



How to Respond to Negative Peer Reviews

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The young junior faculty member desperately needs to break through what can look like a brick wall guarding every peer-reviewed journal, and it can be tough. When I was editing journals, we did everything by snail mail, but these days, everything is electronic. You get an email from the Associate Editor of the *XYZ Journal* saying that your article has been rejected because it “requires major modification. Reviewer comments are attached.” Now what?

The hardest thing for an author to do is read a negative review as an opportunity for improvement. But here’s the point: *if the reviewer was unhappy with your paper, she had a reason*. Unlike your worst fears, she is not out to wreck your career. Quite the contrary, she is trying both to uphold the quality standards of her journal and provide you with constructive feedback. And before you erupt into tales of how reviewers abuse the opportunity to read manuscripts and scoop the results, let me say that I rarely encountered that kind of behavior – in fact, I cannot remember a single example (although at age 76, my memory is not as sharp as it used to be).

Your job as a rejected author is not to flame out into invective and attack the reviewer’s intensions, her intellect, and her integrity. *Instead, you need to figure out exactly why the reviewer objected*. This is hard, because you wrote the paper in your mind-frame, and the reviewer did her work in hers. But most negative reviews contain enough clues to permit you to build a model of how the reviewer was thinking, which is the key to a successful revision. Once you understand why the reviewer might have made a particular comment, you are on the right path. The fix might be minor, such as adding an explanatory sentence. And if the reviewer found an error, you need to correct it and thank your lucky stars that it was found before publication. But more often than not, the flaw will be in putting speculative (or possibly erroneous) material ahead of demonstrably correct material. I have expounded elsewhere about how to use my Believability Index to get things in optimal order. (My paper, “How to Avoid the Reviewer’s Axe,” can be found at www.stephendsenturia.com/articles.)

Here’s another problem: there may be reviewer comments that are (a) wrong or (b) unimportant. If you want your Associate Editor to give your paper a pass when you resubmit it, *you need to respond to each and every reviewer criticism, including the wrong and unimportant ones, explaining exactly how you have treated it in your revision*. It can be tedious, but having sat on the editorial side of the bench for seventeen years, I can assert that it works. If you have done a superb revision job in response to those criticisms that had substance, your credibility for mowing down the criticisms that are wrong or unimportant increases. And if you do a good enough job of explaining your revision, emphasizing the positive improvements you have made and why you ignored the comments that were wrongly based, your editor may accept your paper without submitting it for re-review, saving what might be months in the publication process.

Remember, reviewers are volunteers. They provide a valuable service provided you have the emotional resources not to explode when confronted with rejection. Even when they are wrong, there is probably something in your manuscript that triggered their negative response, and you

should think about it, find it, and fix it. So stay calm, think clearly, and give the hard-working reviewer the benefit of a muted thank-you, even if your first instinct is anything but kind!

I am always happy to hear from readers with comments about the review process and with academic life in general. Send me a note at www.stephentsenturia.com/contact.

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