

Tits and tots of revising a manuscript

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"I have written, re-written.... often several times.... every word I have ever published, my pencils outlast their erasers"

-Vladimir Nabokov

This should be the spirit of every genuine author and one should take revision as a learning opportunity, not as criticism of their hard work. Revising a manuscript is an important step in the process of publication, especially the research publications and it is intended to improve the quality of the paper and its suitability for publication. Of the published papers, almost all the manuscripts undergo revision and re-revisions before the final draft.

Manuscripts are sent to authors for revision with comments of the reviewers made for clarifications, explanations and discussing results in a rational manner, not trying to make your conclusions look like the discovery or invention of a lifetime. As a reviewer, without being acknowledged one puts an extensive effort to critically evaluate the paper and give suggestions to improve the presented material. Hence, authors must put all efforts and time to clearly answer all the queries raised by them.^[1] The ultimate product should appear clear in all aspects of

planning and execution so that the reader is able to comprehend as to what to expect and apply, and the results should enable him to make his own choices. Though the process of revision takes time and delays the publication, but responding to all the issues is bound to substantially improve the manuscript before publication. In support of this is an interesting study conducted by a medical journal, which asked a group of 100 readers (equally divided into medical students, recent medical graduates, general practitioners and specialists) to score three versions of articles: the original submitted manuscript, the manuscript that was revised after reviewer and editor comments and the final published article. Result of this study indicated that readers found a beneficial influence of reviewers' comments in improving the quality of manuscripts submitted for publication.^[2]

This editorial aims to delineate some useful tips for revising the manuscript so as to coax and convince the authors to undertake this process more seriously and efficiently, which most of us consider as an "arduous journey."

TYPES OF REVISIONS

In all peer-reviewed journals, submitted manuscript is reviewed by usually two or three reviewers who are experts in the given subject. The editorial team compiles the comments of the reviewers' depending on the degree and quantum of revisions asked for and categorizes the manuscript as provisionally accepted or rejected. Rejection statements are usually short and do not give a chance for resubmission.

Reviewers' comments are classified as either major (mandatory), minor (should ideally be done) or optional (may be done).

Most reviewers while suggesting major changes provide their comments in a structured format which

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includes remarks on all aspects of manuscript, i.e. from “title” to the “references.” Suggested revisions can be minor or major revisions.^[3,4]

Minor revisions

Reviewers have provisionally found the manuscript suitable for publication and have asked for few modifications before publication. These changes are more likely to be in the nature of seeking some additional information, deleting non-essential material or some changes in style and format of the manuscript and attention to language. Additional information usually required may relate to the studied population or inclusion/exclusion criteria, controls or extended information on some laboratory procedure(s) and statistical methodology etc.

Major revisions

These revisions require a more fundamental re-organization of the paper. Sometimes this may necessitate only moving parts of the text around, like results and discussion may be intermingled, overlapping or repeat of the same. Most of the times, however, these include serious issues, which refer to lacunae in the study design and relationship between hypothesis, methodology and conclusions. Many times flawed statistical analysis and validity of data interpretation is pointed out and justification for arriving at the conclusions and recommendations is asked for. Overall the author is asked to almost re-analyze and re-write the whole manuscript. Such type of revisions requires clarity of thought, fair judgment, time and serious effort by the author. However one should never get disappointed because appropriate modifications and justifications make the submission more likely to be accepted.

Many times, there is a discrepancy between the figures pertaining to the duration of study, recruitment of patients and follow-up given in material and methods and results. This does not reflect very well on the care taken by the authors in preparing the manuscript. Tables in the text may also reflect the same thing and the error becomes more glaring in comparison when the figures are also included in the text. In addition to the minor mistakes in writing references in the bibliography, the major shortcoming can be citing a wrong reference in the text or citing a reference, which is totally unrelated to the present study. This definitely is a serious lapse, which should be avoided and if pointed out should be attended to with full care.

TIPS FOR REVISING MANUSCRIPTS

Three golden rules

While revising manuscripts remember these golden rules:^[5]

- Answer completely
- Answer politely
- Answer with evidence.

Answer completely

Needless to repeat that it is the responsibility of the author(s) to address all the minor or major queries raised by reviewers while preparing the revised manuscript. Prioritize reviewers comments,^[2] as some of the comments are merely suggestions to improve the content of the manuscript. In such a case, reviewers leave this to the intelligent discretion of the author. But for more in depth comments a very comprehensive response is needed, any attempt to provide less than what is asked for will have an adverse outcome.

Enumerate all the comments like “Reviewer 1” and then “Comment 1” followed by the “Response.” This should also be clearly mentioned in the cover letter to the editor while submitting the revised manuscript. The advantage of it is to avoid confusion for the editor and reviewers while they re-review the revised document. So they do not have to make an effort to look for where the changes are made in the revised manuscript and it does leave a good impression about the seriousness of your efforts. Type out or re-write and re-read all the comments while preparing for the revision. This will help the authors to understand clearly what the reviewer has actually questioned hence that no point of discussion is left unanswered or unexplained.^[5,6]

Answer politely

It seems relatively obvious that while preparing the revision, one should not criticize or enter into an argument with reviewer. Every reviewer may have his/her own style of language giving comments and criticism. How so ever harsh the comments may appear, always remember that the reviewer is trying very hard to help you in improving the manuscript and achieve its acceptance.

Think reviewers as “collaborators” not adversaries^[1] because they are evaluating the document not the author. Take help of your experienced colleagues and co-authors to request them to read the replies before they are uploaded with revised manuscript. Even

if the author does not agree to any of the reviewer's statement, the reply of this disagreement should be very polite and supported by evidence so that the editors and reviewers do not feel hurt.^[5]

Answer with evidence

This is particularly true in situations of disagreement with a comment. Do not just say that "we disagree" but provide a coherent argument supported by texts and references clearly stating "why you disagree."^[5] One can take the help of another colleague or expert in such a scenario.

Reply in adequate time

Though time given for resubmission is generally the same for both minor and major revisions, in case of minor revisions, you should attempt to re-submit suitably modified and corrected version as quickly as possible. This is because when a re-submission is quick, it is likely that the particular paper is fresh in the minds of the editor and reviewers and probably ends with speedy acceptance. On the other hand, a long delay in re-submission gives the impression as if the paper is not of much importance to the author or there is some problem in the manuscript. Such delayed submissions reduce enthusiasm on the part of editors and reviewers and the consequences are adverse.

In case of major revisions, the author should utilize this permitted time in understanding the comments and giving point to point clarifications. The response should again follow the "golden rules."^[5]

Preparing the cover letter

Cover letter should reflect all the hard work put in by the authors. To prepare the cover letter, the author should first re-state all the queries raised by the reviewers. Reply to each comment should be given in detail and in a language, which is simple to understand.^[1] Such letters about revision convey a sense of attention to detail and completeness and also make it easy for the reviewers and editors to assess the adequacy of the revision.

Preparing the revised manuscript

Revised manuscript is annotated version of the initially submitted manuscript, in which all the changes are highlighted by using "track-changes" in the Microsoft word software. These highlighted changes are followed by enumeration of the reviewer's comment, which is the source of that alteration.^[6] Some journals require the authors to upload the final revised manuscript

without annotations, along with the cover letter and modified annotated version of the manuscript.

Dealing with other scenarios

Contact the editor in view of any conflict

Authors are often reluctant to talk to the journal editors, but they should feel free to ask for advice of the editor in some conflicting scenarios like if the authors are unable to understand any comment or if they feel that the reviewer has misunderstood some point or the reviewer is being too hostile or the two reviewers have divergent comments.

Re-submitting in another journal

Decision to re-submit the article in another journal is very difficult especially if the manuscript is neither accepted nor rejected and is sent back with lots of comments, which is almost like re-writing of the whole manuscript. At times, the journal has asked the author to re-submit the article in letter format rather than the original manuscript. One should then decide between efforts of revision versus rewards of re-submission of the full article in another journal.

However, if an author chooses to re-submit the manuscript to another journal, one should incorporate all the genuine changes in the document, which have been suggested by the reviewer(s). This is because of two main reasons, firstly the suggestions made by the experts are valuable and an important means for improving the manuscript, which increases the chances of acceptance even in a new journal. Secondly, there is a possibility that the second journal may assign the review of the manuscript to the same reviewer/s who had reviewed the document earlier.

Recommended to shorten the manuscript

One of the more common recommendations from the editorial board is to shorten the manuscript because of limited space, which can be allotted even to an interesting material. This may be in the form of removal of a specific part of the text or more commonly to restrict manuscript number of words or pages. In the former situation, it is straightforward removal of specific text, but it is difficult in the latter situation where a substantial amount of text is to be removed. The author should review the manuscript carefully and delete the information which is more likely to be already known to the readers. The sections of paper, which can be shortened are background, introduction and discussion part. One may take help of an experienced colleague to assign priority to various

paragraphs with the goal of determining whether any paragraph can be substantially shortened or even removed.

Review of recent literature before re-submission

There is a possibility that a good article has appeared during the period between previous submission and the resubmission, which should be referred to and included in the revised manuscript. Authors should always look for recent articles related to their work before submitting the revised document. May be some of the new articles provide good insight for the subject, which can be added as references. This enhances the status of the manuscript and the cited study may even better support the hypothesis given in the original document.

It is unavoidable that you will quote from an already published article or a book rather profusely. Please provide reference to all the statements and the authors(s) must try to rewrite the statement in their own language. All the journals these days routinely check for extensive verbatim quoting from the published material with one of the many available software programs. Take care to stay away from plagiarism to avoid adverse comments. Language is a problem in many situations. What you want to say may not be conveyed by the sentence, which you have written. This could be the reason for comments from the reviewers. In the revised manuscript, read and re-read and make sure you and all co-authors feel that the language is easily understood and conveys clearly what you want to say. When the suggestion is to present the material in the form of a letter to the editor,

this should be interpreted as that the material is good and interesting, but the presentation can be very brief and methods and discussion can be cut down, which will also bring down the number of references. When asked to be brief, this would indicate that there has been repetition of introduction and discussion or that some not very relevant or directly related statements have been incorporated.

Though there are many tips and tricks for successfully revising the manuscript, utmost importance is perseverance, acceptance of criticism, attention to detail and good organizational skills of an author. These characteristics allow one to successfully manage any challenge, then what's revising one's own work.

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