

Take it like a real writer: succeeding in peer-reviewed publishing

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It is with great regret that I must inform you that your submission to Ecology...will be accepted, pending revision. My regrets are motivated, of course, by your excessive profile in the literature. Nothing would have given more pleasure than to reject the paper, but the excellent reviews, and my own opinion of the work, make this impossible. (Broadie, 2001)

Not all letters from journal editors and comments from reviewers will feel like welcome news or induce a chuckle in the writer. Necessarily and often, editors and reviewers will send an author a list of comments and suggestions for changes to a submitted work before acceptance. This is precisely the purpose of peer review: to have our work evaluated by peers on its merit, relevance, and presentation and to learn from colleagues how we might deepen, broaden, focus, or polish our work.¹ Some say you have to have a thick skin to endure the academic publishing process; I say you have to be open.

I have learned this from other writers: when submitting work to publishers, consider that critiques have merit, go back to your work, and only if you have taken an exhaustive look and found the comments unwarranted may you reject the feedback. It's not a matter of dropping one's ego or respecting the authority of an editor, nor is it a matter of having failed or being judged. The question is simply about whether or not you want to become a better writer and the choice is wholly yours.

In evaluating coursework submitted over the years, I have found that students generally respond in one of three ways to my feedback on their papers: silent acceptance of the feedback and grade, disappointment or indignation (usually based on the misunderstanding that their efforts and intentions must equate to quality and that I've missed seeing that), or appreciation (sometimes even gratitude) at the chance to learn something. Sometimes the latter two happen in succession (with a bit of cooling off in between). These are understandable and quite human responses to receiving feedback on our work. Colleagues frequently respond in similar ways when they work together, even though the third response (appreciation) is the most fruitful, not only for the work in question, but also for the continuing working relationships on which much of our success depends.

Indeed, assuming we have something to learn (what is referred to as a "growth mindset") is the most useful response if we are to believe research on what contributes to achievement and success (Dweck, 2006). This contrasts starkly with the "fixed mindset," where we assume we are particularly gifted or special to begin with and will look stupid if we haven't delivered perfection. To solve the cognitive dissonance we experience as a result of this latter mindset, we might assume that a reviewer or editor is biased or mistaken—it's easier than admitting to a perspective that messes with some aspect of our cherished identity.

In short, those who take reviewer comments as opportunities to improve their work will be happier and can often put such feedback to good use. They won't have to 'drop the writer's ego' because there will be no ego involved; a critique of one's work is not a personal attack, it is an extra set of helpful eyes intended to make your work better. That said, some comments may be politically

motivated (e.g., a reviewer has a different view on policy and doesn't like what your findings might imply, or wants you to contextualize what you've written using a pet social theory), influenced by power struggles (e.g., a reviewer figures out who you are, despite the blind-review process, and doesn't like your work), or worded in a condescending tone. It's also possible that a reviewer is actually a nitpicking jerk.

However, even in the worst-case scenario, when a reviewer's intention is clouded by hidden agendas or personal neuroses, the lame can still be helped by the blind reviewer. Consider a list of 20 comments I received quite recently via a journal editor, which included a request to shorten the abstract, pointed remarks that my APA was not up to standard, and three statistical questions I did not yet know how to answer. I began at the top of the list and worked my way down. My method is to underline and number the changes needed (even if they are already numbered; there is sometimes more than one thing that needs to be addressed per comment), highlight the items I may need help with, and put a red dot on the item once I have made a change. In this particular case, I requested help from a colleague more versed in quantitative methods, wrote a much tighter and more articulate abstract, and printed the reference list to see where I had missed the boat on the referencing style.

As weird as it may sound, I appreciate the nitpicking jerks of the editing and academic world; they see things I frequently overlook. When I have made the most of their comments, I feel like a better writer.

Frankly, a reviewer is someone who has taken your work seriously enough to read it, has spent considerable time trying to understand your ideas, has suggested changes that will very likely improve your work, and has done so free of charge. Not to mention that this person is likely a professional in your field of expertise.

There are really only three pitfalls for the inexperienced author and researcher who receives the comment "accepted if revisions are made" from a journal editor. I'll list those pitfalls here and suggest their corresponding remedies:

1. Taking it personally or ignoring feedback

Be open. Read all the feedback carefully. If offended, step away and come back to it later. Usually it all looks a lot less dramatic the second time. Consider ALL reviewer comments, one by one. You may not make changes on every single point, but consider them all carefully.

Additional timesaving tip: While you edit your work and address the points, also create a document where you copy and paste the reviewers' comments and make a note under each point on how you addressed it (or why you didn't). This way your letter to the editor (or response to reviewers) will be nearly ready when you are ready to resubmit. Most journals will not only ask that you make changes, but also want you to report which changes you made.

2. Not asking for help

Sometimes our first response of disappointment or defensiveness is not really because we're upset about the reviewer or editor's evaluation of our work—we're actually feeling a little hopeless about the changes we're being required to make. For instance, what if a reviewer says something like, "the author has clearly not read about the most recent publications and thinking on this topic..." Panic begins to set in; what if it's true? What has been missed? Which readings are really important?

There is only one thing to do when we realize we need help: get help. For instance, if the reviewer comment is as above, we can use Google Scholar, type in keywords, and make use of our university library privileges to begin on readings we may have missed. We can also write the journal editor and ask him/her if (s)he would suggest readings we might have missed or whether the reviewer in question has recommended particular resources.

With a bit of help, peer-reviewed publishing can be a learning opportunity, not an insurmountable obstacle. As famous career coach Barbara Sher (1994) likes to say, "Isolation is the dream killer." We do not learn alone; we do not improve our academic skills by lifting ourselves off the ground by our own hair. When we're learning to get better at something, we have to do but two things: 1. get help, and 2. use that help to get to work on whatever it is we want to get better at.

3. Procrastination

When we've written an article and submitted it, we feel a sense of completion. So when we receive that same text back after several weeks or months, it's quite natural to be a bit taken aback. Some part of us has already taken leave of the piece and now it is back on our busy plate. This, along with taking it personally or not asking for help, can contribute to procrastination.

Consider this when you notice you're procrastinating: writing is rewriting. The work you submit to a peer-reviewed journal is a draft. It may feel polished and complete, but it's a piece of writing subject to rewriting. Fortunately, however, you don't have to do all the thinking about the redrafting on your own this time.

Those we consider the greatest writers frequently had fellow authors read and critique their work. Thus, the act of 'creation,' whether of a novel or an academic article, is always co-creation. We can get help along the way—and again, in the growth mindset, 'help' doesn't mean we've failed, but that we have something to learn and resources to help us do so.

If we want to see our work published in peer-reviewed journals we have to be open to the feedback reviewers and editors provide, ask for help when we need it, and rewrite and resubmit work we thought was already done. In other words, we have to take it like a real writer.

References

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¹Peer-reviewed or 'refereed' publishing refers to the process of submitting articles to academic journals and having one's work evaluated by colleagues in the field who are in the position to evaluate the merit of the work with regards to content, relevance, methods, and presentation. The peers that look at our work are called "reviewers." The practice is blind, which means that the reviewers do not know our names and we do not know reviewers' names. Journal editors facilitate the communication between authors and reviewers.