3 top tips for responding to reviewer comments on your manuscript

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本文原地址：https://www.iikx.com/news/article/3393.html

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Peer review has a vital role to play in research and publishing and a key step in that process is the revision of your paper. However, knowing how to respond to reviewers' comments isn't always easy - get it right and you could see your paper published, get it wrong and it could mean rejection. Sowhat can you do to increase your chances of success?

There's plenty of room for improvement, says Imre P á zsit, Executive Editor of theAnnals of Nuclear Energy and a Professor at Chalmers University of Technology in G ö teborg, Sweden.

"Originally I thought the mistakes in authors' responses were because of a lack of information on the journal website, or in the letter asking them to revise, but I think it's actually more than that," explains Professor P á zsit. "When early career researchers start publishing, they do so under theguidance of more senior researchers, who show them how to write a paper. Except this part – responding to reviewers' comments – often gets left out."

He thinks this aspect of the process needs to be systematically included in training for authors, like in our recent Publishing Connect webinar "Howreviewers look at your paper".

Professor P á zsit says: "It's difficult to systematize manuscript writing in general, a bit like trying to explain how to compose music, but there should be training. Responding to reviews is a point missed by most people who provide professional training. I think there are a few main things that couldmake the work of editors and reviewers as effective as possible."

You can disagree, as long as you explain

As an author, it can be difficult to read reviewers' suggestions – after all, you have probably poured blood, sweat and tears into the manuscript. You might even have a knee-jerk reaction to defend your article.

According to Professor P á zsit, disagreement is fine – in fact, it is actually part of the process – but it's important you can back it up. "The author may not agree with a comment – this is the essence of the scientific debate, a natural part of the business."

Explaining why you disagree will help the reviewer and editor understand your point of view and ultimately

help them make an informed decision about your paper. As Elsevier Executive Publisher Dr. Jaap van Harten advises, "don't fall into the trap of writing to the editor to say that the reviewer is crazy, or incompetent. Make it a factual response. You should have a complete, solid and polite rebuttal to the editor. Write in such a manner that your responsecan be forwarded to the reviewer – editors love copy pasting."

Spell it out

"The main mistake I see in authors' responses to reviewers' comments is in what I call the 'ergonomy' of the information – how well it's described to the editors and reviewers," says Professor P á zsit. "The editors and reviewers don't have time to check the new draft line by line and find theauthor's changes."

According to Dr. van Harten, the simplest way to ensure your responses are informative is to "copy paste each reviewer comment, and type your response below it. If you do so, you should be very specific. So if the reviewer says 'the discussion section is not clear', it's not enough to say 'we changedthe discussion section'. What you should say is 'we changed the discussion section on page 24, lines 7-23'. That makes it clear to the editor what you have changed, and when it goes back to the reviewer, the reviewer sees it immediately and you create a win-win situation".

Don't forget to make the changes

One of the biggest mistakes made by authors is to respond to all the comments, but forget to actually update the paper.

Don't be that person: one way to make sure you remember is to always include line numbers in your changes. That way, you actually have to make the change first before including the line numbers in your response.

What are your top tips for responding to reviewers' comments? Tell us in the comments below!

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