

Answer Reviewer 2: how to respond to peer review without losing the paper

6 MIN READ

A revise-and-resubmit is good news that rarely feels like it. Two or three reviewers have handed you a list of everything wrong with your paper, one of them seems to have read a different manuscript, and the editor wants a response. How you write that response decides whether the paper gets accepted or falls into another round, and it is a skill nobody teaches.

The move that works is not winning the argument. It is making the editor's decision easy. A good response letter shows, comment by comment, that you took the review seriously, fixed what was fixable, and disagreed only where you had reason to. You are not there to be right. You are there to be easy to accept. Here is how to write one, with a worked example of the hardest move and a skeleton you can fill in, drawn from the rebuttals that come through our pre-submission review.

01 You are writing to the editor, not the reviewer

The reviewer will read your response, but the editor decides. The editor is reading for one thing: did the authors engage seriously and is this paper now ready. Write to that.

- Every response is really an argument to the editor that the paper improved. Defensiveness reads as an author who did not listen, and that is the impression that loses the next round.
- Open the letter by thanking the reviewers and stating, in two sentences, the main changes you made. The editor should see the shape of your revision before the point-by-point.
- The temperature of the letter matters as much as the content. A calm, specific, generous response earns benefit of the doubt on the calls that are genuinely arguable.

02 Answer every point, in order, quoting each one

Structure is most of the battle. Quote every one. A response the editor can check line by line against the reviews is a response that gets trusted.

- Copy each reviewer comment in full, then respond directly beneath it. Do not paraphrase or bundle three into one answer. The editor is cross-checking against the original review.
- For every change, say what you changed and where: "We have added this control (Section 3.2, new Figure 4)." A pointer to the exact location lets the editor verify without hunting.
- Number everything and mirror the reviewers' own numbering. Boring, and it is the single biggest thing that makes a response letter easy to accept.

03 When the reviewer is right, concede fast

Most comments are fixable and many are correct. The fastest path to acceptance is to agree, fix it, and move on without ceremony.

- Say "the reviewer is right" and make the change. Do not argue a point you are going to concede anyway; it wastes the reader's patience and your credibility.
- A comment you disagreed with at first is often a signal that something was unclear, not wrong. Fixing the clarity usually answers the comment better than defending the original.
- Thank the reviewer specifically for the catches that improved the paper. It sets the tone for the disagreements that follow.

04 When the reviewer is wrong, disagree with evidence, not attitude

You are allowed to push back. Editors expect it. What sinks a rebuttal is disagreeing by dismissing the reviewer instead of answering them.

- Acknowledge the concern first, then give the specific reason it does not hold: a citation, a result already in the paper, a point of method the reviewer may have missed. Respect plus evidence wins these; tone alone loses them.
- If a reviewer misread the paper, that is partly the paper's fault. Fix the passage that allowed the misreading, rather than telling the reviewer they read it wrong.
- Never write anything you would not want the editor to read, because they will. Sarcasm and exasperation, however earned, read as the author being the problem.

IN PRACTICE

WEAK

The reviewer clearly did not understand our methodology. As we already stated, our approach is standard and well validated.

STRONGER

We appreciate this concern. Our approach follows the validated protocol in [ref 14], and we have added a sentence to Section 2.1 making that explicit, since the comment shows the original passage was easy to misread.

05 When you cannot do what they asked, say so plainly

Some requests are out of scope, out of budget, or would take another two years. Do not bluff it. Handle these honestly instead of pretending or overpromising.

- Explain why the request is beyond this paper: it would require a separate study, the data cannot support it, it is outside the question you set out to answer. Editors accept a clear "here is why not" far more often than authors expect.
- Offer the partial version where you can. If the full experiment is impossible, an added analysis, a caveat, or a framed limitation often satisfies the underlying concern.
- Add the honest limitation to the paper and point to it in your response. A named limitation is a strength in the editor's eyes; a dodged one is a liability.

06 Fill in the response skeleton

This is the structure editors are used to reading. Paste it and work through it reviewer by reviewer, keeping the tone even the whole way down.

- The header sets the frame; the per-comment block does the work; the close lands it. Every reviewer gets the same treatment.

A response-letter skeleton

- ☐ Header: "We thank the reviewers for their careful reading. The main changes are [two-sentence summary]. Our point-by-point responses follow; reviewer comments are in italics and our responses in plain text, with manuscript changes noted by section."
- ☐ Per comment: "[Reviewer comment, quoted in full.] Response: [agree, partially agree, or respectfully disagree]. [What you did, or the specific reason you did not.] [Exact location of the change: section, figure, table, line.]"
- ☐ For a disagreement: "We appreciate this concern. [Specific evidence: a result in Section X, a cited source, a point of method.] We have [clarified the passage or added a note] so this is explicit in the revised manuscript."
- ☐ Close: "We hope the revised manuscript addresses the reviewers' concerns and thank the editor for the opportunity to strengthen the paper."

One rule the whole way down: nothing in the letter should read as annoyed. The editor is reading the temperature as closely as the content.

THE NEXT STEP

A template shapes the reply. The Academy prevents the round.

A skeleton helps you answer well. What it cannot do is stop the second round from happening, because most of the painful comments are the ones a careful reader would have caught before submission: the missing control, the overclaimed causal line, the weak-fit framing. That is what the Academy does, on your own manuscript: it finds those objections while you can still fix them quietly, and walks you to submission-ready, one task at a time.

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