Satisfying Doubters and Critics: Dealing with the Peer Review

Sandeep B Bavdekar

Abstract

Although peer review process intends to improve the quality of published scientific literature, many authors find the process intimidating and overbearing. Responding to reviewers’ comments in a hasty and inappropriate manner is self-defeating. Authors need to answer the reviewers in an objective manner providing additional description, rational arguments and relevant evidence.

Peer review is an important element of the research process. It aims to maintain the quality of scientific publications by rejecting manuscripts that are trivial, weak, irrelevant or misleading and by improving the transparency, accuracy and utility of manuscripts accepted for publication.1,2 But, the process can be intimidating for some new authors. They cannot understand, let alone digest the criticism of their submitted manuscript and hence respond in a hurry and in an inappropriate manner, further jeopardizing the chances of acceptability. This article informs new authors about the way a submitted manuscript is handled in the journal office and provides suggestions on how to respond to the reviewers’ and editors’ comments. More importantly, it intends to provide clues on how to minimize the chances of receiving harsh criticism.

The Review Process

Before we get into the subject of how to deal with the reviewers, it would not be out of place to understand how a manuscript is processed after submission. Generally, the manuscript is seen by the editor or by one of the sub-editors. Their job primarily is to see if the topic of the submitted manuscript conforms to the journal’s aim and scope3 and if it is relevant to the journal’s readers. If the manuscript fails on any one of these counts, the manuscript is rejected without it being referred to the reviewers. An editor may also reject a manuscript if he sees a “fatal flaw” in the study conduct (unimportant research topic, inappropriate study design, methodology or control group, invalid data, a marked lack of power to achieve the objectives, and non-original material) or reporting (invalid data, gross discrepancies in data, drawing conclusions that are not supported by the data presented).2,4 The sub-editor checks if the manuscript is as per the guidelines prescribed by the journal. If he finds that it is not, but thinks that the article has some merit, the manuscript is returned to the corresponding author with the advice to resubmit it after ensuring that the technical issues (such as word count, referencing style, number of references, type of abstract provided, etc.) are addressed.

Once the submitted manuscript is considered to be ‘in order’, it may get discussed within an editorial committee before a decision of referring it for peer-review is taken. Alternately, this decision is directly taken by the editor or by a sub-editor or Section editor. The peer-reviewers (usually 3-4 in number) are selected on the basis of their expertise in the field and related area and from amongst those who have recently published articles on the subject. They are expected to provide their comments and suggestions to the editor within a specified time (generally 2-4 weeks). The editorial office collects and collates reviewers’ comments and communicates them over to the corresponding author, along with a judgment/ suggestion for future course of action: Reject, Accept or Re-submit.

Tips on How to Answer the Reviewers

When a message arrives from the journal, as an author you should expect critique, rather than praise and hope that the article has not been outright rejected. In any case, acceptance without any need for revision is extremely rare for a research article. If a manuscript is rejected, there are three options before you. One is to put up your side to the editor.
stating how reviewers have erred in their evaluation and judgment. This approach has extremely slim chances of success, as unless there are gross errors in evaluation, the editors are likely to stand by the reviewers. The next option is to approach the Ombudsman, if the journal has one. However, most of the times, the ombudsman only determines if the review process has been fair or not; rather than actually going through the merits of evaluation itself. The most prudent and pragmatic strategy is to amend the article based on the reviewers’ comments and submit it to another journal. There are times when the letter says that the manuscript is unsuitable for publication in the current format. This is not outright rejection. The letter then goes not to state the reasons for being judged to be unsuitable. Here, the editor is willing to have another look at the manuscript if it addresses the issues raised. At other times, the editor might request the author to submit a revised version in the light of reviewers’ comments.

Rejection, probing questions and vicious criticism do affect authors. Being at the receiving end, do get angry; but do not respond immediately while being disturbed. You need to get into a dialogue with them and it is never a good idea to initiate a dialogue when you are angry and disturbed. In fact, if the manuscript has been sent back with a request to clarify issues and if you are directed to undertake (a whole lot of) changes, this means that the editor is interested in your manuscript and sees in you a potential contributor to the body of knowledge. This should please you. After letting the anger ebb over a day, take a fresh look at the letter and the comments. Read them carefully and determine what the reviewers want in the revised version. Categorize the ‘must do’ directives (requirements) from ‘suggestions’. The comments can also be classified as the ‘major’ and ‘minor’. The major ones require a fundamental re-organization of the paper and include serious issues (such as flaws in study design, methodology, statistical analysis or conclusion). They require the author to re-analyze or re-write at least parts of the manuscript. It is obvious that the reviewers will expect strong reasons for not agreeing with major suggestions. In contrast, the minor suggestions are those that seek minor clarifications, additional information regarding study procedures or population studied, deletion of non-essential textual matter, or some changes in the style. These are easy to handle. You need to check which comments need to be greater attention.

While responding, be objective and answer scientifically, specifically, completely and with evidence. Admit errors. Perform a literature search before finalizing the response. Maybe an important article on the subject has been published while your manuscript was under review. Appreciate constructive suggestions and criticisms. Be polite. Being polite does not mean that you have to agree to everything that the reviewers have stated. But while voicing non-agreement, state reasons and refer to evidence. State your part respectfully. Avoid making inflammatory comments and do not impute motives. Sometimes, a reviewer’s comment indicates that he has misinterpreted or misunderstood what has been written. Rather than castigating the reviewer for that, consider the possibility of some readers also misinterpreting the passage. Check if you can word it better by removing ambiguities, clarifying intricacies or providing additional details. There are times, when two reviewers state diametrically opposite views. One might agree with a concept in the manuscript that other objects to. Never pit one reviewer against another. Answer their individual comments separately and objectively. It is essential that you adhere to the timelines prescribed by the Journal. A journal may view delayed response as being indicative of lack of interest. And it is important to thank the reviewers for their time, even if the comments appear to be harsh. Remember they have volunteered to help you make your manuscript better and are not going to receive any remuneration (or even recognition) for their efforts.

It pays to make their job simpler. Provide the response in an easy-to-understand format, if the journal has not provided a specific template for it. The suggested format is provided as Table 1. It is important to re-state the comment, as the reviewer may not remember all the comments and suggestions he made and a copy of the comments may not be available to him. It also allows him to judge if the response is adequate. He is also able to see what other reviewers have stated. You can use the column entitled “Authors’ response” to inform reviewer about your thoughts, reasoning and viewpoint about the comments. If necessary, provide relevant references for the facts cited in the response. In short, invest time to think about how to respond and ensure that the response it detailed. The next column is used for exactly describing what is deleted from or inserted in the original text. In addition to describing the location

Note: Include references to support your case/ argument

Table 1: Suggested template for providing response to reviewers’ comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reviewer No.</th>
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<th>Authors’ response</th>
<th>Changes carried out in the manuscript</th>
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Table 2: Issues that reviewers look at while reviewing a research article3,8,9

Related to the conduct of the study
- Is the research question based on current evidence? Is it relevant to science, society, the journal and its readers? Is it timely?
- Are the study design, study population and setting appropriate for the research question?
- Is the study population actually enrolled representative of the intended population?
- Have the participants been selected in an apt manner, minimizing bias?
- Has an adequate number of participants been enrolled and followed-up till the study endpoint? Is the justification for the sample size right?
- If a randomized study, have the investigators used the right method for sequence generation and allocation concealment?
- If blinding has been attempted, has it been done in a manner that would be effective?
- Are the intervention and control groups appropriately selected?
- Is the intervention ethical, scientific and appropriate?
- Has the study been conducted in an ethical manner?
- Are the techniques and tools used in study validated and appropriate?
- Is the outcome measure selected suitable for evaluation of the objective? Could the investigators have selected a better and more appropriate outcome measure? Has it been measured using the best possible method?
- Have the investigators used suitable methods to eliminate or minimize biases in selection of participants, providing intervention, determination of baseline characteristics, measurement of various parameter, etc.

Related to analysis of observations
- Is data description complete and appropriate?
- Have the investigators used an appropriate analytical test?

Related to manuscript content
- Has the manuscript been written as per the “Instructions to authors” provided by the Journal?
- Has it been written as per the IMRAD Format?
- Is the title succinct and related to the topic of the manuscript?
- Does the abstract describe the important portions of the study?
- Are the key words used appropriate?
- Does the “Introduction” section provide enough information for the readers to understand the need for conducting the study?
- Have the study objectives/ hypotheses been clearly stated?
- Have the authors provided enough information in methodology section (related to the setting, study design, study period, population studied, participants enrolled, ethical approval, participant consent and assent, procedures employed, intervention carried out, parameters measured, determination of primary and secondary outcome measures, etc.) for the readers to understand various steps employed and to judge if the procedures were carried out in the right manner? Is the description adequate for an informed researcher to conduct the study, without having to contact the authors?
- Have the authors provided information about the number of participants approached, screened, found eligible, consented, enrolled, followed-up and completed the study?
- Have the authors provided information about all the parameters that were measured in the study? Have the authors provided information about any parameter not listed in the methodology section?
- Do the details add up? Are there any discrepancies in the data?
- Have the authors chosen the most appropriate method to depict data (text, tables and graphs)?
- Have the study findings been appropriately interpreted?
- Have the authors listed the strengths and limitations of the study? Have they provided the steps taken to minimize the limitations and have they discussed the impact these limitations may have had on the study results?
- Have they justified the (unconventional or non-standard) methods that have been used in the study? Have they listed the possible biases involved in the conduct of the study and how they were minimized?
- Have the authors given due credit to the work of other investigators who have generated evidence earlier?
- Have the authors considered relevant evidence while discussing the study findings?
- Are the arguments cogent? Are they provided in a logical sequence?
- Have the authors described what the study adds to current knowledge, understanding and evidence?
- Are the conclusions drawn by the author fair and based on logical deduction of all the available evidence?
- Have the authors described implications of study findings to clinical practice, research or health policy?
- Does the list of cited references indicate that the authors have carried out a thorough literature search? Does it include all the relevant and important references? Has the most recent evidence been included?

Related to writing style
- Is the manuscript written in plain, simple-to-understand language using short simple sentences? Is it without jargon? Is it devoid of odd and circuitous phrases?
- Have the thoughts and ideas presented with clarity? Do they flow logically?
- Is it grammatically correct? Is the semantics right?
- Is the writing style consistent?
- Has it been written in as brief a manner as possible? Is there any text, table, figure or graph that can be deleted or pruned?

Other
- Does the study add significant new information or evidence to current evidence? Does it put forth a significantly novel idea or describe new understanding of a concept?
where changes are carried out (page, paragraph, line and Table or figure number), it is a good practice to highlight the amended Tables and amended portions of the text in the revised manuscript.

The Irony

If we carefully look at the whole process of publishing a research article, which consists of planning and conducting the study, analyzing and interpreting the findings, writing and publishing the manuscript; we find that a formal peer review happens only towards the end of this long process. Now does it make any sense to have a quality-control and quality-assurance step at the end of the process? It is not uncommon to find reviewers conveying to the authors that they should have enrolled a few more participants, or used a better diagnostic test or enrolled a more well-defined population. The study is already completed and nothing can be done to modify these aspects at this pre-publication stage.

Therefore, the process of satisfying reviewers and editors should begin in right earnest truly from the stage of planning the study. We also know what the reviewers look at when they are requested to review a research article: they want the manuscript to employ valid logical arguments to explain the findings of an ethically and properly carried out study with new robust evidence in clear and easily understood language (Table 2). The first step is to have a formal review process at the departmental level, wherein you can get comments from your colleagues regarding your study plan. This will help you fine tune the study protocol and ensure that the study design is scientifically and ethically sound. It may be supplemented by an informal review from other experts in the field. The same process can be followed once the study report is ready. Even the draft manuscript should be shown to a few experts in the field, as well as to scientists not belonging to the specialty and to language experts. Feedback from them will help you get rid of flaws in science, logic and language. You can also use professional services for editing and reviewing. These multiple layers of review at different stages will minimize the loose ends in the manuscript.

When it is time to submit the manuscript to a Journal, spend some time in formulating the covering letter to the Editor. Not only should you select the most appropriate journal for your research paper; but you should also use the covering letter to convey to the Editor why the article is important for the journal and its readers. Include a gist of the article in the covering letter and state how it contributes new evidence, what impact it is likely to have and what controversies it might generate. A covering letter should entice even a busy editor to read the whole manuscript rather than take an unfavorable decision based on the article title and abstract. Once you have passed the editor’s table, the carefully crafted manuscript will help you get past the reviewers’ desk as well.

Conclusion

To get an article published, it has to satisfy the editors and reviewers. They are not your adversaries, but collaborators who help improve the quality of your manuscript. Papers with scientific merit are hardly ever rejected on technical grounds or for poor language. Here is the importance of performing the study in the right manner. If science is good, the reviewers and editors will help you get your research paper published. If, in addition, you take care of technical issues and express your thoughts logically; the path to publication will be much smoother.

References