

Struggling to reply to reviewers: Some advice for novice researchers

Orlanda Harvey^{1*}, Alison Taylor², Pramod R. Regmi³, Edwin van Teijlingen⁴

¹ Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, UK

² Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, UK

³ Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, UK; Visiting Fellow, Chitwan Medical College, Nepal; Visiting Fellow, Datta Meghe Institute of Medical Sciences, India

⁴ Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, UK; Visiting Professor, Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences; Visiting Professor, Nobel College, Nepal

Received:

4 February 2022

Revised:

28th April 2022

Accepted:

29th May 2022

*Corresponding author

harveyo@bournemouth.ac.uk

DOI: 10.3126/hprospect.

v21i2.42907

Abstract

Peer review is key in academic publishing, and rejection (or at least being asked to resubmit your paper to the journal), is a not uncommon occurrence. However, receiving such rejection and having to reply to it can be hard for the early-career researcher.

In this paper, we first highlight the role of the peer reviewer, followed by some of the less friendly reviewers' comments to our own submitted papers in four case studies. We conclude with several suggestions of ways to deal with less than positive reviews.

Keywords: *Academic publishing, peer review*

Tweetable abstract: Replying to tricky academic reviewers is may need biting your tongue.

Introduction

Peer review is the backbone of academic publishing. Typically, when you submit a manuscript to a scientific journal, the editors will have a quick look at your abstract, perhaps go as far as reading your discussion before deciding to reject or submit for peer review. The peer reviewers selected by the editor are other academic researchers or practitioners around the field of your manuscript who are nearly always doing the review voluntarily. Reviewers can be experts on the topic, the method or even the geographical area in which your study took place [1]. In many case the peer review process can be a positive experience, which allows researchers to develop their skills and improve our written work [1]. For example, good reviewers may notice potential imbalances, point out missing key references or highlight different potential perspectives, and thus help you to enhance the overall quality of the paper.

Most journal editors will be looking for at least two reviewers to get different perspectives on the submitted manuscript. Some editors may end up inviting as many as twenty academics to ensure at least two complete the review within a reasonable time frame. Another potential bias is around how people perceive their role as a reviewer, and that to ensure they are seen to have carried out a 'credible/valid' review then they should find fault with aspects of the paper, as nothing is perfect. This can be particularly challenging when they are asked to review a resubmission (but were not the original reviewer), as there is no guarantee that the resubmitted paper will be again reviewed by the original reviewers.

Many journals ask reviewers to complete a check list, see for example, the list from the international publisher Taylor and Francis (https://editorresources.taylorandfrancis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ARN0151_excellence-in-peer-review-checklist_final.pdf). When the reviewers submit their review to the editors they are often asked if they would suggest accepting, rejecting, or inviting the authors to resubmit the manuscript. They may even reject the manuscript but suggest reworking it and resubmitting to fit another type of article format for the same journal (often with a reduced word count).

What reviewers might say

Reviewers can say anything they like, and it often feels to the authors at the receiving end that they do. In academic circles a particularly poor, pedantic, rude, or biased reviewer is referred to as 'Reviewer 2' [2,3]. Since most, but not all, peer review is anonymous reviewers can hide behind the cloak of anonymity and write quite critical negative and potentially devastating reviews. They sometimes write things you know they would not dare to say if their name was attached to the review, and they seem to forget that constructive criticism should be balanced. Some of us have been accused of conducting poor science, redundant research, plagiarism, missing key references, doing the

wrong analysis, interpreting our own data inappropriately, drawing undefendable conclusions, etc.

Remember that the average peer reviewer is a busy academic who often does the peer reviewing in spare time over and above a busy university workload. So, they are probably already slightly grumpy even before they start reading your manuscript. They are looking to point out mistakes or inconsistencies, to show to themselves, the editor and you that they are critically appraising the manuscript. They will also have their own personal biases, opinions, and frame of reference.

Some reviewers use the reviewing process to promote their own work. This may show in their suggestions to cite specific papers or concept/theories (i.e., their own) in your resubmission.

The impact on the researcher

It does not feel great to receive a rejection or even resubmission with major corrections, however it could be argued that for those with several years of experience under their belt, it may eventually feel a little less personal. However, even for experienced researchers if the review is written in such a way that is unprofessional and comes across as a personal attack then it can be an unpleasant experience. Reviewers who write unconstructive reviews often take little or no responsibility for the emotional fallout. Yet there is evidence that 'un-productive evaluative feedback' can adversely impact people's self-esteem and self-efficacy [4,5] and may even increase so-called imposter syndrome amongst early career researchers [6].

Four case studies

The following four case studies highlight the kind of things reviewers have told us about four different papers submitted over the past few years. The first case study is from a paper study on anabolic steroids [7]. This paper was a little controversial and was rejected by several publications and went through a number of iterations before it was accepted. Here we highlight some of the most difficult comments from the challenging reviewers, and we show that perseverance was key.

Case study 1

In this example one of the reviewers asked for major revisions which were undertaken, however even after the revisions the paper was still rejected. Here two reviewers provided two very different types of feedback; the first reviewer was more positive and for those elements they thought needed amending they used very specific suggestions for what need doing in less than one page of feedback. The other reviewer gave six pages of mainly constructive review; however, this was undermined as there were also some overtly difficult comments to navigate. First, this reviewer held strong views on how the study had been conducted: *'the mixed methods design appears to be an inappropriate choice of study design'*. The reviewer should have rejected our paper based on this statement. Secondly, the same reviewer was not familiar with the type of research techniques used, as for example here:

"Snowball sampling is mentioned in the recruitment paragraph but without defining or describing it. Unless this technique can be regarded as common knowledge, which I doubt, the reader needs to be introduced to it."

Snowball sampling is likely to be familiar to qualitative researchers but not to quantitative researchers. Here it is not so much the comment that is the issue, but the choice of language used and the implied/perceived tone of the feedback; phrases such as 'which I doubt' have an emotionally loaded content, and here it comes across as if the reviewer is contemptuous of the research. Moreover, this tone pervaded the whole of the review, with several unnecessary phrase such as *'I assume'*; *'It may be my own shortcomings'* and: *'I ask the authors to specifically address each of my comments'*. The latter use of the superfluous word 'specifically', that took the review from being constructive into being negative and therefore had an emotional impact on the authors [4].

On submission to another journal, the authors received feedback from a reviewer who appeared biased. This reviewer felt the data presented were not balanced and felt that the authors should have been more critical of the views and opinions shared by participants. However, we, as authors felt we had critically addressed participants' views and had cited a number of other studies which supported the views of our participants. In the end we added the comment that participants felt their perspective was not being taken seriously and often dismissed.

In this second example, reviewer 1 was positive and focused on the rework of the methods section. However, reviewer 2 offered a very detailed and critical review, down to the point for asking the removal of parenthesis and the reordering of sentences. Here the suggested amendments were more down to the reviewer's preferred writing style rather than reflecting on the quality of the paper. This attention to no detail started with the suggestion that the title was *'too vague'*.

The reviewer's preference for detail, also showed in additional information asked for in the introduction, background and methods sections, including a questionnaire distribution table and its justification. Interestingly, a reviewer for a previous journal had deemed these irrelevant and had asked us to remove these. Providing additional information can be a challenge as this often means exceeding the permitted word count. In this instance we decided to include some of the additional information as supplemental material.

Reviewer 2's obsession for detail included a suggestion of further data analysis which was not possible due to the limitations of the data set. We carefully addressed each points raised and explained in the comments to the reviewer what we could not change. Although reviewer 2's critique was harsh and needed a lot of effort to address each point, that is not to say that much of the feedback was unwellcome and several suggestions did improve the paper, such as restructuring the methods as well as adding implications and suggestions for further use.

Case-study 2

This case study is from a recent paper on migrant workers and kidney disease in Nepal [8]. This quantitative paper reporting on a survey of nephrologists (kidney specialists) in Nepal was rejected by the first scientific journal it was sent to. Both reviewers stated that sample was very small. They were of course right that 38 participants would be small even for an undergraduate study. However, this paper was accepted by the second scientific journal it was submitted to. The reviewers (and the editor) of the Asian Journal of Medical Sciences noted the high proportion (74.5%) of all Nepal's nephrologists who participated in this national study. These reviewers were also right, although the absolute number of participants is low there are only 51 kidney experts in the whole country and reporting on three-quarters makes this a very worthwhile study [8].

Case-study 3

The third case study is from a more theoretical paper submitted to Health Promotion [9]. We would like to highlight that one reviewer seemed to confuse the notion of citing up-to-date evidence with providing relevant references. In this methodological paper we wrote the paragraph:

“Seventy-five years ago, Kershaw [10] used both ‘Public Health and Preventative Medicine’ in his textbook An Approach to Social Medicine. He wrote that at the time it referred to as “synonymous descriptions of the medical and social work carried out by the social group as a whole, whether the state or the local community, to promote the health of its members”

The anonymous reviewer made the following comment suggesting we have plagiarised someone else: *“But this is a rare book. You blindly copied from somewhere...”* There might be a generation gap here with younger reviewers not considering the possibility that authors may have consulted the original copy of a book or report. In this case one of the authors has the very book on their shelves.

Case-study 4

Our fourth case refers to one of the reviewers for the article ‘Commercialisation and commodification of breastfeeding: video diaries by first-time mothers’ [11]. This paper is based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of video-diaries recorded by breastfeeding women. One of the reviewers commented on our sample size, stating

“... even for a qualitative study, a sample size of 5 is rather small and causes difficulty with extrapolation to other mothers. Additionally, your pilot study only including one mother is not adequate to be considered a pilot study.”

Put in terms of the number of research participants this was a true observation, the sample size of this PhD study was small, but considering the number of hours of data for analysis it was not.

Replying to the reviewers

Taking all the above into consideration you need to rework your manuscript in such a way that it appeases the reviewers and, most importantly, the editor. When you receive a brutal/negative review put it aside for a day or two and come back to it later. On reflection some of the initially very negative sounding comments may make a bit more sense to you or are perhaps less negative than you thought on first reading.

In terms of responding to a reviewer, it is often useful to allow them ‘quick wins’ (that is an amendment that is visible, has immediate benefit and can be achieved quickly with minimal effort), and not to ‘sweat the small stuff’ (that is to worry about minor or less relevant points), so although the authors may not always agree with the reviewer, often it is easier to make the changes than to put up a well-defended argument, in the hope that when the comments are returned, the reviewer perceives the overall amendments in a more favourable light.

Common criticism received on qualitative papers from quantitative reviewers often involves having a different worldview or the reviewer simply not understanding or valuing your chosen method. You can politely disagree with the reviewer and try appeal to the editor by saying the reviewer does not ‘get’ the method.

In case study 3 the authors replied to the editor stating that the fourth author of this paper has a copy of the 1946 book and offered to send a photo of the relevant pages to the editor. In case study 4 the authors’ letter to the editor included the following explanation (or defence) which we had added to the resubmitted paper:

“The pilot resulted in a large quantity of rich data, (more than 11 hours), which were therefore included in the main study ... studies involving video diaries recruiting between three ... and 20 participants ... produce abundant data and this was confirmed in our pilot study. The purposive sample of five participants recorded 294 video entries lasting 43 hours, and 51 minutes providing an abundance of rich, thus further participants were not recruited...”

In the introduction we noted that peer review can also be a positive experience and enhance the quality of the paper. For example, reviewer 1 for this paper asked that we include an example of where particular reviewers’ comments have improved the paper, and therefore we would share that in the following advice the suggestion that authors provide point-by-point responses to comments came from reviewer 2. Thereby, exemplifying how both reviewers’ comments have enhanced the quality of the paper for the benefit of the reader.

Advice on dealing with peer reviewers’ comments

- Our first advice is: Don’t take a poor review of your paper as a poor review of you.
- Put the paper to one-side for a couple of days, to allow for the initial emotional reaction to subside.

- If you are finding it hard to separate negative comments from constructive critical ones speak to your fellow authors, supervisors, or a trusted mentor.
- Write a cover letter to the editor thanking the reviewers for their insightful comments and outline what changes the authors have made in reply to the reviewers in the resubmitted manuscript, and what you have not changed and why this is the case.
- Provide point-by-point responses to the comments, which can help the reviewer(s) and editor to see how well the comments have been addressed – using a table format can aid clarity.
- Try to give a positive reply to each of the reviewers' comments.
- If the reviewer is clearly mistaken on specific points, say so in the nicest kind of way, and tell the editor that you propose to make no changes in response to this particular issue. For example, a reviewer commented: 'Abstract: A structured abstract is preferred' to which we responded: "We have checked the guidance for the journal which requires 'an unstructured abstract of 200 words' therefore we have not changed the structure."
- Sometimes you can't address the issues raised by the reviewers. Use the positive parts of their review and incorporate them in your revisions and submit the improved manuscript to a different journal.

Final thoughts

We considered giving this paper the title 'Overcoming the Emotional Hijack: Confidently addressing Reviewer 2' but we do not want to give the reader the idea that all, or even many, reviewers are unreasonable. Often reading your manuscript with a fresh pair of eyes, they can ask great questions and offer useful comments and their reservations and misunderstandings can help you to rephrase and focus the paper better. As Watling and colleagues [4] reminded us: "often the peer review process improves our work so that we can resubmit and contribute more convincingly to the scholarly conversation." Many of our papers have benefitted from insightful reviewers' comments for example, a reviewer once pointed out that our manuscript of migrant health had missed out a key review by Simkhada and colleagues [12] on the very topic we were writing about. This was very true, we had indeed forgotten to include this key reference, which was even more embarrassing because we had written it ourselves!

Competing interest

Authors declare that they have no competing interests.

References

1. van Teijlingen, E., Thapa, D., Marahatta, S.B., Sapkota, J.L., Regmi, P.R., Sathian, B. (2022) Editors and Reviewers: Roles and Responsibilities, In: Wasti, SP, Simkhada, P., Hundley, V., van Teijlingen, E., Shrees, K. (Eds.) Academic Writing and Publishing in Health and Social Sciences. Kathmandu, Nepal: Social Science Baha & Himal Books; Page 32-37.
2. Peterson DAM (2020) Dear reviewer 2: Go f' yourself. Social Science Quarterly. 101(4): 1648-1652. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12824>
3. Watling, C., Ginsburg, S., Lingard, L. (2021) Don't be reviewer 2! Reflections on writing effective peer review comments. Perspectives on Medical Education.10(5): 299-303. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-021-00670-z>
4. Baron, R.A. (1988) Negative effects of destructive criticism: Impact on conflict, self-efficacy, and task performance. Journal of Applied Psychology.73(2): 199–207. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.73.2.199>
5. Thompson T (1997) Do we need to train teachers how to administer praise? Self-worth theory says we do. Learning and Instruction. 7(1): 49–63. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4752\(96\)80730-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4752(96)80730-4)
6. Gill P. (2020) Imposter syndrome – why is it so common among nurse researchers and is it really a problem? Nurse Researcher. 16;28(3):30-36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.2020.e1750>
7. Harvey O, Parrish M, van Teijlingen E, Trenoweth, S. (2021) Libido as a motivator for starting and restarting non-prescribed anabolic androgenic steroid use among men : a mixed-methods study androgenic steroid use among men: a mixed-methods study. Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy 0(0). 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2021.1882940>
8. Aryal, N., Sedhain, A., Regmi, P. R., KC, R. K., van Teijlingen, E. (2021) Risk of kidney health among returnee Nepali migrant workers: A survey of nephrologists. Asian Journal of Medical Sciences. 12(12): 126–132. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ajms.v12i12.39027>
9. van Teijlingen, K., Devkota, B., Douglas, F., Simkhada, P., van Teijlingen, E. (2021) Understanding health education, health promotion and public health, Journal of Health Promotion. 9(1):1-7.
10. Kershaw, J.D. (1946). An Approach to Social Medicine. London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox
11. Taylor, A.M., van Teijlingen, E., Alexander, J., Ryan, K. (2020) Commercialisation and commodification of breastfeeding: video diaries by first-time mothers, International Breastfeeding Journal. 15: 33 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13006-020-00264-1>
12. Simkhada, P.P., Regmi, P.R., van Teijlingen, E., Aryal, N. (2017) Identifying the gaps in Nepalese migrant workers' health & well-being: A review of literature, Journal of Travel Medicine 24(4): 1-9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/tax021>