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Williams, Hywel C. (2004) How to reply to referees' comments when submitting manuscripts for publication. Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, 51 (1). pp. 79-83. ISSN 0190-9622

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# How to reply to peer review comments when submitting papers for publication

HC Williams PhD

Manuscript to be considered as a "special article" or *e-blue* for JAAD

*Corresponding author:*
Prof. Hywel Williams
Centre of Evidence Based Dermatology
Queen's Medical Centre
Nottingham NG7 2UH

Tel: +44 115 924 9924 x43000
Fax: +44 115 970 9003
e-mail: hywel.williams@nottingham.ac.uk

Conflict of interest: None

**Abstract**

*Background*

The publication of articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals is a fairly complex and step-wise process that involves responding to referees' comments. Little guidance is available in the biomedical literature on how to deal with such comments

*Objective*

To provide guidance to novice writers on dealing with peer review comments in a way that maximises chance of subsequent acceptance

*Methods*

Literature review and review of the author's experience as a writer and referee

*Results*

Where possible the author should consider revising and resubmitting rather than sending their article elsewhere. A structured layout for responding to referees' comments is suggested that includes the three "golden rules" of (i) responding completely (ii) responding politely and (iii) responding with evidence.

*Conclusion*

Responding to referees' comments requires the writer to overcome any feelings of personal attack, and to instead concentrate on addressing referees' concerns in a courteous, objective and evidence-based way.

Word count 147

Key words: Referee comments, reviewer comments, response

## Introduction

Plenty of guidance is available on conducting good research[1,2], and websites of most scientific journals give clear and helpful instructions on what is suitable for submission and how to submit. Yet where does one obtain guidance on replying to referees' (peer reviewer) comments once the manuscript is returned? I could find little in the literature dealing with this important topic[3-7].

This article attempts to address this gap by providing some helpful tips on how to reply to referees' comments. In the absence of any systematic research to determine which strategies are "best" in terms of acceptance rates, the tips suggested below are based simply on my personal experience of publishing around 200 papers and of refereeing over 500 papers, as well as working as an editor for 3 dermatology journalsI have presented some aspects of the work previously in two workshops with groups of British Specialist Registrars in dermatology, and I am grateful to them for helping me to develop the learning themes.

I have deliberately not entered into any discussions on the *quality* of peer review[8] or the *value* of peer review in publication since it is still hotly debated if peer review really helps to discriminate between good and bad research or whether it simply improves the readability and quality of accepted papers[9]. Instead, I have decided to stick to providing what I hope is helpful and practical guidance within the system that already exists .

## That letter arrives from the journal…

After labouring for many months or years on your research project and having written many manuscript drafts in order to send off your final journal submission, a letter or e-mail from the journal arrives several weeks later indicating whether the journal editor is interested in your paper or not. At this stage, it is every author's hope that the paper is accepted with no changes, yet such an experience is incredibly rare – it has happened to me only twice, and these were both commissioned reviews. More commonly, one of the following scenarios ensues:

ACCEPT WITH MINOR REVISION

If you are lucky, the letter will ask for only minor revisions. In such circumstances, it is probably best to simply get on with these without invoking too much argument. If you send the revised paper back to the editor quickly, it is still likely to be fresh in his/her mind, and you will probably get a speedy acceptance.

MAJOR REVISIONS NEEDED

The commonest form of letter is one that lists 2 or 3 sets of referees' comments, some of which are quite major. In such circumstances, you will need to work hard at reading and replying to each referee in turn following the layout and three golden rules (Box 1) that I will develop later in this paper. Such a process can take days to complete, so do not underestimate the task. Only you can decide whether such an investment of time is worthwhile. My advice is always to revise and resubmit to the same journal if the comments are fair, even if responding to them takes a lot of time. Some authors go weak at the knees when requested to do a major revision, and instead simply send the paper

elsewhere. This is understandable, but the authors should still try and make improvements to the paper in light of the referees' comments. Authors should also be aware that in certain fields of research, their work is likely to end up with the same referee when they send their paper to another major specialty journal. It will not go down well with that referee if they see that the authors have completely ignored the referees' previous comments. So generally speaking, my advice is to put in the time needed to make a better paper based on the referees' comments, and resubmit along the lines suggested. If you do submit to another journal, you should consider showing the "new" journal the previous referees' comments and how you have improved the article in response to such comments – some journal editors feel positively about such honesty (Bernhard JD, personal written communication, November 2003).

## JOURNAL REQUESTS A COMPLETE REWRITE

Only you can decide if the effort of a complete rewrite is worth it. If it is clear that the referees and editor are interested in your paper and they are doing everything they can to make detailed and constructive suggestions to help you get the paper published, it might be a safer bet to follow their wishes of a complete rewrite. It might be difficult for the editor to then turn you down if you have done exactly what was asked of you. If on the other hand, the request for a complete rewrite is a cold one, ie without suggestions as to exactly what needs to be done and where, then it might be better to reflect on the other comments and submit elsewhere. Sometimes, referees may recommend splitting a paper if the paper is part of a large study that tries to cram in too many different results. Such a request from one of the referees may appear like a gift to the author – two for the price of

one. But a word of warning - if you are going to redraft the original paper into two related papers, there is no guarantee that both will be accepted. The best thing under such circumstances is to have a dialogue with your editor to test how receptive they would be to having the paper split into two.

UNSURE IF REJECT OR POSSIBLE RESUBMISSION?

The wording of some journal response letters can be difficult to interpret. For example, phrases such as "we cannot accept your paper in its current form, but if you do decide to resubmit, then we would only consider a substantial revision", may sound like a reject, yet in reality, it may indicate an opportunity to resubmit. If you are unsure on how to "read between the lines", ask an experienced colleague, or better still someone who works as a referee for that journal. Failing that, you could simply just write back to the editor to ask for clarification. Sometimes, a journal will ask you to resubmit your article in letter format rather than as an original paper. You then have to decide if the effort versus reward for resubmission elsewhere is worth it, or if you are content to accept the "bird in the hand" principle and resubmit your original paper as a letter.

THE OUTRIGHT REJECTION

Usually this type of letter is quite short, with very little in the way of allowing you an opportunity to resubmit. Outright rejection may be due to the manuscript being unsuitable for the journal or because of "lethal" methodological concerns raised by the referees that are non-salvageable eg by doing a crossover clinical trial on lentigo maligna with an intervention such as surgery that has a permanent effect on patient outcomes in the first

phase of the crossover study. Sometimes the editors, who are always pushed for publication space, simply did not find your article interesting, novel or important enough to warrant inclusion. You will just have to live with that and submit elsewhere.

Dealing with outright rejection of your precious sweat and toil may not be easy, especially if the journal has taken ages to get back to you. You have two main choices at this stage. If you feel that the referees' comments are grossly unfair or just plain wrong, you can write to the editor to appeal the decision and ask for new referees. The success of such appeals depend on how confident you are that their decision was "out of order" and whether the real decision for rejection was indeed those comments transferred to you. Appeals such as this are rarely successful – I have done it twice with the BMJ, and both have failed.

The other (better) option is to stop snivelling, pick yourself up and resubmit elsewhere. If you do this, it is important that you read and objectively assess the referees' comments from the journal that has turned down your paper. This is for two reasons (i) those comments may improve the article and (ii) as stated earlier, your paper may end up with the same referee even if you send it to another journal. If you are really convinced that your paper is earth shattering, then you should not automatically resubmit to a journal that might be easier to get your paper accepted into. Sometimes, it has been my experience that a paper that was rejected by a medium-ranking dermatology journal is subsequently accepted by a higher-ranking one – such is the unpredictability of peer review and journal editor preferences[9].

**The three golden rules of structuring your response letter**

RULE ONE: ANSWER COMPLETELY

It important that *all* of the referees' comments are responded to in sequence, however irritating or vague they may appear to you. Number them, and repeat them in your covering letter using the headings such as "Reviewer 1" then "Comment 1" followed by "Response". What you are doing here is making the editor's and referees' jobs easy for them – they will not have to search and cross reference lots of scripts in order to discover what you have done – it will all be there in one clean document.

Typing out or paraphrasing the referees comments as a means of itemising the points also achieves two other things (i) it forces you to listen to what the referees actually said, rather than what you though they might have said when you first read their comments and (ii) it helps you to understand how many separate points are being made by the referee. Quite often, you will just receive a paragraph with several comments mixed up together. In such a situation, you can split the paragraph into 2 or 3 separate comments (comment 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) and then answer them in turn. Even if some of the comments are just compliments, then repeat these in your cover letter followed by a phrase such as "we thank the referee for these comments".

RULE TWO: ANSWER POLITELY

Remember that nearly all referees have spent at least an hour of their personal/family time in refereeing your paper without being paid for it. If you (as a lead author) receive a huge list of comments, it usually means that the referee is trying very hard to help you improve the paper to get it accepted. Reject statements are usually short, and do not allow you an open door to resubmit.

It is quite all right to disagree with referees when replying, **but do it in a way that makes your referees feel valued.** Avoid pompous or arrogant remarks. Whilst it is only human nature to feel slightly offended when someone else dares to criticise your precious work, this must not come across in your reply. Your reply should be scientific and systematic. Get someone else to read your responses before sending them off.

Try to avoid opening phrases such as "we totally disagree" or "the referee obviously does not know this field". Instead try and identify some common ground and use phrases starting with words such as "We agree with the referee…..but…". A list of helpful phrases that I have developed over the years is given in Box 2 for guidance.

RULE THREE: ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

If you disagree with the referee's comments, don't just say, "we disagree" and then move on. Say *why* you disagree with a coherent argument, or better still, back it up with some facts supported by references that you can cite in your reply. Sometimes those extra

references are just to back the point you make in your covering letter, but occasionally you may add them to the revised article. Some kind referees go to the trouble of suggesting missed references or how you might reword important areas of your document. Providing the references or rewording makes sense to you, just go ahead and incorporate them. It is quite legitimate to use the referee's comments to add some extra text and data if their comments require it, although if this amounts to more than a page, you would be wise to suggest it as an option to the editor. Another option is to suggest that the extensive additions would be better placed in another subsequent article.

Sometimes, if there is no clear published data to strongly support your methodological approaches, you can discuss this with an expert in the field. If he/she agrees with your approach, then you can say so in your reply eg "Although other approaches have been used in the past, we have discussed this statistical methods with Prof Teufelsdröch who agrees that it was the appropriate analysis".

**Tips on dealing with other scenarios**

REFEREES WITH CONFLICTING VIEWPOINTS

At first, this scenario might appear very difficult to the novice, yet it should be viewed as a gift. You, the author, have the choice of which viewpoint you agree with the most (or better still, the one which is right!). Then it is simply a question of playing one referee off against the other in your reply. You can always appeal to the editor by asking him/her to make the final decision, but give them your preferred option with reasons.

THE REFEREE IS WRONG

Referees are not Gods, but human beings who make mistakes. Sometimes they do not read your paper properly, and instead go on at length about their hobbyhorse whereas in fact you have dealt with their concerns elsewhere in the paper. Try to resist the temptation of rubbing their nose in it with lofty sarcastic phrases such as “If the referee had bothered to read our paper, …”,. but instead say something like “We agree that this is an important point and we have already addressed it on page A, paragraph B, line C”.

Sometimes the referee is just plain wrong about something. If so, it is silly to agree with the referee, and you are entitled to a good argument. If you are confident that you are right, then simply argue back with facts that can be referenced - the editor can then adjudicate who has the best evidence on their side.

THE REFEREE IS JUST PLAIN RUDE

Anyone who has done clinical research will realise just how difficult it can be, and there is no place for rudeness from referees. I find it sad that senior academics can sometimes forget their humble beginnings when they referee other's work. Nearly all journals provide clear guidance to their referees to avoid remarks which they would find hurtful if applied to their own work, yet some ignore such advice and delight in rude or sarcastic comments, possibly as a result of envy or insecurity. In such circumstances, all you need to do is to complain to the editor and ask for another non-hostile review.

THE DREADED "REDUCE THE PAPER BY 30%" REQUEST

Such a request typically comes form the editor who is pushed for space in his/her journal. I have to confess that for me, this is the comment that I dread most of all because it is often accompanied by 3 referees' comments, the response to which usually involves making the article *longer* than the original submission. A general reduction in text by 30% basically requires a total rewrite (which is slow and painful). It is usually easier to make a brave decision to drop an entire section that adds little to the paper. Ask a colleague who is not involved in the paper to take out their editing knife and suggest non-essential areas that can go – even though the process of losing your precious words may seem very painful to you. Discussion sections are usually the best place to look for radical excisions of entire paragraphs. Background sections should be just one to two paragraphs long – just long enough to say why the study was done, rather than an

exhaustive review of all previous literature. Please do not skimp on the methods section unless you are referring to a technique which can be put on a website or referenced.

**Conclusion**

Referees are human beings. The secret of a successful resubmission is to make your referees feel valued without compromising your own standards. Make your referees' and editor's life easy by presenting them with a clear numbered and structured response letter. Provided you have made a good attempt at answering all of the referees' comments in a reasonable way by following the three golden rules, many referees and editors are too weak at the stage of resubmission to open another round of arguments and resubmission. In my experience, I spend up 90 minutes on the initial refereeing of a manuscript, but only around 20 minutes on a resubmission. But if you miss out some comments completely or your manuscript changes do not correspond with what you said you have done in your covering letter, this you will entice your referee to spend hours going through your paper with a fine toothcomb and a possible deserved rejection.

Like a good marriage, resubmitting your manuscript in light of your referees' comments is a process of give and take.

**Acknowledgement**
The author wishes to thank Dr. Jeffrey Bernhard for his constructive comments and for references 5 to 7.

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**Box 1: 3 golden rules of responding to referees' comments**

Rule 1: Answer completely

Rule 2: Answer politely

Rule 3: Answer with evidence

**Box 2: Some useful phrases to start your replies to critical comments**

We agree with the referee that ……, but

The referee is right to point out …., yet

In accordance with the referees' wishes, we have now changed this sentence to …

Whilst we agree with the referee that……..

It is true that …, but

We acknowledge that our paper might have been…., but

We too were disappointed by the low response rate…

We agree that this is an important area that requires further research…..

We support the referee's assertion that …., although

With all due respect to the reviewer, we felt that this point is not correct…