

FROM THE EDITORS

RESPONDING TO REVIEWERS

The receipt of a “revise and resubmit” from *AMJ* signifies a significant accomplishment in the process of publishing your paper. Rejection is a common affliction in our business, but a noteworthy increase in the likelihood of acceptance accompanies an invitation to revise. If you are like me, the receipt of a revision request brings with it a bevy of emotions: from nervous anticipation, as I scan the editor’s pleasantries looking for the decision; to elation (and sometimes, frankly, relief) at finding the invitation to revise; to the alarm of seeing the major pitfalls and problems with the current manuscript detailed by the editor; to the mixed emotions—positive and negative—that occur when reading through the reviewers’ encouragements and concerns; and finally, to the hope and dread of facing the work that lies ahead.

The question then becomes: *What next?* In the paragraphs that follow, I detail some suggestions for responding to reviewers and crafting a response document. These observations, though not exhaustive, have been gleaned from my experiences as an author—including successes and failures—and as an action editor, observing skilled authors successfully manage the review process. The ideas in this “From the Editors” have also been informed by comments and suggestions from members of the current and former *AMJ* editorial teams. This editorial is intended to complement treatments of the same subject from the authors’ perspective (see, e.g., Agarwal, Echambadi, Franco, & Sarkar, *AMJ*, vol. 49: 191–196). I categorized my thoughts into three sections: being patient, being conversational, and being thorough.

Be Patient

Like others I know, I adhere to what I would call a “cooling off” period after receiving the decision letter. That is, I try to put the decision letter out of my mind for several days and instead revel with my coauthors in the receipt of the good news. After the emotions have settled a bit, I read and reread the editor’s letter and the reviews carefully several times. It is often amazing how different these documents appear after a few days away. The major challenges outlined by the editor that appeared intimidating and critical on the first read, now, in the better cases, read more like a roadmap for navigating the challenges outlined by the reviewers. The critique of a reviewer that sparked anger at first frequently appears to be well reasoned

after a few days, even if I disagree on the point. *These people are trying to help me.* Years ago, as a student and junior scholar attending editors’ panels and such, I often heard editors opine about how they wanted to publish your paper. I found it hard to believe. But, sitting in the action editor’s chair now, my view is different. It’s true—editors do desire to see your paper published. I think the same is true for the reviewers as well. I cannot tell you how many times reviewers, in their private comments to me, have said something along these lines: “I like what the authors are trying to do” or “I really want to like this paper.” The reviewers do an amazing service for the *Journal* and the field. As an author, it is important for you to keep in mind that reviewer comments that appear direct and grave are, by and large, made in the spirit of constructive criticism.

With this in mind, let me emphasize here how important it is to understand your editor’s and reviewers’ concerns, not only from a technical standpoint, but also in terms of the spirit of the commentary. The action editor’s major points provide a guideline for how to structure a revision. The reviewer comments not directly highlighted by the action editor serve two other purposes. First, addressing them effectively will help improve the manuscript on the margins, heightening your chance of success. Responding to these points effectively may be necessary for winning over a reviewer or perhaps bringing him/her to a more neutral stance. Second, the reviewers’ comments, as a set, provide a window of opportunity, not only for manuscript improvement, but also for improvement as an author. By organizing these comments into common themes, it is possible to see patterns of weakness in your own writing. Do I rely on prior authors’ assertions rather than explaining the *why* behind hypotheses? Am I using citations rather than crafting a compelling story? Are reviewers consistently requesting more information about my sample? Am I taking shortcuts with measurement? Am I presenting the results with enough clarity? Am I positioning my paper appropriately in the literature? These themes not only serve to sharpen the presentation in the focal paper, but are also tools for honing your craft in general. Once some time has passed and you have thoroughly digested and organized the reviewers’ comments, it is time

to start drafting the revised manuscript and responding to the reviewers' comments. I offer a few suggestions on this process below.

Be Conversational

A good point of departure for a response document is to set the right tone. Huff (1999) stated that good manuscripts join a conversation in the literature. In a similar way, the initial submission of a manuscript begins a conversation with reviewers; the first decision letter and reviews are the first retort in the conversation. The key, then, is to keep the conversation flowing. Responses that are serious, but conversational in tone, are the best way, in my judgment, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas in the review process. Think of the exchange as being between you and me, or us as the case may be (e.g., "Your point is well taken. We made the following changes as a result of your comments"), rather than between the authors and the reviewers (e.g., "The reviewer's point is well-taken. The authors made the following changes as a result of the reviewer's comments"). It is also helpful to be appreciative of the reviewers' collective wisdom and their insight on certain key points, but not to be obsequious. Excessive flattery is unnecessary and detracts from the message and information you are attempting to convey. Think about it this way: When talking with a colleague about a manuscript *in person*, you would likely acknowledge your appreciation for the colleague's advice and valuable time at the beginning and/or end of the conversation. You would also likely thank her or him periodically for a certain insight or for bringing to light something that you had not thought of before. But, it would be awkward and dysfunctional to greet every statement and comment with a gratuitous "great idea!" or "outstanding point!!" Reviewers realize that not all comments are strokes of brilliance; it undermines the conversation to treat them as such. There is an affective rhythm in a spoken conversation, and the same pattern should be followed in a response document as well.

In contrast, respectful, clear, and direct responses will aid in the transfer of information and ideas to the reviewers in the next round. When I asked colleagues for advice on drafting this editorial, one technique that was often suggested was to read each response as though you were the reviewer. That is, take an empathic view of the responses that you are writing. If I were the reviewer who made a certain comment, what would I think about the response and how would I *feel* about it? It is common for reviewers to search response documents and read the authors' responses to their comments first. Much as you experience emotions welling up inside when you receive

decision letters, reviewers also experience emotional reactions to the responses to their concerns. Placing yourself in their shoes provides a new perspective. You can catch situations in which you have given too little effort to address a concern, or glossed over a subtle but important nuance in the comment, or were too heady or brusque in the response. Managing the downside risk of a negative emotional reaction with thoughtful, clear, and respectful commentary lessens the chance that a negative hue will color the evaluation of your revised manuscript.

As a final note on this point, it should be acknowledged that sometimes the review process uncovers errors. Authors, reviewers, and indeed, editors, make their fair share of errors in the research process. Acknowledging that you have made a mistake—unintentionally misciting, coding a variable incorrectly, making a miscalculation in an analysis, etc.—is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign that you are committed to getting things done properly. Dealing with the mistake in a straightforward way and directly explaining to the reviewers what you have done to correct an error is a much more effective approach than hiding it and hoping for the best. Reviewers will appreciate the candor.

Be Thorough

A common way of categorizing reviewer comments is to place them into three broad categories: (1) those that if addressed and included in a manuscript would make it better, (2) those that would have a neutral effect, and (3) those that would hurt the paper. Those in the first category are often included in the action editor's decision, where he/she synthesizes the major reviewer comments. As a general rule, these often result in substantial changes to a manuscript and the bulk of the material in the response document. Those comments in the second category should also be addressed thoroughly, with many, if not all, of the comments and suggestions integrated into the paper. If they have a neutral effect on the manuscript itself, but their inclusion assuages a reviewer's concern about an issue, it is a net positive to change the manuscript.

The third category is more challenging for authors, and it is here where the first topic—the need to be conversational—comes back into play. It is a myth that authors cannot disagree with reviewers *judiciously* and have a successful outcome. What is important is that authors carefully manage the disagreement. First, reviewers will be looking to ensure that the authors took the concern seriously and, importantly, took action to address it. I think a general rule in responding to reviewers is that action and data are better than argumentation. If you disagree on a point and decide not to include the

change in the manuscript, it is imperative that you adequately address the reviewer's concern. As a general example, reviewers often request changes or modifications in data analysis. If you are able to conduct those analyses, do so. It is critical to avoid being defensive in the review process. By conducting the analysis and showing the reviewers the results, even if the results do not end up in the manuscript itself, you will satisfy their curiosity. As a caveat, if you find yourself disagreeing very frequently, it is probably a sign that you are being defensive and resisting the need to make important changes.

In all research projects, judgment calls must be made and later defended in the review process. For example, in teams and networks research, judgment calls must often be made in managing a trade-off between response rates (which are crucial for ensuring that team- and network-level measurements are reliable and valid) and sample size (which is critical for generating the statistical power needed to detect effects). If a reviewer disagrees with the judgment call that was made, an author might survey the literature to determine how other others dealt with response rate issues—what are the more liberal positions, what are the more conservative ones, and where does the current study fall on the continuum? In addition, if there is disagreement with reviewers' stance on the issue, some robustness checks may be in order. You might rerun analyses after making different judgment calls on response rates and include the results of these alternative analyses in the response document. These analyses may alleviate the concern by satisfying reviewers' curiosity. In essence, they get to see how things would turn out under their preferences, even if those results do not appear in the manuscript itself. Following both of these approaches, an author would not only educate the reviewers about the typicality of the decision rule in the literature, but also provide information about how stable or wavering the results are across different plausible decision rules. The key is that the action and additional data analysis are better than additional argument in defense of the decision that was made.

Being as thorough as possible can sometimes convince reviewers that what you did was correct, but in other cases it serves the purpose of managing the reviewer's reaction to your approach. A colleague offered an anecdote to this effect: A reviewer had a negative reaction to a new measure that was being used in an empirical analysis. In the process of revising the manuscript, my colleague realized that she and her coauthors had not done an effective job of explaining the process used for developing the new

measure. In the responses, the authors first acknowledged that they had not communicated well in the initial submission. Next, they provided a much stronger argument for the link between the conceptual space of the construct and the operationalization. Finally, they brought additional data to bear to bolster the reviewer's confidence in the measure. In the next round of reviews, the reviewer was not converted into a zealot for the new measure but conceded the point by saying, "Now I better understand. I still don't love it, but it's better."

Let me offer two final points on thoroughness. First, the suggestion to be thorough is not a license to write a novel. Be succinct where possible, especially when you agree with a reviewer's point and have made a change to the manuscript. A clear, concise explanation of how you made the change, and pointing out the appropriate page in the manuscript, should be sufficient. Second, the collective response to reviewers should be designed to move reviewers to a more favorable judgment about your manuscript—in essence, to get them on your side. As noted above, reviewers typically want action rather than argumentation in addressing their concerns. Consistently highlighting in your response specifically how those actions resulted in a stronger, more coherent manuscript is important. The purpose of this editorial was to offer some guidance for responding to reviewers, but as authors we should not lose sight of the fact that using the reviewer's comments to improve papers is the ultimate goal.

Conclusions

The craft of responding to reviewers effectively takes practice. It takes a great deal of effort, some creativity, and importantly, also the right attitude. In my experience, destructive criticism from reviewers is a rare event. Reviewers are selected not only because of their expertise but also because of their interest in the topic at hand. As such, they nearly always offer comments and criticisms that are intended to help authors improve their manuscripts. The author-reviewer relationship is often thought of as something of a hostile takeover—arduous and combative. I contend that for successful authors, the analogy of a joint venture is a better fit. Patience, a conversational tone, and thoroughness can help seal the deal.

Jason D. Shaw
University of Minnesota

REFERENCES

- Huff, A. S. 1999. *Writing for scholarly publication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.