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Surviving Referees' Reports¹

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Making revisions in response to referees' comments can be challenging and sometimes discouraging. A pragmatic step-by-step approach can help overcome barriers.

You've just heard from the editor. Maybe the letter says your article is not suitable for publication as it stands but invites you to 'revise and resubmit,' taking into account the referees' reports. Or perhaps you're lucky: Your paper is accepted provisionally, subject to responding to the points raised by the reviewers. Maybe you've hit the jackpot and don't have to make any changes at all! In that case, read no further.

Referees' comments can be discouraging, especially if you take them personally. Some referees say little or nothing that is positive, instead filling their reports with a litany of criticisms. This can be hard to take.

Consider first the worst outcome: The editor says your paper is rejected. Rejections come in all shapes and sizes. I've received form-letter rejections from high-status journals, supposedly refereed, without even the courtesy of an editor's signature. At the other end of the spectrum is a detailed letter from the editor plus several critical readers' reports.

After receiving discouraging news, you may want to give up. Very occasionally, that's the best response: Maybe your paper is really bad! But don't take the editor's or a referee's word for it. Check with a trusted colleague. And make your own judgement. If you've published before, you should have a good idea of the quality of your work, which is not likely to vary enormously from paper to paper. Only give up on a paper if there is consensus between the editor, more than one colleague, and your own judgement. And don't be too tough on yourself.

Otherwise, the next step is to find another journal. Check through the editor's and referees' comments to see if they say anything that

you think will improve the paper. If so, make revisions – but only the ones you really want to make. Then just send the paper off to the next journal. There's no point in waiting; journals are slow enough without your contributing to the delay.

Take heart from research by Juan Miguel Campanario showing that some of the most frequently cited papers were initially rejected.² Innovative papers often have a difficult time with referees and may be rejected, sometimes several times, before publication.

It's also worth taking note of acceptance rates at different journals. Some top-ranked journals, especially in the sciences, accept most papers submitted, whereas others, especially in the humanities and social sciences, accept less than 10 per cent. If you've been rejected by a journal with a very low acceptance rate, you're in good company: Many excellent papers don't make the cut.

If your submissions are rejected repeatedly, it might be time to try journals with higher acceptance rates. On the other hand, if every paper you submit is accepted, maybe you should try for a more prestigious or high-impact journal.

Back to those referees' reports. If you think a referee has totally misunderstood your paper – for example, because he or she is in the wrong field – you can ask for reconsideration by a new referee. I've done this successfully a couple of times when a paper was rejected on the basis of a single report. But this procedure is highly unusual, and is not likely to succeed if more than one referee is negative.

If the editor says you can revise and resubmit, that's often a good idea, even if the referees seem hostile. One of my colleagues received two reports, one recommending rejection and the other recommending major changes and resubmission, and the editor discouraged resubmission. He convinced the editor that resubmission should be considered and ended up getting the paper published. If the editor encourages you to revise and resubmit, that's a good sign that doing so is worthwhile.

Revising: it sounds easy enough but it can be agony. The biggest problems arise from taking the criticisms personally and from taking them too seriously. Tough comments are commonplace, and nothing to get excited about. What seems like heavy criticism may just be the sort of thing this referee dishes out to everyone. David Pannell, who has suffered his share of hostile reviews, writes that 'one certainly does need a thick hide. I have found that many referees are needlessly

harsh and heartless. Too many seem to take the view that their role is to demolish a paper if possible.³

If you're new to the publishing game, take the reviewers' comments to an experienced colleague and ask for a judgement: Are they really as bad as they seem? Almost always they aren't. If they're abusive or nasty, that's a reflection on the reviewer, not on you.

It's helpful to treat referees' comments as part of an obstacle course. Your goal is publishing your work and communicating it to readers. Getting past the referees is something you need to do to get to the goal, and, as a bonus, you might improve your work along the way. So, rather than dwelling on the criticisms, it's more productive to proceed systematically in making revisions.

Some people advise taking a break, after reading the referees' reports, to let your emotions calm down and let your unconscious mind begin preparing responses. A day or a week later, you should be ready to tackle rewriting. Don't make the delay too long – it might become permanent! Making revisions isn't all that time consuming, compared to research and writing, but it is hard work.

There are two important things to prepare for the resubmission: the revised article and a cover letter.

First, when making revisions, you should pay most attention to the editor's suggestions. If your revisions are well done, sometimes the editor may decide to accept the paper without sending it out to readers again, or he or she may look more favourably at your work after the readers' comments come in.

Doing revisions in response to referees' and editors' comments is one of the most challenging parts of research/writing. I think that's because we, as writers, become attached to the way we've expressed things. Revising or deleting a favourite paragraph, or even just a treasured phrase, can be agony.

I've found a way to make the revision process easier. I don't reread my text, because that just cements my previous approach. Instead, I go through the recommendations of the referees and the editor one by one, making changes. After I finish all those changes, large and small, I print out the whole article and read through it, fixing up expression and making it flow.

Tackling recommendations one by one is important psychologically. Looking at a list of criticisms, sometimes pages of them, can be demoralizing; the task seems too big. Focusing on a single

point is easier. Once it's done, you can check it off and proceed to the next point, either immediately or tomorrow.

Sometimes, when you're facing a huge number of recommendations from different referees, it can help to make a list of them, grouping them by topic and effort required. This can make the task seem more manageable.

Sometimes responding to a point requires additional work, such as obtaining and reading some new theory or doing some new calculation. It's helpful to write down every step that's required – for example, (1) order Smith's book, (2) read the theory section, (3) write a one-paragraph summary – and tackle them one by one.

The second thing you need to do, in addition to making revisions, is write a cover letter to the editor. The normal way to do this is to start by thanking the editor and reviewers for helpful comments; then say you've made revisions addressing all (or nearly all) of the suggestions; then list each point by each reviewer and the editor, explaining what you've done in response.

For example, 'Reviewer 1, point 1: intervention as strategic. I have added a paragraph on page X defining my use of "strategy" and discussing the distinction between strategy and tactics.'

Sometimes you may decide that the reviewer is wrong or that the change recommended is not helpful. In this case, you should tell the editor that you haven't made any change and explain why not. However, it's often valuable to make a small change – modified wording, or an extra sentence – so that you can say you've responded.

It's usually best to present your responses in a straightforward, measured fashion. While perhaps cathartic, lashing out at a referee – no matter how inadequate his or her report may be – is not likely to be productive.

If all your additions make the article much too long, there are two main ways of cutting back. One is to eliminate or drastically reduce a section – for example, a case study or a discussion of theory. The other is to cut words and sentences throughout the paper, squeezing wherever possible. Editors often allow revised versions to go over the official word or page limit, so don't feel obliged to cut too much at this point. If the only objection to your revised paper is length, you'll be given another opportunity to make cuts.

Your cover letter might be one or two pages long, depending on the number of points covered.

Think of it from the editor's point of view. She receives the revised paper, and has in front of her the original and revised versions and the reviewers' reports. She doesn't want to compare the original and revised versions paragraph by paragraph to see what you've done; she would rather read your cover letter and turn to page X to see your addition, perhaps read the new version of the conclusion, and so forth, and on this basis decide whether your changes are satisfactory. So make it easy for the editor. She's the key person you have to please.

Sometimes a referee's comment is obscure: It's not obvious what you need to do. Ponder such comments for a while, and think about them from the referee's point of view. You know your material intimately, but the referee doesn't. Maybe you need to explain yourself better. You might ask a colleague, or even the editor. But before doing this, it's usually better to figure out what you think the referee is saying, and how you'll respond. If you can draft changes that seem plausible, that's likely to be good enough for the editor.

While you're negotiating your way through the refereeing jungle, give a thought to the hard-pressed referees and, especially, to the overworked editors, who have to coax reports out of reluctant and tardy referees and then write letters to authors, often with bad news. They can be just as happy as you are when a paper is finally accepted.

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- 1 I thank Juan Miguel Campanario and Jason Delborne for valuable comments.
- 2 Juan Miguel Campanario, 'Have Referees Rejected Some of the Most-Cited Articles of All Times?' *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 47, 4 (April 1996): 302–10
- 3 David J. Pannell, 'Prose, Psychopaths and Persistence: Personal Perspectives on Publishing,' *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 50, 2 (July 2002): 101–15