

Behind the Reviewer Replies: Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Peer review is a fundamental part of scientific publishing, ensuring the originality and quality of published work. After the peer review process, authors may receive a range of decisions, such as acceptance pending minor or major revisions, which typically require a formal response letter addressed to the reviewers and the editor. While this step can be challenging, it often brings valuable opportunities to improve the manuscript. This article aims to analyze the types of feedback authors may receive from reviewers and to offer strategies for crafting effective responses, ultimately increasing the chances of publication.

Keywords: peer review, research studies, response to reviewers, writing skills.

Detrás de las respuestas a revisores: recomendaciones

RESUMEN

La revisión por pares es una parte fundamental detrás de la publicación de artículos científicos para garantizar la originalidad y calidad de los trabajos publicados. Tras una revisión, los autores pueden recibir diversas respuestas, entre ellas la aceptación con revisiones menores o mayores, las cuales requieren una carta con una respuesta a los revisores y al editor. Si bien esto último puede representar un desafío, suele traer numerosas oportunidades de mejora de calidad del artículo. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las posibles respuestas por parte de los revisores y ofrecer estrategias para responder y así aumentar la posibilidad de publicación.

Palabras clave: revisión por pares, estudios de investigación, respuesta a revisores, habilidades de escritura.

INTRODUCTION

Peer review is the formal mechanism through which academic manuscripts are subjected to scrutiny by experts in the relevant field of knowledge¹. It is an essential part of the scientific publication process, ensuring the originality and quality of the work published by journals. When a manuscript is submitted, the editor conducts an initial

assessment and, if deemed appropriate, assigns at least two experts on the subject in review. Although the process may appear tedious, it is crucial for enhancing the quality of the work².

At the end of the review process, authors receive one of the following outcomes: acceptance without changes, acceptance with minor revisions, acceptance with major

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revisions, or a complete rejection. Although infrequent, the first two scenarios are the most favorable, as they require only minor modifications to be made promptly. In contrast, major revisions pose challenges when responding to reviewers.

As a point of reference, we estimate that reviewers accept 0.3% of manuscripts during the initial review stage, suggest minor revisions for 8.5%, and request major revisions for 20%. The most common response is outright rejection.

Such statistics would be even less favorable for Latin American authors due to the inequalities affecting the “Global South.” Among the most relevant factors are the lack of funding for research and education, language barriers, and the so-called “geographic bias”¹³. These and other factors create significant obstacles in the scientific publication process for non-English-speaking authors^{14,15}.

This article discusses the types of responses reviewers may provide and offers strategies to effectively respond to every type of decision, to increase the chances of publication.

Types of Decisions

Direct Rejection

Receiving a direct rejection can be difficult, so it is vital to learn to accept it and not take it personal⁴. We estimate that approximately 70% of articles are rejected by the first journal to which they are submitted³.

Manuscripts are most often rejected due to poorly organized or unclear presentation of ideas or methods, incorrect interpretation of results, unsuitable methodological choices for the stated objectives, and low scientific relevance of the work^{9,11}. Rejection may even stem from factors unrelated to the manuscript’s quality, such as a poor fit with the journal’s scope or overlap with similar publications.

When facing rejection, it is advisable to consider submitting the manuscript to another journal. Authors should review the editor’s comments and revise the article accordingly. This process should be carried out promptly to preserve the relevance of the data³.

Acceptance with Revisions

It is natural for authors to feel angry or frustrated when receiving an acceptance with revisions, as they have invested many hours in writing and developing their work. However, this type of response shows that the journal values the manuscript and sees its potential for publication after certain improvements are made.

Authors may receive feedback related to both the scientific-technical content of the manuscript and its writing and presentation. Regarding content, reviewers may suggest adding information or further details to an explanation, clarifying specific descriptions, or even

offering approval or confirmation of certain aspects. Regarding the writing, it is common to receive comments on sentence or paragraph restructuring, suggestions for word substitutions, and language correction recommendations¹².

Articles accepted with revisions may include two types of suggestions: major revisions, which involve substantial changes to the work, such as collecting additional data or making key adjustments to the statistical analysis, and minor revisions, focused on adjustments to the presentation of existing data or correcting sentence structure or language⁵. It is worth noting that approximately 90% of articles with suggested minor revisions are accepted after the second submission, and nearly 50% of those requiring major revisions are accepted following the requested adjustments³.

It is good practice to take some time after reading the reviewers’ comments to process the feedback. Then, the author should return to the manuscript and respond kindly and respectfully, expressing appreciation for the reviewers’ suggestions. A helpful strategy is the acronym CALM (Comprehend, Answer, List, Mindful): comprehend the reviewer’s points, answer each one, list the changes made, and be mindful by making the review process easier for the reviewer⁶. Figure 1 presents a diagram summarizing this method. It should be noted that, in general, editors and reviewers dedicate their time to examine manuscripts voluntarily (ad honorem). The suggestions look to improve the quality of the paper and ensure that it meets the journal’s standards. In addition, reviewers may identify errors that the authors overlooked, thus contributing to improving the manuscript⁷.

Responding to Reviewers: Response Letter

1. Start thanking them and explaining the process.

Begin the letter by thanking the reviewers for their time and effort on the manuscript, as well as for their valuable comments. It is also essential to explain how you will respond to any suggestions made. For example, mention that responses will be displayed as submitted and using either color, highlighting, bold, or italics. That will make the reviewer’s job easier, save them time, and demonstrate the author’s intention to be thorough.

2. Respond politely and constructively

It is good practice to begin each response by reaffirming the reviewer’s suggestion. That ensures that the reviewer sees that their comment has been understood and considered.

Respond politely and respectfully. Although it may be tempting to refute some reviewer comments, especially when you disagree, doing so can decrease the chances of your manuscript being accepted.

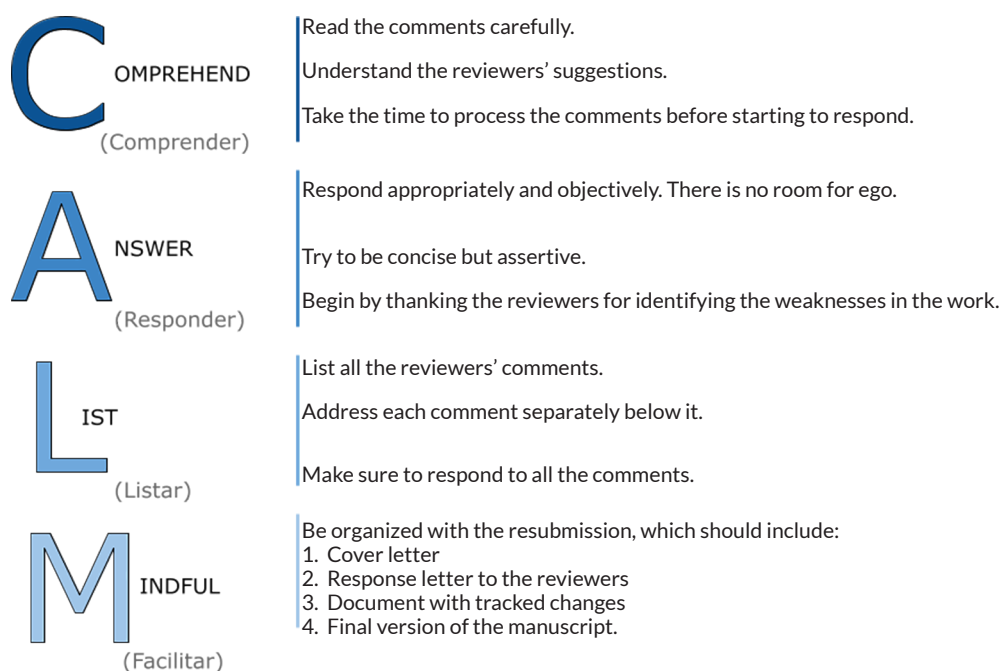


Figure 1. Summary of the CALM method for responding to reviewers.

We recommend to avoid a confrontational tone. Suggestions should be addressed constructively to increase the chances of the manuscript being accepted. It is essential to keep in mind that the goal of the peer review process is to obtain helpful feedback and make the necessary modifications considered appropriate to improve the quality of the work.⁵

One tool to ensure using the appropriate tone is to ask the other authors of the manuscript to review the response letter. Since the revisions should be carried out by all authors, allowing them to read the letter before submitting the response can help prevent misunderstandings caused by a confrontational tone.

3. Respond specifically and in detail

Each of the reviewers' suggestions should be addressed specifically and in detail in the response letter. All comments must be addressed, including those related to minor corrections such as grammatical errors. Ignoring comments can be detrimental and negatively affect the evaluation of the manuscript. The unlimited length of the response letter should be used to provide clear and thorough explanations⁴.

4. Identify which points to defend and which to forgo

Implementing the changes suggested by reviewers demonstrates openness to their input and is often the easiest path forward. This is especially useful when it comes to format-related changes, such as adding tables, removing sections, or adjusting sentence phrasing.

Although it is important to consider all suggestions, it is not always necessary to implement every single one. For instance, if the authors consider their analytical approach, writing style, or choice of words to be more suitable than the reviewer's recommendation, they should present their perspective clearly and professionally and may choose to decline the suggestion⁴.

It is essential to keep in mind that the author holds final responsibility for the completed work. Therefore, they must be completely satisfied with the article to defend it.

If changes were made, the author may quote them verbatim or specify where in the article (page, paragraph number, or line number) they were incorporated. If no changes were made, a professional justification must be provided to explain the decision taken² as clearly as possible. While it is possible to disagree with a reviewer's comment, it is essential to support one's position with well-founded arguments (Table 1)⁸.

Table 1. Examples of how to respond to reviewers' comments

| Avoid | In other words |
|---|--|
| The reviewer didn't understand what we wrote. | Ambiguous statements were revised to improve clarity. |
| The suggested change is not necessary... | We agree that..., therefore we added... |
| We simply don't have that data... We believe the section is adequately written... | It is true that..., nonetheless... The reviewer rightly pointed out that..., so we rewrote the section... |
| I will not accept the suggestion to change the word in another language... | We accepted the reviewer's suggestion and modified the title to use a single language. |
| What the reviewer states is completely wrong. | Thank you for the comment. Our perspective on that point is that... While the suggestion is interesting, the focus of that objective is... For that reason, we believe that... |

5. Express gratitude at the end of the letter

At the end of the response process, it is important to thank the reviewers once again for their suggestions and the time they have devoted. It is good practice to express gratitude on behalf of all the authors, who should take part in reviewing and responding to the reviewers' comments.

Annex 1 includes a response letter template that may be used by authors who require it.

CONCLUSION

The peer review process is essential to ensuring the quality of scientific articles, although it can be challenging for authors.

It is crucial to approach each decision with an open and constructive attitude, maintaining a respectful and professional tone, and remembering that editors and reviewers voluntarily dedicate their time to improving the quality of the manuscript while leaving the authors with the credit for the publication.

In short, although it may be demanding or tedious, responding to reviewers is a valuable process that significantly contributes to enhancing the quality and validity of the work.

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