

Responding to Reviewers' Comments on Submitted Articles

Peter Cummings, MD, MPH; Frederick P. Rivara, MD, MPH

English Editing Service: EssayStar.com

Few authors receive any training in how to respond to the comments of editors and reviewers, although some advice on this topic has been published.¹⁻³ In this article, we present our suggestions.

The letter from the editor generally comes in one of 4 flavors. First, a manuscript may be accepted without any changes. If this happens to you, count yourself lucky; such an editorial response is rare. In our experience, this has happened only once for each of us. Second, the manuscript may be accepted with suggestions for minor revisions. Again, count your blessings, quickly make the suggested changes (if you can), and return the revised manuscript; hopefully the paper will be accepted. Difficulties typically arise with the next 2 categories of response: outright rejection and provisional rejection with the opportunity to make major revisions.

DEALING WITH REJECTION

Getting a letter of outright rejection is painful. We have been there many times. Successful researchers have to develop a thick hide regarding rejection; do not take it personally. Rejection may not even reflect badly on your manuscript. It just means that for stated or unstated reasons, the editors decided that your paper was not what they wanted. Editors strive to publish articles that make important new contributions. In some instances, you may be the victim of bad timing; the journal might have just published or accepted a study very similar to yours.

You should read any suggestions that you receive. If they can be used to improve your manuscript, by all means, make

those changes. If you still feel that your work deserves publication, send it to another journal. Do this quickly; delay wastes time, and some papers will eventually grow stale as the data become less relevant. An editor reviewing a manuscript in 2002 may be less enthusiastic if all of the data were collected prior to 1996. You presumably did the work in the first place because you thought that it had value. Getting published requires fortitude about pushing your work. One of us wrote a paper that was rejected by 8 journals but was finally published in a ninth.

Should you appeal the editor's decision? We know of colleagues who have done this and prevailed. We have not done this ourselves, however, and suspect that urging the editors of most journals to reconsider is a low-yield strategy.

RESPONDING WHEN MAJOR REVISIONS ARE REQUESTED

The most common route to final publication is to get a letter from the editor that rejects (or provisionally accepts) the current version of your paper but offers reconsideration after major revision and a response to reviewer comments. A letter like this gets your foot in the door. Now you need to plan a strategy for revising your paper and gaining full acceptance.

We suggest that you carefully read all of the comments from reviewers and the editor. Some of these may be critical, and others may even seem ignorant or wrong. Allow yourself a couple of days to grind your teeth and grumble. After you shed any initial irritation, try a second,

From the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center (Drs Cummings and Rivara), the Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health and Community Medicine (Drs Cummings and Rivara), and the Department of Pediatrics, School of Medicine (Dr Rivara), University of Washington, Seattle.

more dispassionate reading. Then set about crafting a response that is polite, thoughtful, clear, and detailed.

It is a good idea to respond promptly. If you let many months go by, the editor will forget what was in your original manuscript, and you may give the impression that you are not interested in your own work.

Be polite. You may be tempted to say that the reviewer was an ignoramus, but this is not likely to get your paper accepted or to create the impression that you are a thoughtful scientist. Avoid a defensive or confrontational tone; you are not in a political debate. The goal is to glean helpful information from the comments, adopt any useful suggestions to improve the paper, and calmly explain your point of view when you disagree.

There is no limit on the length of your response. If it takes you 10 pages to cover each point and explain all of the changes, the editors are willing to read a letter that long. Go through the reviewers' comments in an orderly, outlined manner. In response to each comment, cut and paste into the letter any substantive changes made to the manuscript. Although this letter of response may be long, you actually ease the editors' job by putting everything they need into one orderly document.

Imagine that you have comments from both the editor and reviewers A and B. In your manuscript you wrote, "Study subjects ranged in age from 0 to 10 years; 27% were 0 to 2 years, and 41% were 2 to 6 years." Reviewer A wrote, "The description of the age distribution of study subjects was unclear. Were 2-year-olds in the first group or the second group? And the 2 groups add up to only 68%." Obviously, you meant that 68% of the subjects were in the 2 youngest age categories and that 32% were in the oldest group. However, the reviewer was correct in noting the vagueness of your age boundaries. You might respond with something like this:

Reviewer A:

4. The reviewer was concerned about the lack of clarity in our description of the age distribution of study subjects in the first paragraph of the "Results" section.

The reviewer is correct, and we appreciate the chance to make ourselves clearer. We have revised the paper as follows: "Twenty-seven percent of study subjects were younger than 2 years, 41% were 2 to 5 years, and 32% were 6 to 10 years."

By numbering your responses, first giving the reviewer's comment and then giving your answer, you make it easy for the editors and reviewers to follow the details of your response. By restating what you believe was the concern of the reviewer, you force yourself to think carefully about what the reviewer wrote. This can sometimes be illuminating, both for yourself and for the editors. By giving the actual manuscript changes in the response letter, the editor can follow what you have done without searching for the changes in the revised manuscript. Notice that the previous response is polite and expresses gratitude. Reviewers are not paid, and they have other things to do in addition to reviewing manuscripts. If they offer you ways to improve your paper, thank them. Even though the hypothetical manuscript's original wording is nearly as clear as the revision, the response conveys the sense that you are happy to adopt reasonable suggestions.

Some journals ask that you highlight changes on one copy of the returned manuscript. This can be done using your word-processing software or by highlighting the changes with a marker. This procedure often creates a long manuscript that is hard to read, and fails to clearly juxtapose the reviewers' comments with your changes. Detailing the responses in a cover letter makes the whole process easier.

Change and modify where it makes sense. You are not required to make every suggested change, but you do need to address all of the comments. If you reject a suggestion, the editor will want a good reason. Responding at length to the reviewer and editor about their concerns without making changes in the manuscript may be appropriate for some comments. Rejecting a suggestion just because you prefer it your way is not good enough. For example, if a reviewer says that Figure 2 should be cut and the information placed in a table, you should do this even if you think that the use of a figure is clearer or more dramatic.

Reviewers do not always agree with each other, and then you must make a choice. Decide which suggestion seems more valid, note your change in your response letter to that reviewer, and note in your response to the other reviewer that you received conflicting advice and made what you hope is the best choice.

When you feel that your analytic method or choice of wording is superior to that suggested by the reviewer, lay out your argument. Remember, it is your name that will go on the article. If a letter to the editor criticizes something in your study, it will not be an acceptable defense to say that what you wrote or did was suggested by an anonymous reviewer. In the end, you will have to take responsibility for your work.

Bear in mind that even a carefully crafted response letter and extensively revised manuscript may not be accepted. Although the journal is giving you a second chance, the editors are under no obligation to publish the revised paper. If the ultimate decision is rejection, take heart that the journal was interested enough to review 2 versions of your work. The revised version will usually be an improvement, and you can quickly submit elsewhere.

CUTTING TEXT

Most journals, including *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, state the typical length for manuscripts in their instructions to authors. It is not uncommon for the editor to note that whereas your manuscript is 4000 words, a length of 3000 words is more suitable from the journal's point of view. You may receive such advice with either an invitation to resubmit or an acceptance that asks for minor changes. You should follow this advice; the editor is trying to balance priorities and believes that your paper can be shorter. If you want a final acceptance, you will have to trim. Cutting text with acceptance in sight does not need to be painful. Often you can find entire sentences that can go, or even a paragraph. Then start looking at each word within a sentence.

We have had to do this many times with our own work. One of us had a paper accepted by a major jour-

nal. Although the original draft was 4000 words, we knew that the journal would not accept this length, so we trimmed it to 2500. To our dismay, the editors said that they would accept the paper if it were cut to 1500 words! At first this seemed impossible, but the final version was compressed to 1650 words and was actually a better paper.

Sometimes there is a conflict between reviewer suggestions and the need to trim the manuscript. If the editor tells you to cut 1000 words and a reviewer asks for a new analysis or discussion that might add 500 words, your best option may be to offer to do what the reviewer suggested but point out that you did not follow the suggestion in the interest of saving space.

THE ROLE OF REVIEWS

As authors, we sometimes succumb to the feeling that reviewer comments are simply a barrier that we must breach to get our obviously brilliant work published. As editors, however, we appreciate that reviewers are

donating their time to improve our manuscripts. A careful review is usually our last defense against a faulty analysis, incorrect reasoning, or muddled language. Reviewers read our papers with a fresh eye and offer us the chance to improve our work; we, not the reviewers, will get the credit for those improvements. Although responding to reviews may be burdensome, the chore is usually well worth the effort.

Corresponding author: Peter Cummings, MD, MPH, Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center, 325 Ninth Ave, Box 359960, Seattle, WA 98104-2499 (e-mail: peterc@u.washington.edu).

REFERENCES

1. Huth EJ. *Writing and Publishing in Medicine*. 3rd ed. Baltimore, Md: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 1999.
2. Browner WS. *Publishing and Presenting Clinical Research*. Baltimore, Md: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 1999.
3. Samet JM. Dear author: advice from a retiring editor. *Am J Epidemiol*. 1999; 150:433-436.

Books Received in 2001

Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Sourcebook, edited by Helene Henderson, Detroit, Mich, Omnigraphics Inc, 2001.

Cool Parents, Drug-Free Kids: A Family Survival Guide, by Robert H. Coombs, PhD, Boston, Mass, Allyn and Bacon, 2002.

Introduction to Podopediatrics, edited by Peter Thomson, BSc, DpodM, MChS and Russel G. Volpe, DPM, Edinburgh, Scotland, Churchill Livingstone, 2001.

On Call Pediatrics, 2nd ed, by David A. Lewis, MD, FAAP, FACC, and James J. Nocton, MD, FAAP, Philadelphia, Pa, WB Saunders Co, 2001.

Early Diagnosis and Interventional Therapy in Cerebral Palsy: An Interdisciplinary Age-Focused Approach, 3rd ed, edited by Alfred L. Scherzer, New York, NY, Marcel Dekker Inc, 2001.

You and Leukemia: A Day at a Time, 2nd ed, by Lynn S. Baker, MD, Philadelphia, Pa, WB Saunders Co, 2002.

Parenting Well When You're Depressed: A Complete Resource for Maintaining a Healthy Family, by Joanne Nicholson, PhD, Alexis D. Henry, ScD, Jonathan C. Clayfield, MA, and Susan M. Phillips, Oakland, Calif, New Harbinger Publications, 2001.