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HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE LETTER TO REVIEWERS

Mark Jeremy Hunt[1,2 E]
• ORCID: 0000-0001-7741-2191
Magdalena Ochmańska[1 E]
• ORCID: 0000-0001-6312-0278
Justyna Cilulko-Dołęga[1 E]
• ORCID: 0000-0002-7334-1063

[1] eCORRECTOR, Newton, Cambridge, UK
[2] Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology PAN, Warsaw, Poland

A – study design, **B** – data collection, **C** – statistical analysis, **D** – interpretation of data, **E** – manuscript preparation, **F** – literature review, **G** – sourcing of funding

ABSTRACT

The review process is intended to provide an objective assessment of the suitability of a submission to the target journal. When authors receive the decision letter from the editor it is almost always accompanied with the reviews, which at times can be quite critical. Writing a well-constructed response letter to the reviewers, with well-reasoned arguments, is a key part of the reviewing process. Although the manuscript is the main focus of the submission, the content and tone of the response letter can have a surprisingly large impact on the eventual recommendation given by the reviewers. The importance of writing a clear response letter is often overlooked by authors. This prompted us to prepare a short article addressing the main points that can help authors prepare their response to reviewer letter to the reviewers.

Although each review is unique, here, we outline ten points which are aimed at helping authors respond effectively and clearly to reviewers' comments. The points are based on the authors' collective experiences which includes publishing and reviewing for international peer-reviewed journals. The tone of the letter should always be professional, organized and objective. Each point raised by the reviewers needs to be replied to in a precise way, with clear evidence that the major concerns have been considered in a serious way. This article also covers what information should be included, when it is appropriate to disagree with a reviewer, and how to present appropriate rebuttals.

KEYWORDS: academic writing, response letter, article sections, tips

Background

All authors know that receiving a decision letter from a journal is one of the most stressful moments in the manuscript evaluation process. All authors wait in anticipation, repeatedly checking their inbox, for the moment they can read whether their paper has been accepted. The decision letter states whether the manuscript has been rejected, accepted, or requires major or minor revisions. Authors often take the first result very personally as if it was an assessment of the validity of their research. It is important to recognise that rejection is actually quite common when targeting higher impact journals – i.e. some journals only have a 20-30% acceptance rate; therefore, the vast majority of submissions will in fact be rejected for reasons not necessarily related to quality of the research. Independent of the outcome, reviewers spend many hard hours reading each submission and identifying what they consider to be the major and minor flaws with the work and assess suitability for the target journal. Reviewers often point out the strengths of work as well and may complement authors when a study has been rigorously carried out. Consequently, we should not see the review process as a procedure invented to find every possible shortcoming of the paper. It is designed to provide constructive criticism and stimulate the research process – all communicated via the review form.

This article deals with situations where authors have been invited to submit a revised version of their manuscript. In this situation the authors will have to respond to the reviewers' criticisms and modify the body of the main text accordingly. Being invited to respond to reviewers' comments is good sign. It means at this point your paper has the potential to be accepted and has not been rejected by the editor. Alongside the necessary modifications that you have to make within the manuscript, how you write your response to the reviewers can become a make or break moment for the entire

process. Reviewers will be asked again to comment on the work and submit a recommendation decision about the revised work. It is important to remember that the reviewer has already carefully read the submission, so may not dedicate quite so much time reading or re-reading the second version. Therefore, it is extremely important to make this part of the reviewing process as easy as possible for the reviewer. This is mainly achieved by a comprehensive response to the reviewers' letter where each point made by the reviewer is clearly addressed and answered or rebutted.

Ten tips for responding to reviewers

The purpose of this article is to provide advice on how to respond appropriately to reviewers' comments. This is drawn on our collective experiences as authors of international peer-reviewed papers and reviewing for international journals. Ultimately, the final decision will rest with the scientific integrity of the work submitted. However, the ten steps that we recommend below, when followed, will certainly strengthen your response letter.

1. **Start with a short summary:** Before you detail your point-by-point response to the reviewers, we recommend writing a short paragraph summarising the most substantive changes in the paper (but do not go into detail – keep it short and simple at this stage). It should be obvious from the reviewers' comments what the main concerns are and these should be briefly addressed. For example, if you added new figures or expanded the analyses to support your conclusions, then mention this here. If you have restructured or completely refocussed the paper as per suggestions, then this should be included. Then, state that you have responded to all the reviewers' comments below (make sure you do respond to all the comments) and include your comprehensive response to the reviewers' letter.
2. **Thank the reviewers:** Reviewers often are very busy researchers themselves and invest many hours into reading your paper, often providing a comprehensive review of the submission without remuneration. In many cases, reviewers write extensive comments which reflects their time taken and the hope that the research results presented in the paper will be a valuable addition to the scientific world. It is extremely important that you also take time (and demonstrate that you have taken time) to provide carefully thought-through and sufficiently detailed responses to ALL the points raised by the reviewers. A response letter that is terse and rushed will do you no favours in the minds of the reviewers – they expect that the author cares about the reviewers' opinions and will make a clear effort to achieve the expected quality.
3. **Make it easy for the reviewers:** The reviewer may not invest as much time in reading the main manuscript as in the response letter. The purpose of the letter is that you are responding to the specific points made by the reviewer and they will be naturally interested to know how you have addressed their concerns. Reviewers typically number their comments to the authors' letter. Therefore, it is quite straightforward to copy and paste the comments into a new file and insert your replies below each point raised by the reviewers. It is crucial that every single remark is responded to, with the details about what you changed and why clearly stated underneath. If a point has several sub-points, then it is important that all the concerns raised are thoroughly responded to.
   A reviewer may have proposed an alternative mechanism or suggested your explanation is farfetched and should be rephrased, if not removed. Where a more substantive comment is made (or major revision suggested) statements such as "we have included the necessary revisions outlined by the reviewer in the discussion" or "we agree with all suggested changes" become 'lazy' responses which may irritate the reviewer. It is not a point in your favour. A reviewer will expect you to summarise specifically what changes you made (e.g. if you agree with the reviewer then state this and explain what new material you added, any supporting references, any caveats). Of course, it is also acceptable to disagree with the reviewer by providing a well-supported argument.
4. **Respond to ALL comments:** We cannot stress this point strongly enough. Sometimes an author will deliberately avoid answering a key point and hope that the reviewer will not mind or notice. However, in most cases, if a key point is ignored, you may expect quite harsh feedback from the reviewer, which make it much harder to publish in the target journal.
   It may happen that the same point has been raised by more than one reviewer – if this happens do not copy and paste or tell the other reviewer to "see response to Reviewer 1". This, again, is a lazy response and may make the reviewer feel that his/her point did not warrant the same attention as the other reviewer's. Reviewers are not usually deliberately harsh and do want to see their effort appreciated. It does not take much effort to reword the response to the same or similar remark, especially since the overall context where the point was made may be different and a more personalised response can be given.
5. **Remember most comments will be constructive feedback:** It is normal to feel defensive if you have had your work criticised. Review is by definition an evaluation, so both strengths and, unfortunately, weaknesses have to be pointed out

to initiate improvement. It is important, although difficult, to remain objective when writing your response letter. Reviewers, even if they recommend substantial changes, are usually trying to test the robustness of the main results and/or develop a deeper understanding of the study. This is an important part of the peer-review process which ensures that work that has sufficient scientific merit and there are no obvious gaps in the study. Journals care about the quality of the published papers and critical review of the paper is, unfortunately, an unavoidable part of this process.

Suggested changes are not always substantial. Reviewers will also point out minor changes which can be genuine mistakes made by the author in rush. These also need to be responded to appropriately (see example below).

- Reviewer: *The units of the colorscale is not indicated in Figure 1A or the corresponding legend*
- Response: *This was an oversight and we have added the units as requested*

6. **It is OK to disagree with a reviewer:** Disagreements are all part of scientific advancement, but it is important to be polite and, if necessary, firm. If a reviewer has highlighted something which you believe to be clearly wrong, for example that results from the experiment are in line with hypothesis A and not B, then it is important to point this out with supporting references to justify your position. It is crucial to remember that there can often be multiple interpretations of data as well as explanations for why specific results were obtained. The differences often lie in the paradigm familiar to the reviewer. If the suggestion made by the reviewer is plausible, then it makes sense to include this as an alternative explanation along with any reasons why you, as the author, consider this to be more or less valid. The resulting conclusions will be more comprehensive and more diverse. For example, you may use a structure like this: "Alternatively, it could be argued that [...]; however, we consider this less likely since [...]." A reviewer may request you introduce new methodologies to support your conclusions, for example the use of optogenetic techniques. If this is clearly outside the area of the study (and you honestly consider the methodology and data used are strong enough) then it is perfectly reasonable to thank the reviewer for their suggestion and state that this methodology is beyond the scope of this particular submission. It should be mentioned that if opportunities arise to carry out this type of work, then it would necessitate a new study potentially reinforcing the new quality your paper brings into the approach to the examined issue.
7. **The response letter may be the main document read after the first review:** Do not underestimate the importance of a strong response letter. When revising the manuscript, many authors put almost all of their effort on the revision of the main text, without concentrating equal or sufficient attention to preparing the response letter. As stated previously, some reviewers will carefully read the response letter, but only scan the post-revision manuscript. If it is written in a careless or negligent manner, the reviewer may be under the impression that the same approach was assumed while revising the paper. Therefore, it is essential your response is persuasive and fully thought through.
8. **Strike the right tone:** In connection with the fifth point, it is easy to be overly defensive since your work may have been heavily criticised. It is important to remember reviewers are trying to test the robustness of the study. If there are weak points then as researchers they are professionally obliged to acknowledge this. On the other hand, you do not want to go to the other extreme and be overly apologetic. The work is after all yours and the main author has to come across as knowledgeable and believing in the validity of research, otherwise your whole study can be undermined.
9. **Include supporting information:** Researchers often carry out complementary research projects and, therefore, may have new unpublished data which supports the conclusions of the submitted piece of work. It can sometimes be persuasive enough to include this in the response letter, clearly stating that you are showing the reviewer the data in confidence since. This additional material demonstrates that your finding is reproducible, but that the latest finding is part of a new study that addresses a different question (which will be part of a follow-up paper); therefore, you do not want to include it in the current submission. A specific example from one of Dr Hunt's studies is shown below:
   - Reviewer: *I would expect a control of some sort for the ketamine injection itself – perhaps saline/vehicle control. Better yet would be other related pharmacologic agents, such as MK801.*
   - Response: *As mentioned above, we have provided control data which is now clearly stated in the main text and also provided in Supplementary figure 1.*

     In parallel to the current study, we have also carried out experiments examining the effect of 0.15 mg/kg MK801 on the power of HFO in the bulb. This study although confirmatory is slightly different since muscimol or saline were infused to the OB after MK801 injection, in other words when the power of HFO was already substantial (as opposed to pretreatment and ketamine injection). However, the main message is the same and consistent with what we report in our submission. We would like to show this data in con-

fidence to the reviewer to demonstrate that this work has been done. We would rather not include this in the current submission since it is part of a large ongoing project, and not directly related to the effects of ketamine we report here.

Including this type of additional data presents your work in a wider context and shows that you want to approach the examined issue from different perspectives, including those suggested by the reviewer.

10. **Make sure you text is written in proper English**: When reviewing a manuscript reviewers are often asked to comment on the quality of the English. In many cases reviewers will point out sentences or phrases that are ambiguous or typographical and grammatical errors. It is actually quite common for there to be a few language errors, even in texts written by native English speakers, however, when these become too substantial that the fundamental understanding of the work is jeopardized a reviewer may well become overly critical. If a reviewer provides a list of language edits we recommend writing 'Done', or similar, next to each one as it shows every individual edit should have been made. It is important to ensure the English language in the cover letter is a high standard, since a badly written response letter is likely to indicate that the quality of the English in the manuscript may also be weak. It is there extremely important to ensure both your response letter and revised manuscript have been checked by one of the authors who is fluent in English or a native English speaker.

Summary

The review process can be intense for all parties involved, especially when the reviewers and the authors are very passionate about the research area. The reviewers' remarks are in principle aimed at improving the paper and achieving the high standard expected by the journal. Responding to reviewers' comments provides an opportunity to exchange ideas and improve the study, so it should not be perceived as overly negative (there are of course bad reviews, where a reviewer fundamentally does not understand the work or may be competing in the same area, but in our experience these are relatively rare – in this case it is recommended to contact the section editor and request an appeal). It is our hope that outlining these ten steps for preparing a convincing response to reviewers' remarks will be helpful to all authors working on their publications.

References:

1. Noble WS. Ten simple rules for writing a response to reviewers. PLoS Comput Biol 2017; 13(10): e1005730.

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Correspondence address:
Mark Jeremy Hunt
eCORRECTOR Ltd, Mill Lane, Sawston,
CB22 3HY Cambridge, United Kingdom
E-mail: mhunt@ecorrector.com
Phone: (+48) 22 122 80 71

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