

## EDITORIAL

# How I respond to peer reviewer comments

The process of publishing our science is like a dance between authors, editors, and reviewers. As in any relationship, to achieve optimal results, everyone needs to be made happy. In this editorial, I am sharing my advice on the how to prepare the dreaded “Response to Reviews Document.” None of us likes to write this document—it is not nearly as fun as writing a manuscript that conveys research that we feel passionate about. The style is dry and formal, and the need to be flexible about our work in responding to reviewers can annoy us.

I suggest 6 general recommendations for this task:

- Be polite, grateful, and professional, even when you think a reviewer is wrong
- Never assume a reviewer is “stupid” or a nonexpert
- Respond to ALL queries and ALL author instructions
- Provide thorough responses—do not leave any stone unturned
- Make it EASY for the reviewer and editor to understand your response
- If you do not understand a review comment, it is okay to admit it

## 1 | BE POLITE

It can be tempting to respond with spite about specific reviewer comments. Rather than saying something like, “The reviewer is incorrect on this point and...,” consider, “We believe the reviewer might have misunderstood our intention and...”

If you disagree with a reviewer, that is fine. As an author, one of my favorite points of disagreement with reviewers is when a reviewer asks me to add *P* values to “Table 1,” the table describing characteristics of the studied population. My coauthors and I might respond, “We respectfully prefer not to add *P* values to Table 1 for several reasons. First, we are not testing hypotheses in Table 1 but just describing the cohort. Second, if the reviewer is concerned about identifying possible confounders, statistical inference is not a valid method for this and may provide misleading information. Third, statistical inference measures in a baseline characteristics table address the likelihood that a study exposure and a specific covariate are related in the underlying population; this question can be tangential to the study hypotheses and potentially distracting. Fourth, the use of statistical inference measures in a baseline characteristics table involves multiple comparisons so is likely to generate false-positive associations. We hope that the reviewer and editor can agree with

us.” Here, I have provided many reasons why this is a bad thing to do, and usually, it assuages the reviewer. If I was worried about pushback from the editor (based on seeing *p* values in other papers they have published), I might add, “However, we can add the *P* values to the table at the discretion of the Editor.” Based on the above, you can also see why Research and Practice in Thrombosis and Haemostasis (RPTH) does not generally allow *P* values in “Table 1.”

## 2 | NEVER ASSUME A REVIEWER IS “STUPID” OR A NONEXPERT

As a scientist, usually you are an expert on the topic you are writing about. Reviewers (and editors) may have less content expertise than authors. My observations over many years as an associate editor and editor tell me that most reviewers do not provide comments out of spite or to waste the time of authors—they genuinely want to help the authors publish a better manuscript and assure that the results and interpretation are correct. Of course, there are bad apples, but give the reviewer the benefit of the doubt. If your gut reaction to a specific reviewer comment is, “Wow this person does not know anything,” step back, take a deep breath, and consider an alternative explanation. We communicate in English, and this is not everyone’s first language, so be sure that there is no communication issue you aren’t noticing. Consider that they are trying to help, search your brain for the meaning, and respond constructively.

## 3 | RESPOND TO ALL QUERIES AND ALL AUTHOR INSTRUCTIONS

As a journal editor, I am continually surprised when the authors ignore queries and author guidelines. At RPTH, we offer format-free initial submission to save authors’ time. However, we require authors to follow formatting and other guidelines on manuscript resubmission, even providing the link to the author instructions in the decision letter. We do not burden the authors by asking for a checklist attesting that they are the following instructions.

We regularly see some of our instructions skipped. There are 2 common examples.

First, we ask the authors to optimize their article for search engines, a topic all of us should care about (as discussed elsewhere) [1]. A prime reason for emphasizing this is that about 40% of traffic to our

site comes from Google, and if your article is responsive to their algorithms, it will be more easily found.

Second, we ask the authors of articles studying humans to provide data on the race and/or ethnicity of the participants. The main reason is to provide insights on the sociocultural determinants of health in the studied population. As pointed out by the editors of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, “Neglecting to report race and ethnicity in health and medical research disregards the reality of social stratification, injustices, and inequities and implications for population health, and removing race and ethnicity from research may conceal health disparities” [2]. Some authors have responded to me that race is not important in their locale since all persons have healthcare coverage. A response like this demonstrates a lack of understanding that social factors such as structural racism, interpersonal racism, unconscious bias, and patient attitudes about health (which may differ by race) affect health and health behaviors independent of whether a person has healthcare coverage. Sometimes the authors have not collected information on race or ethnicity. In these cases, we ask that this missing information be addressed as a limitation or that some other sociodemographic data be provided.

#### 4 | PROVIDE THOROUGH RESPONSES

Be thorough while not overly verbose. If you do not or cannot address a comment, provide a valid reason. This topic may be best discussed by providing an example of what not to do. In this example, an author is asked to provide more information on how participants were instructed to report a specific health event. A reviewer responded, “We believe that the modifications we have made will demonstrate the instructions given to participants.” This is not a response! If the reviewer has the patience to even try to understand this response, they will need to hunt through the article looking for the information. Providing tracked changes in your article is not enough! In this case, the authors should have provided detailed information in the response document on the general approach to how patients were instructed and then provided verbatim the actual text revisions to the manuscript, including the page and line numbers (or page and paragraph) where the edits can be found.

#### 5 | MAKE IT EASY FOR THE REVIEWER AND EDITOR TO UNDERSTAND YOUR RESPONSE

There are 3 key elements to consider.

First, repeat all the reviewer comments verbatim in your response document. Believe it or not, occasionally, the authors simply write a response and do not re-list the original comments. Copy and pasting is a simple enough task.

Second, although I do not practice this as an author, I like it when authors make a 2-column table to convey their responses to reviewers. Comments to the authors are listed in the first column, and author response in the second column.

Third, as suggested above, provide a thorough response but also indicate precisely what text was added or deleted from the manuscript

in the response document. This saves the reviewers and editors much valuable time. If a reviewer must hunt for information to understand what you did, they will be irritated and more likely to ask you for more. If you make it easy for them, they will fly through their assessment of your resubmission. If you say something like, “The text was amended to make this point more clear,” reviewers and editors need to find that text and then interpret for themselves why the new text is responsive to their comment. Better to say, “This is an excellent comment, and we respond by adding the following passages to the Discussion on page 13, line 152, then paste those additions in the response document.”

#### 6 | IF YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND A REVIEW COMMENT, IT IS OKAY TO ADMIT IT

This is pretty simple. The authors can graciously say, “We are not sure we understand the reviewer’s question. We think they might want x, y so have responded by doing x, y, and z. If we have missed the meaning, we welcome the opportunity to respond again.”

#### 7 | CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that being a member of the science community requires that we all serve as peer reviewers for our colleagues. In our current system, sadly this is a volunteer activity for most journals. At RPTH, we offer modest awards to our most committed reviewers every year, which I hope is appreciated. As authors, it is incumbent on us to dance the dance with our reviewer colleagues to make their lives easier. Then, our work can be published efficiently without unnecessary back and forth. I hope this article is helpful to you—and if you have your own pearls to share, I would love to hear them!

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