

Some Advice About Interacting with Journal Editors and Reviewers

SUBMISSION

Submitting your work to a scholarly journal provides an important “punctuation mark.” The experience can be very satisfying. There is a warm feeling of accomplishment, and simultaneously a feeling of liberation — you are free to get on with other things!

As you might expect, however, things aren’t over yet.

First, it is important to be professional in submitting your work. Read carefully the *Instructions to Authors* associated with the journal. Make sure that you follow the instructions to the letter. A common mistake is for authors to fail to format the submission according to the journal’s style. Each scholarly journal has its own standard, and not all journals follow MLA or APA guidelines. In particular, it is important to format the references and citations to conform to the journal’s practice.

Do not take the attitude that you’ll reformat the manuscript should your paper get accepted. Editors immediately see when a manuscript doesn’t follow the journal’s style or conform to the submission requirements. They will conclude that you are not “detail oriented.” You will already have a strike against you.

In formatting references, some journals want more detail than others, so maintain a master copy containing the most detailed information, and trim/edit a copy for submission.

CONFIRMATION

After submitting your manuscript, you should receive a confirmation note. This may be sent automatically (if the journal uses an automated submission system), or it may be sent by an editorial assistant, or even the Editor. If you don’t receive a confirmation within two or three days of submission, then contact the Editor. Never assume that your submission has been received unless a confirmation is issued.

Once you have received confirmation, place an entry in your date-book three months hence — reminding you that you submitted your manuscript three months ago. Nearly all journals aim to respond to authors within three months of submission. However, manuscripts are sometimes misplaced or reviewers prove to be especially tardy. After three months, it is entirely appropriate to write to the editor to inquire about the status of your submission.

Always maintain a separate folder or dossier containing all of the correspondence relating to your submission. This folder has the potential to become rather large, and it is helpful from the beginning to keep all of the materials together.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

For most journals, when a manuscript is received, the Editor examines the subject matter, and assigns the paper to one of the Associate Editors affiliated with the journal. At this point, the assigned Associate Editor becomes the *Action Editor* for that particular manuscript. In some cases, the Editor will assume the role of Action Editor for a given submission.

The Action Editor is typically involved in selecting and recruiting reviewers to review your manuscript. Once the reviewers have agreed to work on the manuscript, the Action Editor is responsible for encouraging the reviewers to complete the task.

Reviewing can be a time-consuming and thankless task. If a journal publishes 20 articles per year and has an 80% rejection rate, then typically 100 submissions are reviewed each year. Since most submissions are reviewed by two or three reviewers, that means that the 20 articles published in a given year represent the tip of an iceberg masking nearly 300 reviews. Reviewing is labor-intensive, and it is all done by volunteers.

After receiving reports from all of the Reviewers, the Action Editor will then read your manuscript, consider the Reviewers' comments, and form his or her own assessment. The Action Editor will write a letter. The *action letter* and the *reviewers' reports* will then be sent to you. The reviewers' reports will be labeled "Reviewer #1," "Reviewer #2," and so on.

THE REVIEWS

Reading through the Reviewers' comments, you'll typically find a range of responses. It is not uncommon for one reviewer to recommend publication while another reviewer recommends rejection. Reviewers may like or dislike the paper for different reasons. When criticisms are offered, the reviewers frequently choose different things to criticize.

When reading Reviewers' comments, it is common for authors to experience a rollercoaster of emotion. You will celebrate (rare) moments of praise, lament points of (legitimate) criticism, feel embarrassed by (now obvious) lapses, and feel angered by points of (unfair) attack.

After reading the Reviewers' comments, it is important to return to the Action Editor's letter. This letter is key.

First, the Action Editor's letter will communicate a formal decision regarding the manuscript. Most journals allow for four possible conclusions: either the manuscript will be *rejected*, *accepted outright*, *accepted pending revisions*, or the author(s) may be encouraged to *revise and resubmit*.

Each of the Reviewers will also have rendered a judgment, but formally, the Reviewers' comments are simply recommendations to the Action Editor. It is the Action Editor's decision that counts. Some journals have very specific policies, such as rejecting the paper if any one of the reviewers rejects it. However, there is wide variation in editorial policy, and it is possible that

an Action Editor may choose to accept a paper that is rejected by one or more reviewers, or may reject a paper that all of the reviewers praise.

Acceptance outright is not common. Depending on the prestige of the journal, many or most submissions will simply be rejected. That brings the whole process to an end; at this point, you will need to consider alternative journals.

For good research (which is what we always aim to do), the most common assessment is either *accepted pending revisions* or *revise and resubmit*.

As noted, the Action Editor will form his/her own opinion about the quality of your work. In addition, the Action Editor will form an opinion about the value of each of the reviewers' comments. Do not assume that the Action Editor agrees with each of the remarks made by the various reviewers. It is not uncommon for an Action Editor to think that some reviewer's remark is off-target, inconsequential, or wrong.

In drafting the action letter, the Action Editor must navigate through a delicate social situation. Recall that Action Editors rely on the volunteer labor of reviewers, so they are usually eager to maintain good working relationships. This can be hard to do if the Action Editor sometimes disagrees with a reviewer. Reviewers become unhappy if their advice or assessments are routinely ignored, or considered inconsequential or inappropriate. Suppose, for example, that Reviewer #2 has voiced a "serious" objection concerning *X*. However, it may be the case that none of the other reviewers mention *X*, and the Action Editor doesn't think *X* is a serious matter. The Action Editor must write a letter that communicates what is important — but at the same time doesn't offend Reviewer #2.

Attend carefully to the specific wording in the action letter. The Action Editor is likely to mention several major concerns raised by the reviewers. All of the concerns mentioned in the action letter must be addressed in any revised manuscript. However, if issue *X* is not mentioned, then it suggests that the Action Editor may disagree with Reviewer #2, and does not consider this an essential issue.

You will need to respond to every issue raised in the reviewers' reports. But you will need to pay particular attention to those issues mentioned in the action letter.

HOW TO CARRY OUT REVISIONS

The key to revising a manuscript lies not in your manuscript but in your *letter of response* to the Action Editor. When you resubmit your manuscript, you will need a covering letter. It is this *letter* that will get your revised paper accepted, not the *revised manuscript* itself.

First, no one wants to read your paper again. Worse yet, no one wants to have to read your revised paper while simultaneously referring to your original submission, while also looking at their original written critique.

Getting your paper accepted depends on making life easy for the Action Editor and the reviewers. Your covering letter should take the editor and reviewers step-by-step through the revisions, chronicling the specific changes you have made. The aim is to have the editor and reviewers read your letter and conclude that your revisions are acceptable, and that there is no need for them to read the entire manuscript again. (Each time someone reads your manuscript, there is the possibility that they will discover further things to criticize.)

Once again, focus on the letter of response, not the manuscript. Your letter of response will typically be more than twice the length of the action letter plus the reviews. If the action letter plus reviews is 6 pages, your letter of response will likely be at least 12 pages in length.

1. Begin your revision by copying the action letter and reviews into your draft letter of response. Put all of this material in italics so you can distinguish your writing from the action letter and reviewer reports.
2. Address your letter to the Action Editor:

Dear _____

Thank you for your letter of July 28th concerning my manuscript entitled _____. Enclosed you will find a revised manuscript whose changes follow closely the comments in the action letter, as well as the individual detailed comments in the reviewers' reports. The revisions are chronicled in detail below. For convenience, I have interspersed each comment with a description of the associated changes to the manuscript.

3. Respond to each of the concerns raised by the reviewers in turn. For example, write along the following lines:

Figure 2 (now Figure 3) has been fully revised in accordance with the comments of Reviewer #3. Specifically, the horizontal axis is now labeled "pitch distance (in semitones)" and the vertical axis includes a zero marking.

As suggested by Reviewer #1, I have provided more detail regarding the manuscript sources. Specifically, the following passage has been added on page 8, lines 38-40:

"The Vivaldi opus 8 concertos survive in four sources: the Turin autograph, the Dresden manuscript, the Amsterdam print, and the Manchester part-books. Although most of the discrepancies are minor, there are some major deviations, including through-composed sections of up to 24 measures, and other differences that have analytic repercussions."

4. Use page and line numbers to identify each change:

Formerly pg.7/lines 10-11/Now pg.7/lines 23-24

"Our results establish that ..." now reads:

“Our results are consistent with the view that ...”

5. Thank the reviewers for good ideas.

The results from Experiment #2 have been re-analysed using a MANOVA procedure as suggested by Reviewer #1. I am pleased to report that the main effect remains statistically significant. However, the interaction between intraversion and preference ratings is no longer significant. The discussion has been revised accordingly (formerly page 13; now page 14).

My thanks to Reviewer #1 for recommending the MANOVA analysis.

6. A good reviewer’s report will begin with a paragraph that summarizes your work. Sometimes a reviewer will misunderstand the purpose or nature of your work, and that will be evident in the summary or other points in the review. Since the reviewer is likely to be a respected scholar in the field, if the reviewer is confused, then it is very likely that many readers will find your work confusing. Take this as your cue to improve the paper. Say something like the following:

In light of the summary provided by Reviewer #2, it is apparent that the manuscript has led to confusion regarding the motivation for this study. Accordingly, I have revised the Introduction (pages 1-4) in order to better clarify the background and aims. Specifically, ...

7. You don’t need to necessarily chronicle each of the minor changes recommended by a reviewer. In your letter of response, you may say something like:

Regarding the “Minor Issues” section in the report by Reviewer #1, all of the recommended changes have been made.

Otherwise, chronicle each of the changes you make to the manuscript in your letter of response.

In general, use your letter of response as your guide for making revisions. Write the letter of response *first* in order to clarify precisely the changes that need to be made in order to satisfy the Action Editor and reviewers. *Don’t revise the paper and then later chronicle the changes in the letter.* The key to successful revision is the letter of response.

PICK YOUR FIGHTS

Inevitably, there will be criticisms made by one or more reviewers with which you disagree. In responding to the Action Editor, there is room to take issue with certain criticisms.

First, avoid beginning your letter by disputing some issue. Use the bulk of your letter to show that you take the reviewers' comments seriously, and have made a sincere effort to address all of the concerns. If you show that you have accepted and dealt with 90% of the criticisms, then the reviewers and Action Editor are more likely to give ground on the two or three items that you dispute.

Since the reviewer's reports often begin with "Major Concerns," you might want to delay disputing one of these concerns. Say something like the following:

Regarding Reviewer #2's Major Concern #1, I will address this later in the letter (page 8).

Second, pick your fights. You might disagree with a dozen points made by the reviewers. However, you shouldn't fight all of these at once. If you write several pages describing (in effect) how idiotic the reviewers' comments are, it will make you look defensive and intransigent. Choose two or three major points of disagreement, and address those. Explain why you consider the criticisms misplaced.

It is not uncommon for a manuscript to generate two or three rounds of correspondence with the Action Editor and reviewers. Having resolved certain issues, you may have additional opportunities in subsequent correspondence to take issue with other critical points. However, each letter should demonstrate your sincere efforts to modify your manuscript in accordance with the reviewers' concerns.

Third, avoid intemperate language. Sometimes a reviewer will make a criticism using harsh language, and you may find the criticism hurtful or even anger-provoking. In your response, always tone-down the language. No matter how inflammatory the criticism, use calm and measured words in your response. Avoid any hint of sarcasm. You will win-over critics by always behaving in a professional manner (even when others fail to do so).

For empirically-oriented research, a common point of disagreement relates to the request for more work. It is not uncommon for a reviewer to ask for another follow-up experiment or corpus study. If you agree that an additional study is warranted, and if you have the resources and inclination, by all means, endeavor to fulfill the request. However, it is often the case that requests for additional research are impractical or excessive.

Requests for addition research can usually be ignored if the request is not mentioned by the Action Editor in the action letter.

You may need to remind the reviewer(s) that no research is definitive. In analytic and empirical research there is no such thing as proof. Even if you do a follow-up study, there are surely other studies that could also follow. Your intention is not to bring "closure" to the subject, and you anticipate that other researchers will undoubtedly revisit the issue in the future.

Moreover, you may have difficulty complying with the request for additional work. You may no longer have access to an essential manuscript or piece of equipment. A collaborator may have moved and it is no longer practical to continue with the collaboration.

It may be helpful to mention that you agree with the sentiment that more research is warranted and that the proposed additional study is a good idea. Nevertheless, practical considerations make it difficult to comply with the request. You would encourage the Action Editor to consider whether the work as it stands makes a contribution to knowledge, even without an additional study.

THANKS

End your letter by thanking the Action Editor and Reviewers for their hard work. Say something like:

I would like to thank the Reviewers for their many helpful comments and suggestions. I feel that the revised manuscript has greatly benefitted from the Reviewers' input.

OPTING OUT

In light of an action letter, you might conclude that the requested modifications are simply too burdensome. Accordingly, you might decide to submit your manuscript to a different journal. Nevertheless, take advantage of the feedback to make revisions to your manuscript. Especially if an issue is raised by more than one reviewer, there is a strong likelihood that reviewers for another journal will raise similar concerns. There is no need to notify the first journal of your decision not to resubmit.

This scenario highlights the fact that there are actually *two* reasons for submitting a manuscript to a journal. Of course, the principal reason is that you hope that the journal will elect to publish your work. However, sometimes authors submit manuscripts to journals in the full knowledge that the journal will almost certainly reject the submission. The logic goes as follows:

For research that you know is controversial, it is helpful to be aware of the arguments opponents have against your work. You might consider sending a copy of your manuscript to someone you know is a severe critic of the sort of research you are doing. However, the likelihood is that the critic simply won't read or respond to your unsolicited manuscript.

When you submit your work to a journal, the journal makes a commitment to engaging reviewers who will be required to produce a written assessment and critique.

Suppose you have decided that journal *X* is the most likely journal to publish your controversial work. Before submitting it to journal *X*, you might choose instead to submit to journal *Y*. You know that journal *Y* will almost certainly reject the work. However, the reviewers' reports from journal *Y* may prove useful in revising your manuscript to address the concerns and arguments of your critics. By doing this, you will increase the likelihood that when you finally submit your work to journal *X*, you will have a better chance of acceptance.

CALLING IT QUILTS

Consistent negative reviews may be telling you something. Don't be afraid to abandon a project. Economists speak of "opportunity cost." When you choose to do something, there is a cost incurred by virtue of your inability to do something else instead. You will never invest so much in a project that it may not be worthwhile to move on to something else.

The most common mistake made by young scholars is to pursue excessively ambitious projects early in their careers. Grow your projects. Start with modest research ventures, and ramp up the ambition as you gain experience.

Every scholar writes more papers than get published. Who knows: with the passage of time, you may ultimately return to an abandoned early project, and know just how to polish the rough edges.

SUMMARY

In a nutshell, there are five essentials to bear in mind when revising a manuscript.

1. Pay attention to nuanced wording in the action letter.
2. Use the action letter and reviewer reports as the structure for writing a detailed letter of response.
3. The letter of response provides the action-plan for revising the manuscript. Write the letter first, and then revise your manuscript in accordance with the letter.
4. Pick your fights.
5. Your aim should be that your letter of response is sufficiently detailed that the Action Editor and Reviewers will be satisfied by your reported revisions, and will decide not to read the entire revised manuscript.

David Huron