text that has not been read by the other authors or that has been edited several times by successive co-authors without being finally checked, harmonized, and made fluent by a single author who is a proficient writer.

They are not as competent as the authors in the field

This is possible but very unlikely because most journals ask their authors the following: (1) to register several times in various databases that require accurately reporting their specialties and serve as a source of reviewer addresses and competencies; and (2) to give the names, affiliations, and competencies of potential reviewers. Besides, a serious reviewer who is incompetent in a certain field would decline the revision request. Furthermore, after unblinded peer review, the authors may appraise the competence of each reviewer. In any case, it is the responsibility of the journal's editorial team to compare the review reports and detect important discrepancies indicating that one of the reviewers is not fully competent in the field. Finally, if the authors have doubts, they might discuss the issue with the manuscript's handling editor.

Authors have not understood the reviewers' question or query

This does happen, but very rarely [5]. In that case, consider two or three possible meanings of the question, express them clearly, and answer each of them fully and independently. It may also happen that the vast majority of questions are challenging to understand because the reviewer, though an eminent specialist, does not have full mastery of English. In the latter case, the authors should contact the manuscript's handling editor to discuss the problem and receive solutions.

Authors are not willing to consider the reviewers' point of view

Obviously, this depends on the specific point of view. If the point is secondary, authors may consider choosing not to

maintain it as originally stated and instead make an effort towards a consensus. If the point is essential, the authors may give their arguments and let the reviewer decide whether an amendment should be necessarily made. If the authors insist on overlooking a reviewer's point of view without convincing arguments, the manuscript will be rejected, at least by one reviewer and possibly by both the reviewer and the editor.

Keeping a paragraph, table, or graph as is

If there are no sufficient arguments, sticking stubbornly to a given presentation does not reflect open-mindedness, a key attribute of a researcher. In principle, there is no single way to present a result, simply because of the need to avoid exhaustiveness and promote a clear and direct interpretation. Thus, make any effort to amend any part of a manuscript as suggested by the reviewer, especially the illustrations. Refusing to do so might offend the reviewer and expose the manuscript to the risk of rejection.

What the authors have said to another reviewer

Beginner authors imagine the reviewers of a given manuscript do, or would possibly, communicate before issuing their first (or later) review report. In fact, this is very unlikely, at least before a first review, because the editors are keen to respect the principles of blind or double-blind peer review. Sometimes, for specific reasons or after making a final decision, the editor may feel it is better to let the reviewers read each other's reports to understand the reasons for rejection [8].

Avoid, to the maximum extent possible

Giving a single answer to several questions or comments

This may seem practical, but it will neither ease the reviewer's task of checking the revisions nor speed up the whole review process, especially when those comments are gathered from distant places in the review report. If the authors choose to do so for practicality or any other reason, the reviewer may not understand this reason or like this idea; instead, the reviewer might consider that the authors are trying to mislead him or her by mixing several issues. The reviewer is expecting a straightforward and clear explanation for each specific issue [9].

Changing the comments' order within a review report

A reviewer always expect point-by-point answers to their comments in exactly the same order they have chosen (usually, an order that follows the manuscript's structure; i.e., IMRAD [Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion]) [10,11]. If the authors choose to reorder the questions for whatever reason, this reason might not be understood or agreed upon, and even worse, reordering may be viewed as irritating or offensive because it forces the reviewer to search for their own or-

der within the authors' [4], which is an unnecessary and frustrating waste of time and mental energy.

Skipping any question, comment, or query

As the reviewer expects successive answers to successive remarks, they will easily notice if a remark has been overlooked and suppose this was done on purpose to escape giving an answer. Be warned—this is a very risky strategy [12]. Thus, always give an answer, even a brief or obvious one [9,13]; the reviewer will appreciate a confirmation of a point of view or a clearer explanation of an inappropriately written statement.

Omitting to say what and where changes were made to the manuscript

This is quite a common omission. After a more or less long explanation, an author may consider that the point has been dealt with and forget to express that explanation concisely and insert it at the most convenient place in the manuscript. One tip is to write down that concise paragraph without delay, find it a place in the manuscript, and clearly indicate that place immediately after the answer [4,9,14].

Authors may, occasionally

Give a combined answer to two or three successive comments

A combined answer can be given, but only to successive comments and only when those comments are closely related or related to a single issue. Even in these conditions, start by informing the reviewer that the authors are answering that set of questions, and then try their best to follow the same order of ideas. First, this respectful attitude will surely be understood and positively perceived [9], and second, the common answer may be more efficient and timesaving.

Refer the reviewer to an answer given earlier in the response document

In a review report, the same question may be raised when the same unclear or incomplete idea is present in the Introduction, Methods, or Results, then again in the Discussion. When this happens, the authors may tell the reviewer they have tackled this issue in a previous answer and indicate clearly the place of that answer in the response document.

Reformulate a comment

Sometimes, a comment might not be clearly formulated by the reviewer or fully understood by the authors. If this happens, do not abstain from giving an answer [9]. First, submit the question to a co-author or other colleague; they may be more perceptive of its hidden meaning. If this attempt fails, the authors may rephrase, but only slightly, the comment and

give it the most adequate answer, for example, “If you mean [comment rephrased], then the answer is. . .” (see also “Authors have not understood the reviewers’ question or query” in the “Never ever tell a reviewer” section.)

Make minor changes without highlighting them

It may happen that a revision reveals a number of grammar or spelling flaws. Obviously, these errors should be corrected, but should they be highlighted? In my opinion, this depends on the number of errors. In case of only a dozen or so errors, scattered throughout the text, authors may choose to highlight them or not. In case of many more errors, it would be better to abstain from “overstaining” the text; highlight added whole sentences but do not let a great number of highlighted words or punctuation marks interfere with fluent reading. In that case, inform the reviewer that the authors have not highlighted a few or all minor changes and corrections.

Conclusion

When giving answers to the questions of a review report, call on knowledge, facts, logic, and some diplomacy, but never on artifice, subterfuge, concealment, or flattery. Respond from the perspective of what a reviewer would want to receive. This reciprocity eases the tasks of all contributors to science production and diffusion (sponsors, researchers, authors, reviewers, editors, etc.) and speeds the process of publication for the benefit of all knowledge providers and knowledge seekers. Finally, if I had to choose a single word as a link between authors and reviewers, I would simply opt for “honesty.”

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Funding

The author received no financial support for this article.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Supplementary Materials

The author did not provide any supplementary materials for this work.

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