



Using Peer Review Comments in a Constructive Way

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Getting published isn't magic; it's a process. You don't need to be Houdini! Just follow a few simple rules, submit to the appropriate journal for your study, and take heed of comments from the editor and peer reviewers. To help you on your way, here are a few tips and reminders on the process in general and on responding to peer review comments in particular.

First of all, remember that editors are looking for novelty, relevance, and quality (see Table 1 for examples), and you should ensure evidence of these are clearly communicated in your submissions.

Table 1. Examples of novelty, relevance, and quality in original research articles

Novelty	Relevance	Quality
Information about a new drug, patient population, or issue	Impact on clinical practice (a new answer for an old problem, consolidating evidence, changing accepted practice)	Sound methodology, appropriately powered
Definitive data in controversial area	Develop/validate a method of diagnosing or quantifying severity of disease	Comprehensive and analytical
Extending previous findings	Establish a mechanism of disease	Well-presented and well written
Large study population (confirmatory data)	Generate a hypothesis	Statistical analysis and review, certain sample size

Editors often make an initial assessment of a submission and may ask for changes before a paper even goes for peer review. These changes are often in regards to length, clarity, and focus. Assuming your paper passes through this triage stage, it's likely that it will then be sent for peer review. After a period of time, you will receive a decision letter with comments from peer reviewers and the editor. This letter will usually let you know that either your submission has been rejected or that a revised version addressing the peer review comments should be submitted.

At this point, you and your co-authors should regroup and consider what the peer reviewers and editor have said and decide whether you want to continue with the paper and submit a revision or revise and submit it to another journal (in the case of a rejection, for example).

Be sure to take a little time before responding to the journal and try to allow any feelings of anger or resentment to subside. It is of no benefit to respond to the comments received while thinking that the reviewer hasn't taken the right approach to your findings, is wrong, has misunderstood you, and must be either biased or stupid (or both). Instead, try to accept as much of the criticism as you can. It's meant to be constructive, not personal. Keep in mind that reviewers can improve your article and correct errors; view the process as adding value to your article.

Model response to a reviewer

Peer reviewer A, point 1: "The objective of the study is hard to find and is not clearly stated."

Author Reply: Thank you, we have revised our manuscript. The objective is now included as the last sentence of the introduction (page 3, last sentence) and has been revised to read "The aim of our study was to..."

If you decide to revise your paper, address the peer reviewer and editor comments and highlight them in the revised text. In addition, submit a separate sheet listing each peer review comment and your responses. Respond to individual comments and state upfront what action was taken (what was done or not done), then explain the reason. These responses and explanations are key and must be carefully

considered and clearly articulated (see "Model response to a reviewer" for an example). Of course, you don't have to humbly accept every comment made, but you should make all possible changes in accordance with the review and provide a detailed explanation on why certain changes have not been made. Agree with the reviewer (or at least avoid disagreement), but feel free to explain why the suggestion wasn't incorporated in the revision.¹ Above all, answer completely, answer politely, and answer with evidence.²

When responding to peer review comments, be honest and professional, and be mindful that authors and journals are working to the same end. Be aware of what editors are looking for—good papers that the audience will read (and cite). This means being realistic about where you submit your article—does it really warrant publication in the number one journal in the field? Never withhold information—include all requested forms and tick lists with your submission and ensure financial and conflict of interest statements are complete and up-to-date. Don't break the rules—read the journal's instructions to authors and ensure every element of your submission complies with them. Good luck with your next submission!

References

1. Kotsis SV, Chung, KC. Manuscript rejection: how to submit a revision and tips on being a good peer reviewer. *Plast Reconstr Surg.* 2014; 133: 958-964.
2. Williams HC. How to reply to referees' comments when submitting manuscripts for publication. *J Am Acad Dermatol.* 2004; 51:79-83.