How to write a response to the reviewers of your manuscript

Doing science

Training programmes for scientists usually include modules on writing a scientific manuscript but rarely pay attention to dealing with comments from reviewers. The two main outcomes of the decision process following submission of a manuscript to a journal are: 1) the journal rejects your manuscript; or 2) the journal shows an interest provided that you adequately deal with the comments of the reviewers (major or minor revision). But how do you deal with these comments and how do you write a rebuttal letter in which you deal with these comments? Is the “reviewer always right” and if not, how do you indicate this? In this article, some suggestions are provided for writing a rebuttal letter based on personal experiences, including my experience as Section Editor for Basic Science for the European Respiratory Journal. Whereas this article is focussed on writing rebuttals to comments on submitted manuscripts, some of its content may also be useful for writing rebuttals for, for example, grant writing.

How to write a response letter

Consider the following: you have submitted a manuscript to a scientific journal, awaited the response from the journal and then you get an e-mail saying that it is nice but not acceptable in its present form. Is this good news or bad news? Actually, it is good news because the journal is apparently interested, and manuscripts rarely get accepted without any comments and subsequent revisions. So, now you have read the comments from the editor and the reviewers. What do you need to do next?

It is essential that you “sleep on it” before starting to write your rebuttal. You should carefully read the accompanying letter from the editor again to find out what they have highlighted in the reviewers’ comments and whether any additional points have been raised. Next, read the reviewers’ comments again carefully and check the issues raised by the reviewer with the manuscript you submitted. If you feel that none of the comments are worth making changes to your manuscript, you are most likely wrong. Read the comments again and sleep on it again.

The next thing to do is to carefully discuss the comments, a reply and the performance of additional experiments (if applicable) with your co-authors. After you have done that, decided whether and which additional experiments are needed, and you have performed and analysed these experiments, you can start to work on your reply to the comments: the rebuttal letter. Actually, it may be better to start earlier (the sooner the better) because that usually will increase the quality of your response. You can use the outline below to structure your work on the response.

When writing your reply or rebuttal, it is best to keep in mind that the better you structure this, the...
How to write a response to the reviewers of your manuscript

Realise that the reviewer has taken time to
Discuss the comments in detail in advance with
Organise the comments/questions from the
Write an introduction to your response to the
Include a heading for every page with “Reply
outline for writing your response.
any issue raised by the journal. Here is a suggested
easier it is for the editor and reviewers to see what
you have done. In addition, it helps you not to forget
any issue raised by the journal. Here is a suggested
outlook for writing your response.

- Include a heading for every page with “Reply
to the comments on manuscript [title of your
manuscript] [manuscript ID number]” and “[your
name] et al.”
- Write an introduction to your response to the
comments and summarise major changes you
have made, and include this with this response
or use it for a separate cover letter for the Editor.
Do not forget to thank the editor and reviewers
for their efforts.
- Organise the comments/questions from the
editor and each reviewer and your response,
for example, as follows.
1) Comment 1.1. (for comment 1 from reviewer
1) followed by a copy–paste of the comment
or question, or a short summary of the point
raised. If the reviewer’s comments are not
numbered, split the review into individual
comments. You can use italics to highlight
the comments from the reviewer.
2) Reply 1.1. (the reply to comment 1 from
reviewer 1). This is why this is often called
a point-by-point reply to the comments.

Prepare this document in the early phase to
structure how you handle the comments. In the
beginning you can use the “reply” space to simply
type what you think the reply should be (e.g. with
keywords) or whether additional experiments are
(really) needed.

Here are some ground rules for the content of
your reply.

- Discuss the comments in detail in advance with
your co-authors and always send the proposed
reply to the comments to your co-authors before
submitting it. Carefully consider their comments
and suggestions to improve the quality of your
rebuttal letter, and remember that you answer
on behalf of them.
- Carefully read the requirements from the journal
for submitting a revised version (e.g. marked-up
version).
- Realise that the reviewer has taken time to
evaluate your manuscript and aims to help
you to improve it (although it may sometimes
appear otherwise). Be polite to the reviewer
and editor, and do not be dismissive of their
comments. Even if they appear to be making
“stupid” remarks and you feel that “they have
not understood your paper” or actually missed
something. Please realise that this means that
one of the key readers of your manuscript has
not understood what you wanted to say, so you
have to try harder. You can (and should) adapt
the manuscript and answer by saying, “this
has been clarified in the original manuscript
on page x, but maybe we have not made this
sufficiently clear. Therefore, we have now
stressed this item on ...”
- Always be very specific in your response and
address all points raised. A one-line reply is
rarely sufficient. However, sometimes, in the
case of, for example, an editorial comment or
spelling error, you can answer “This has now
been amended”; “We agree” or “We apologise
for this omission”. If more than one reviewer has
raised the same point, refer to this (“this point
has been addressed in the reply to comments
of reviewer y”). Consider including additional
information, data or figures for the reviewer
that were not included in the manuscript if it
helps you to make your point. If you cannot
address a point raised by the reviewer, explain
why. If you feel that a certain comment is
outside the scope of your study, please explain
this. If you disagree with the reviewer (yes, this
may happen) and/or think that an additional
experiment or analysis is not needed, explain
why. Carefully consider also mentioning this in
the Discussion, for example, in the paragraph
with limitations, since readers may share the
reviewer’s opinion. Never claim to have made
changes if you have not done so.
- If you have been asked to shorten some part of
your manuscript, do so. You can even indicate
by how much (words or percentage) you have
shortened it.
- Make life easy for the reviewer and the editor.
Always indicate where you have made a change
in your manuscript in response to the question/
comments: “This is now addressed in the
Discussion section of the revised manuscript
on page x, line y”. If appropriate, cite relevant
references in your reply.
- The response that you write should be directed
to the Editor and not to the Reviewers. You
should write for instance “We agree with the
reviewer...” rather than “We agree with you”.
Always refer to the reviewer in third person.

Concluding remarks and further reading

We all know that rejection rates can be high,
especially for high-profile journals. Always be aware
that your resubmitted and revised manuscript may
still be rejected. Writing a response or rebuttal letter,
maybe performing additional experiments and
revising your manuscript takes time, and there is
usually also a deadline from the journal. Organising
this process and making best use of the expertise
of your co-authors (and the reviewers) increases
your chances of being successful in getting your
paper published. If your manuscript is rejected,
either in its revised or original form, make sure to
incorporate suggestions from the reviewers into
the manuscript to make it better when you submit it
to another journal.
In addition to this contribution to *Breathe*, several websites provide information for writing response or rebuttal letters, including the “dos and don’ts” that come with writing such a letter. Suggestions can be found in the Further Reading section of this article.

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**References**