Responding to Reviewers

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Rejections. Revisions. Resubmissions. So goes the cycle of academic writing. When you've poured your heart and soul into submitting a journal article or conference paper, it really sucks when the feedback you get is less than enthusiastic. Yet part of the research process is putting your work out there and seeing what the community thinks.

As we've discussed here on GradHacker before, failure [4] and criticism are just a part of grad school. So how do you get past the sting of criticism to productively move forward with your project? How do you respond to nameless feedback and fight for your work in a way that's professional and constructive?

First, you get mad. No, not in an angry email to the editor or a passive aggressive tweet. Vent in private to a few trusted friends, parents, or your dog. Again, make sure it's in private. Bemoan your poor luck and how reviewer #2 just didn't get it. **Give yourself time to sulk and deal with rejection [5]properly before you make any formal responses**. This will help you be in a better mindset when you go to make edits and allow you to think critically about your own work.

Next, give it some time before you come back to the revision. **Give the reviewer's comments a quick look to see the main sticking points, and then let them marinate in your head for a few days**. By the time I submit a paper I'm usually so sick of looking at the minute details that the last thing I want to do is make more changes. Even if I try, my head is so stuck in the weeds that I can't see the bigger picture. It's okay to disagree with the feedback you've received, but give your mind a chance to clear so you can give an intelligent response.

Now that you've taken a couple days, it's time to look at the feedback in depth. I usually copy the reviewer's comments into a separate word document and start making comments to myself, summarizing how I want to respond or what changes I need to make to satisfy the question. I take this opportunity to look at my work from an outside perspective. Oftentimes the reviewer is right in pointing out something I missed or asking for a clarification. Just because they gave critical feedback, it doesn't mean they're out to get you. If you find

yourself making slightly snarky comments, save the document under a separate name (something like response_DONTSUBMIT.docx) and give yourself a few more days to think about it. **It's okay to vent to yourself (it's all a part of the process), but you don't want to accidentally send an unpolished response down the road.**

Next, it's time to start your real response. Start a NEW document with the reviewers' comments and go through it again, outlining your responses. **Make sure to acknowledge the effort that the reviewer put in to reading your manuscript.** Even though you may not agree with all of the reviewers' comments, they are likely an expert in your area and just trying to offer another opinion, not personally tearing you down. Occasionally you may get a reviewer that is blatantly rude or unfair. If this is the case, escalate the issue to your advisor/co-authors. From there you can decide if it's worth making a formal request to the editor.

From your outline, **create a To-Do list of all the edits you need to make and get working.** Two heads are better than one so if you're stuck on how to correct something, ask your co-authors or mentor what they think. **As you make edits in your document make sure you denote the changes with a tag**. Something like, "[R1.7]" for reviewer 1 comment #7. Then write your response to the reviewer about how, why, and where you incorporated their suggestion. This helps the reviewer to easily see where you made changes, which helps the next review go more smoothly. Along these lines, resist the urge to reword every sentence in your manuscript. Doing so will only make it harder for the reviewer to see if their changes were incorporated.

Just because the reviewers have offered valuable feedback, it doesn't mean their word is absolute gold. **As the author of the paper, you have the right to stand up for your work if you don't agree with a comment**. Treat it as if you were having an intellectual discussion with the person. After all, you are. Make sure your responses are professional and respectful, even if you're disagreeing. **However, choose your battles wisely**. You don't want to change too much in the document (making it difficult to see how you addressed comments), but you also don't want to fight the reviewer over every little thing. At the end of the day everyone just wants to make sure their opinion was valued. Decide how much you really care about that request to insert a comma, and choose to take a stand on other things.

Finally, proof-read your response page and edits multiple times. **Dissect it line by line to make sure everything is polished and cohesive.** It may seem like a lot of work, but when you're not interacting in person the only impression the reviewers have of you is your writing. The impact of your work will be lost upon the reviewer if they're frustrated from sorting through a sloppy response. Send the responses and edits to your co-authors for a final check and then submit the responses. Treat yourself to a nice dinner out for successfully responding to review!

Receiving criticism of something you've worked extremely hard on can be harsh, but that doesn't mean you can't make something good out of it. Allow yourself the time to vent, craft a professional and intelligent response, and enjoy taking part in one of the most time-honored traditions in academia – peer review.

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