



# Responding to reviewers' comments: tips on handling challenging comments

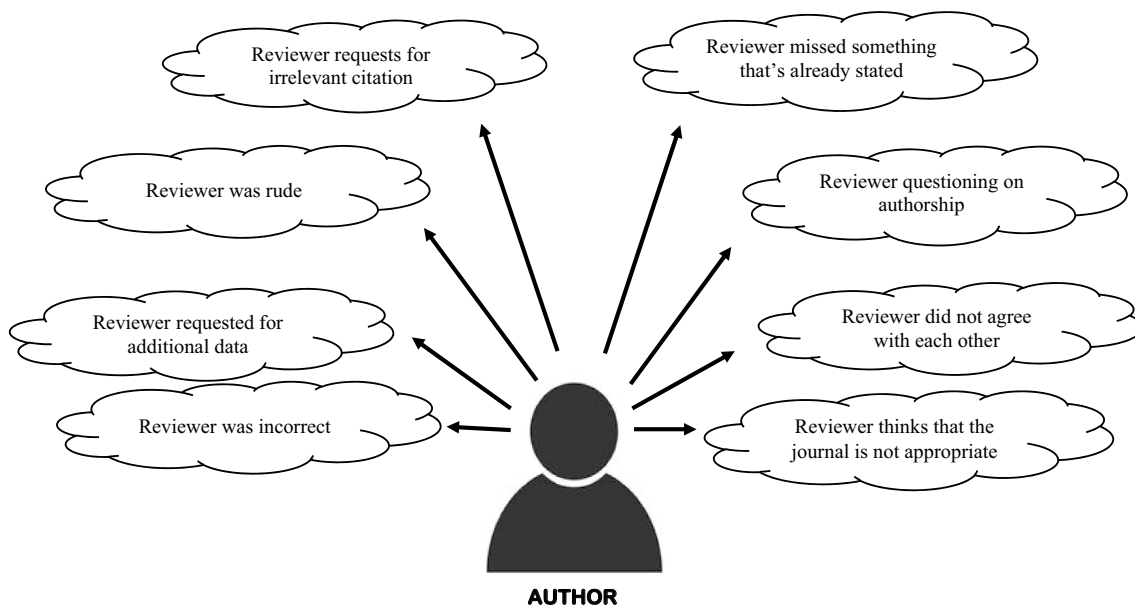
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## Abstract

The goal of every author is to have their research work published. In the process of publishing a peer-reviewed article, authors are often required to revise their original manuscript based on the comments from the reviewers. Although some of these comments are straightforward and concise, others are conflicting and unclear and, as such, authors may find it challenging to plan and carry out the revision as well as compose the accompanying response letter. In this article I outline eight challenges in handling reviewers' comments that may be useful for novice authors. In general, authors will always benefit from adopting a positive attitude towards reviewers' comments and make the effort to improve their manuscript.

## Graphical abstract



**Keywords** Peer review process · Challenges · Reviewers' comments · Authors' responses · Tactfulness

## Introduction

It is with great interest that I address the recent article [1] published in *ChemTexts* by the Editor-in-Chief. Although various methods have been proposed to provide a 'helping hand' to young researchers who are trying to publish the 'fruits of their labour' [2, 3], some still shy away from

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attempting to publish. A multitude of factors may lead to the failure in publishing their scientific paper. Here, I would like to reflect on the theme of the above-mentioned article and focus on one aspect of that article, namely how to respond to reviewers' comments, especially those deemed challenging.

Before I delve into the challenges that confront authors when responding to a reviewer's comments, it is helpful to understand the peer review process (Fig. 1). Basically, the peer review process can be considered to be a third-party 'quality control' step that contributes towards the production of sound, correct and unbiased scientific articles. Once the manuscript is submitted, the journal editor will initially assess the manuscript to determine whether or not the peer review process should proceed. Based on this initial assessment, the editor decides (1) that peer review is not required and rejects the manuscript (also known as desk-rejection) or suggests that the manuscript be transferred to a more suitable 'home' (i.e. submitted to a more suitable journal), or (2) to initiate the peer review process by selecting and inviting peer reviewers to assess the manuscript. Manuscripts undergoing the peer review process prior to publication are usually subjected to either an open review, a single-blind review or a double-blind review. In an open review, the identity of both authors and the peer reviewers is known; in single-blind review, the identity of the reviewers is concealed while that of the authors is revealed to the reviewer; and in double-blind review, the identities of both the reviewers and author(s) are concealed [4]. Upon receiving comments from the reviewers, the editor will then make a decision on

the manuscript, and this decision will be communicated to the authors. Generally, there are four main types of decisions: (1) accept as is; (2) minor revision required; (3) major revision required; and (4) rejection. Authors are required to revise their manuscript based on the reviewers' comments and provide a letter detailing a point-by-point response to each reviewer's comments. In most cases the response is returned to the reviewers for verification that their concerns have been appropriately addressed, before the editor makes the final decision. On occasion, an editorial team consisting of a group of prominent experts will support and act on behalf of the editor. Overall, authors need to consider both the reviewer's and journal editor's roles when preparing the response to the reviewer's comments.

The peer review process is constantly curated to ensure only scientifically robust articles are published. Consequently, authors are often required to produce a revised version of their manuscripts based on the comments from the reviewers. Although some of these comments are straightforward and concise, others are conflicting and unclear and, as such, authors may find it challenging to plan and carry out the revision as well as compose the accompanying response letter. Challenges in responding to reviewers' comments may arise due to a conflict between the authors' interpretation of the comments and the reviewers' intention when making these comments. Conflicts also may arise among reviewers when one reviewer makes a comment that appears to be the opposite of that made by another reviewer. Resolving the first situation is relatively manageable, but resolving the

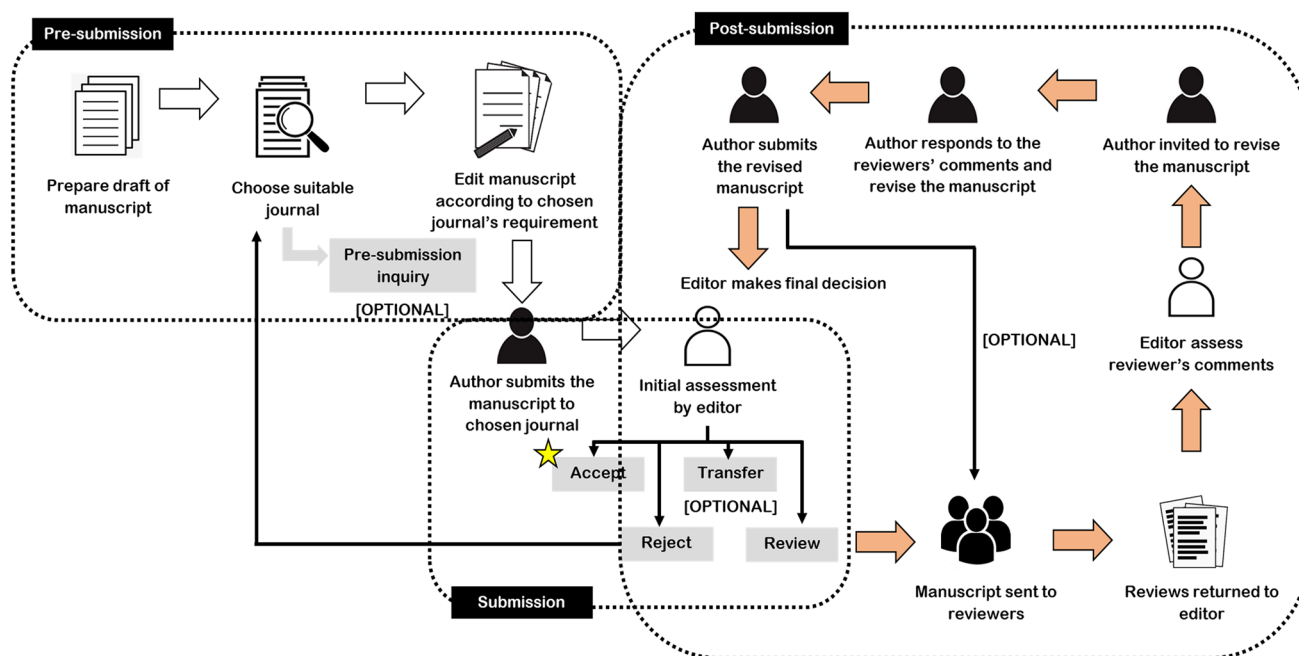


Fig. 1 The peer review process

latter situation may demand complex resolution qualities. There is one quality that is of utmost importance in handling challenging reviewers' comments, and that is tactfulness. The aim of this article is to highlight various challenging reviewers' comments that were identified through a literature review [4–17] and based on the author's personal experience, as well as to provide tips to handle such comments.

## The challenges

### Challenge #1: reviewer was incorrect

Reviewers are not always right, but that does not weaken their credibility. The reviewers might misinterpret, misjudge or misunderstand the content of the manuscript. Incorrect comments may imply that the manuscript suffers from a lack of clarity [5]. If the reviewer, who is an expert in the field, misunderstood the information, there is the possibility that other readers of the journal may not understand it either [6]. In this case, the authors should revisit the relevant segment of the manuscript to improve clarity in order to limit potential misunderstandings by the reader. Then, the details of such revisions should also be included in the response to the reviewer in a respectful and objective manner. Providing relevant supporting evidence makes the response appear objective and well-founded [7].

#### Example

**Reviewer's comment:** *I do not think that XYZ is novel. The same finding was previously reported by ABC et al., 2020.*

**Author's response:** *We thank the reviewer for raising this point. However, it appears that there is a misunderstanding. We realize now that our description was unclear for some important aspects of XYZ. While ABC et al., 2020 reported on a tool for doing XYZ in specific cases, we have generalized the tool for all cases. We have revised the text and hope that it is now clearer. Please refer to page #, lines ### to ### of the revised manuscript.*

### Challenge #2: reviewer requested a significant amount of additional data

A reviewer might request additional data to improve the robustness of the study findings. Sometimes, authors may hesitate to incorporate additional data, more so if the data are too large to handle. If such a request makes clear sense to the author, regardless of its magnitude, efforts should be taken to plan and provide the additional data [8], in part or in full. In addition to adding soundness to the manuscript, providing the requested additional data will indicate the willingness and commitment of the authors to do everything

they can to address the reviewer's comments. Although a positive outcome is highly likely obtainable when all of the reviewer's comments are addressed, it does not guarantee acceptance for publication, but it will surely enhance the quality of the paper. If the reviewer's request cannot be fulfilled, it is acceptable to provide a logical and reasonable explanation to enable the reviewer to understand the authors' limitations [9]. As an alternative, the authors can discuss these limitations in the revised manuscript. If the authors feel that the request will require an additional study because the scope is too big, it is advisable to include the suggestion in the revised manuscript as a recommendation for future studies [10]. The reviewer should be thanked for providing the suggestion.

#### Example

**Reviewer's comment:** *It would be interesting to include data on XYZ and conduct a multivariate analysis using these data.*

**Author's response (agree with reviewer):** *We thank the reviewer for the comment. We agree that the reviewer's suggestion will enhance further understanding on our findings. We have included the data on XYZ and the findings on the multivariate analysis using these data in page ### of the revised manuscript.*

**Author's response (disagree with reviewer):** *We thank the reviewer for the comment. Unfortunately, we are unable to include the requested data and analysis in the revised manuscript due to (state reasons). However, we have included the reviewer's suggestion in the limitation/directions for future research in page ## of the revised manuscript.*

### Challenge #3: reviewer was rude and presented comments that personally attack the author

Although this scenario is rare, some reviewers have been found to provide discourteous comments which on occasions appear as a personal attack [11]. In some of these situations, there are possibilities of miscommunication. A rude review does not need to be reciprocated. Instead, the authors should focus on the substance of the comments rather than the tone (and the various punctuation marks) used by the reviewer [12]. If the reviewers' comments were outright discourteous, the author can take this matter to the editor and, if needed, request that the article be reassigned to another reviewer [13].

#### Example

**Reviewer's comment:** *The author's last name sounds Spanish. I didn't read the manuscript because I'm sure it's full of bad English [11].*

**Author's feedback to the editor:** *Dear sir/madam, I, the corresponding author of manuscript entitled (state manuscript title and number) would like to bring to your attention on the ad hominem comments presented by Reviewer # (examples). I ignored those comments in the Response to Reviewers' Comments document as it did not enhance the scientific quality of my paper. However, I would like to address it here as I am disheartened that those comments were not omitted before it was sent to me. If deemed required, I would like to kindly request for a reassignment of another reviewer to review my manuscript. I would also like to suggest that future reviews from the above-mentioned reviewer be rechecked before it is sent to the authors. I thank you for your consideration and cooperation.*

#### **Challenge #4: reviewer requests citation of articles irrelevant to the topic**

Responsible referencing is one of the top priorities of the authors in order to demonstrate the foundation of the study and highlight the differences of their findings from those of previous work(s). Sometimes a reviewer might suggest adding irrelevant references to the manuscript. In such situations, the authors must first verify and ensure that the references suggested by the reviewer are indeed irrelevant. This could be done with the help and advice from supervisors or experienced colleagues. Once irrelevance is confirmed, the authors should state in their response to the reviewers that they chose not to include the suggested references as they were completely unrelated to the study. Authors could also provide details on the methodology of the study to convince the reviewers that the results of the study and conclusion of the authors were not compromised even when the suggested references were not included.

#### **Example**

**Reviewer's comment:** *Authors such as XXX, YYY and ZZZ have each contributed immensely in this research area. I am bewildered as none of these author's papers were included in the review. This is but a few names that I can recall. This reflects the incomplete search that was done which may affect the results and conclusion of this review.*

**Author's response:** *We would like to thank the reviewer for pointing out the authors who have contributed immensely in this research area. However, the aim of this review is to provide an updated overview of awareness, knowledge and views of healthcare professionals. The authors mentioned by the reviewer are all researchers who have contributed extensively on the prevalence of the disease. We would like to clarify that these do not fit into the scope of this review hence the reason for exclusion of the studies by these distinguished authors. The*

*entire conduct of the systematic review, including the search strategy used, fulfilled the PRISMA statement. A detailed description of the information sources that were searched, including the dates when each source was last searched is provided as well as the data extraction process is supplied as supplementary material. By strictly adhering to the PRISMA statement (please refer to the PRISMA checklist provided as supplementary material), we believe that the results and the conclusion of this review were not compromised.*

#### **Challenge #5: reviewer missed something that you have already stated**

On the occasion where the reviewer missed out on something that the author has already stated, it is best for the author to tactfully point out exactly where the topic in question was addressed in the original manuscript and then detail how the manuscript has since been revised to emphasise the topic and enhance clarity. Undermining the reviewer for misunderstanding the information is unacceptable.

#### **Example**

**Reviewer's comment:** *It would be good to show the relationship between (a) and (b) in the results section.*

**Author's response:** *Thank you for the comment. However, we would like to kindly draw your attention to the content in the results section at line ### of page ### of the submitted manuscript that discussed your concern. We apologise that our manuscript might have been unclear in stating the relationship between (a) and (b). In order to clarify this statement, the following changes have been made in the revised manuscript: (state the changes).*

#### **Challenge #6: reviewers questioning on authorship**

Authors are often required to submit an authorship statement outlining the contribution of each author when submitting their manuscript for publication consideration. However, at times this statement is not shared with the reviewers. On other occasions, reviewers also might notice that there was significant involvement of certain individuals without inclusion in authorship. This might trigger the reviewers to question the authorship allocation. Although questioning on authorship may sound irrelevant, the authors are obliged to briefly explain the basis of authorship allocation. The response to this kind of comments may not result in corrections in the manuscript but it is the responsibility of the author to provide an explanation.

**Example**

**Reviewer's comment:** *There seems to be two authors, but at least 4 persons seem to have participated in the analysis and have been acknowledged. Why aren't they included as authors?*

**Author's response:** *We appreciate the reviewer's concern. We would like to inform that the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommendations were followed in the authorship allocation for this study. Those who participated in the analysis of the study did not substantially meet the ICMJE criteria hence authorship was not allocated. Furthermore, the individuals who helped in this study agreed to be acknowledged for their contributions and they were duly acknowledged. To address the reviewer's concern, the authors deliberated once again and still feel that the authorship allocation and acknowledgement statement were presented correctly.*

**Challenge #7: reviewers did not agree with each other**

There are times when reviewers present conflicting comments. At this juncture, the authors can point out the disagreement, but aim to fix the problem as well [14]. Each and every case of disagreement is unique and may require different approaches to fix it. Some may even require the editor's intervention. For example, one reviewer may request that a table be expanded to provide more details while another reviewer suggests removing it. The author must make a choice based on which comment seems more valid and could improve the scientific quality of their paper. The approach and solution implemented to resolve the disagreement should be clearly communicated in the response letter to the reviewers. Alternatively, the author could suggest a third solution which is more suitable [15].

**Example**

**Reviewer #1's comment:** *Could you please provide data on ABC in Table 1. This would greatly help to understand XYZ.*

**Reviewer #2's comment:** *I suggest deleting Table 1 as I do not see any relevance in keeping it.*

**Author's response to Reviewer #1:** *Thank you for the suggestion. Reviewer #2 also commented on this issue; however, they suggested removing Table 1. After careful deliberation, we have decided that this option would most improve the quality of our paper. We have revised Table 1 by adding data on ABC.*

**Author's response to Reviewer #2:** *Thank you for the suggestion. Reviewer #1 also commented on this issue; however, they suggested expanding Table 1 with data on ABC. After careful deliberation, we have decided that adding data on*

*ABC to Table 1 would most improve the quality of our paper. We have revised Table 1 by adding data on ABC.*

**Challenge #8: reviewer thinks that the journal is not appropriate**

Manuscript rejection is a situation faced by many authors. Many reasons for rejection have been highlighted in previous studies [16, 17], with the reasons mentioned including originality, language, scope, format and organisation. When manuscripts were rejected for any of these reasons, the majority of them were accepted when the authors reassessed, improvised and submitted the manuscript to a more suitable journal. Identifying and choosing the most 'suitable' journal for submission is a task that cannot be taken lightly. New authors are encouraged to seek advice from their mentor, supervisor or experienced colleagues on this matter. Occasionally, reviewers may recommend rejection when they assess that the article is not suitable for the scope of the journal. In responding to such comments, authors should politely state their disagreement and provide a justification for how the paper fits the scope of the journal.

**Example**

**Reviewer's comment:** *I am sorry but, after assessment, I am unable to recommend acceptance of the paper for publication in this journal. Whilst I read your article with interest, overall I thought it was a bit out of scope for this journal. Also, there wasn't a clear reason why this journal was chosen.*

**Author's response:** *We appreciate the reviewer's feedback but we respectfully disagree that our paper is out of scope for this journal. Our paper has (describe the research gap addressed, knowledge gained, insights provided, questions answered, etc. by your study and its findings with specific reference to the journal's scope). We believe these findings fits within the scope of the journal and would appeal to the readers of this journal.*

**Bias in peer reviewing**

Authors have positive views about peer review and feel that the quality of published papers can be effectively improved by responding to the reviewers' comments [18]. However, the peer reviewing process is not spared from being critiqued as prejudiced and biased [19–22]. Peer reviewers have been reported to assess manuscripts using factors other than research quality and academic contribution, i.e. *ad hominem* bias [21]. Some reviewers have been found to exhibit a bias of favouring established authors and hindering newer ones [20]. Role bias has also been observed when the role



performed by an individual, whether as the reviewer or researcher in the peer review process, can result in a difference in opinion over the importance of criteria for evaluating research quality [22]. Unfortunately, acceptance for publication favouring native English speakers has also been reported [21]. It is somewhat convincing to know that newer approaches to peer reviewing [23] are being introduced and implemented to address examples of prejudice and bias in the traditional peer reviewing process.

## Conclusion

Given the good and the bad of the peer review process, the aim remains clear, which is to provide the authors with an opportunity to improve their work and clarify its presentation. Although various forms and tones of comments have been given by the large pool of reviewers, the approach taken by successful authors to respond to reviewers' comments seems universal. Those who approached reviewers' comments with persistent intellectual and emotional calmness seem to have succeeded in publishing. Authors need to ensure that a point-by-point response is given to each reviewer's comment. It is also wise to practise a composed and objective approach towards responding to reviewer's comments. Additionally, authors need to aim for clarity and conciseness in preparing the manuscript as well as the response documents. With practice and experience, any author can acquire the skill to respond to reviewers effectively and produce a clear, concise and meaningful scientific article.

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