

## Revising Papers for International Journals

We were happy to be invited to write this editorial, which sets out some of our observations and experiences when submitting and revising papers for international journals. We approached this editorial from two perspectives: First as authors who have submitted papers to numerous outlets and second as editorial board members who have spent considerable time reviewing other authors' work.

Although the process of writing and revising papers for national and international journals is similar, there are some differences.

A key difference is that the process of revising papers for international journals tends to be considerably longer than for national journals. In particular, papers are typically subject to multiple rounds of revision before they are (hopefully) accepted. In addition, requests for major changes – perhaps even involving further data collection efforts and additional analyses – are not uncommon. In fact, in our experience, the work that goes into drafting a revised paper is often equal to, if not more substantial than, the work carried out on the initial submission.

Submitting and revising papers for international journals is also a challenging process. The rejection rates tend to be very high, with top-ranked journals routinely reporting rejection rates above 90%. Therefore, our first observation is that it is important not to lose hope if your paper is rejected. It is easy to feel dejected and to take it personally when you face such a knock back, but ultimately every academic will face rejections in their career. Given the low acceptance rates, rejection is (in our experience, at least!) more common than acceptance. How you deal with rejection and learn from the experience will often determine whether you will have a successful career in the long-term (Ireland, 2009). And in the short-term, if you respond constructively to reviewers' comments, you are likely to boost your chances of acceptance at the next journal you submit to.

### So, how should we approach a revision?

First, any revise and resubmit (R&R) decision is a cause for celebration as it indicates that the editorial team see value in your paper and believe it has the fundamental elements of a publishable study. That alone is an excellent achievement that is worth celebrating. Initially, it is worth giving yourself a 'cooling off' period (Shaw, 2012). Often receiving feedback on our own work can evoke strong emotions and we are better able to embark on a revision once our emotions have subsided a little.

In the first few weeks, it is useful to read and re-read the reviewers' letter multiple times and try to understand what they are asking of you. Once you have a good grasp of the reviewers' main points, it is helpful to compile a list of the different areas of concern – integrating the comments made across the reviewers and

editor(s) (Agarwal et al., 2006). It could be, for example, that the editorial team have various concerns about your theoretical framing, or the operationalization of your measures, or your sampling.

One thing to pay attention to at this stage is the consistency of the editorial team's comments. Typically, there will be two or three sets of reviewers' comments and additional comments from the editor. In an ideal world, the reviewers will agree on the main strengths and weaknesses of the paper and share consensus on the direction that a revision should take. But, at times, there may be differences of opinion or inconsistent recommendations given. Pay particular attention to the editor's comments as this is the person who will make the final decision. Thus, if the editor makes a recommendation, then – unless you have a good reason not to – it is advisable to follow their suggestions. Similarly, if a majority of the reviewers agree or point you in the same direction – then it's worth heeding their advice. In the case of entirely inconsistent reviewer guidance, it is up to you, as the author, to decide which perspective is most appropriate and to defend this position in your letter to the editor.

Having created a list of relevant concerns in each area, it is worth prioritizing these concerns. Often reviewers will be quite clear about the points they consider most problematic. Indeed, they will often list 'major' and 'minor' concerns or will purposefully list their comments in order of importance. While every comment needs to be considered, these high priority comments should be given primary attention.

The editor will expect you to respond to their comments in a letter, in which you systematically set out how you have addressed each point raised. It is important to be responsive to each of the reviewers' concerns and to take action to address them, wherever possible (Shaw, 2012). This action is vital to acknowledge and show appreciation for the reviewers' work. In addition, the reviewers' letter provides a valuable opportunity to make a good first impression, as many reviewers start the review process by reading the response letter. However, you do not have to agree with every observation or suggestion made by the reviewers and editor, and you are entitled to defend your position if you disagree with any proposed amendment. After all, it is your paper.

At this point, it is worth pointing out that your focus during the revision process should be on improving the paper, rather than on writing the perfect reviewers' letter. As we can testify to ourselves, one key cause of rejection following a revision is that authors are overly responsive to reviewers' concerns and forget the overall narrative of the paper. Being overresponsive to individual reviewer comments can lead to a very disjointed paper that loses its overarching narrative. It is thus helpful to remember that the reviewers' letter is a secondary document that supports your submission, but your paper is the primary focus. After all editors will be accepting or rejecting your paper, while readers of the journal will never see your reviewers' letter, however perfect it is!

Finally, a note about language. It is important not to be defensive in your letter to the reviewers, and to remain respectful in the language you use. Sometimes that can be difficult, – especially when you feel that reviewers' have been disrespectful or inaccurate in their comments. But reviewers are volunteers, who have invested time and effort in reading your work and are often genuinely seeking to help you publish the best paper

you can. Indeed, it is true to say that many of our papers have been immeasurably improved by the wise and constructive input of reviewers/editors during the revision process.

## References

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