



## *How do you respond to the reviewers of your article?*

### **How long is a reasonable time to wait for a response?**

A number of journals allow you to track the progress of your article through the review process. On submission of the article, the journal will send you a number to use for tracking your article. This is helpful to see where your article is stuck.

A reasonable time to wait before enquiring about your article is 2- 3 months.

### **What should you remember prior to reading the reviewer comments?**

There are 3 facts to remember before you open and read the comments from the editor and the reviewers:

- No article is perfect no matter how long you have worked on writing it. You will have to revise portions of it. Everyone has to revise his or her articles.
- Most reviewers and editors are actually interested in improving your article. So most reviewers and editors are on your side if you have an interesting article.
- Peer review means exactly that: review by one of your peers. Peer review is not always a review by an expert. It is important to accept this fact.

### **What should I do when reading the comments from the editor and reviewers?**

You are either going to be very happy (your article provisionally accepted with minor revisions) or very cross (your article requires major revisions or is rejected). If your article has been provisionally accepted on condition that you respond you have a good chance of getting the article published. You now have to develop your reply to the reviewers.

## What tips are there to replying to the reviewers?

One of the best articles published with tips on replying to the reviewers had the following advice<sup>1</sup>:

1. Get mad then get over it.
2. Consider what the editor's letter really says.
3. Wait, gather your thoughts.
4. Even if the reviewer is wrong it does not mean you are right.
5. Choose your battles wisely.
6. Never pit one reviewer against the other.
7. Be grateful for the editor's and reviewer's time.
8. Restate the reviewers comment(s) when responding.
9. Be prepared to cut text.
10. Do not submit to another journal without revising your manuscript.

To these tips we would add the following:

1. The editor is always right.
2. Be polite when responding.
3. Discuss the review with all the authors; take advice.
4. If the reviewer(s) misinterpreted your statements the most likely reason is that you did not write clearly.
5. Address each point the reviewers make. Address does not necessarily mean that you agree with the reviewer or accept their recommendation(s).
6. If you differ from the reviewer and do not accept a recommendation for changes you have to argue your point academically/scientifically and not emotionally or personally.
7. Absolutely avoid personal comments.
8. Write a well thought through letter to the editor. Do not fight with the editor. Remember point number 1.
9. If you have a good paper never give up, it will be published.
10. Even though we all hate criticism, use this process as another learning opportunity to improve your writing skills.

## What do you do if the article is accepted with minor revisions?

If the editor indicates that your paper is accepted with minor revisions – celebrate! Your paper will be published. Accept the changes the reviewers request and re-submit with a letter indicating exactly how you have responded to each of the reviewers suggestions and a letter to the editor thanking him /her. Do this quickly so that the editor does not have a chance to forget the article.

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<sup>1</sup> Annesley TM. Top 10 tips for responding to the reviewer and editor comments. *Clinical Chemistry* 2011; 57:551-554.

## **What do you do if the editor's letter suggests that the article is possibly accepted but needs major revision(s)?**

This is the response that most authors receive (>80%). Do not think the editor or reviewer is against you. In most cases if you respond in detail to each of the recommendations made by the reviewers, your article should be accepted. Do not send it to another journal before answering the present one.

Read the letter carefully as well as the reviewers' comments to make sure you know exactly what the editor and the reviewers want.

Send the letter to your fellow authors without any comments (they probably have received an electronic copy already).

Re-read the letter after a day or two to make sure you understand the revisions required.

Discuss the letter with your fellow authors and devise a plan how to respond. Sometimes responding takes a lot of time. You might even have to re-analyse some of your data (remember the last TIP step 14 to safely store your final database?) or do an extensive literature search.

We recently wrote an 11-page response to a 7-page article and eventually got it published!

Take your time, do not rush. You must and will get it right. Discuss your reply with your fellow authors.

Write a covering letter to the editor on resubmission.

Follow all the rules of the journal for re-submission.

If you have answered all the reviewers' comments carefully, and you are lucky you can sometimes get a letter of acceptance within a week ( our record is 6 hours).

## **Now you know what to do, but how do you respond to the comments made by the reviewers?**

The easiest way is to copy the whole letter from the editor and reviewers onto a word document and then address each recommendation/query in a detailed respectful way. (See Appendix 10 for example of a reply to the editor /reviewer.)

## What do you do if your article is rejected?

The rejection can follow 2 courses. The one is a desk rejection by the editor who feels the article is not suited to the journal. There are no accompanying reviewers' comments so you have not learned about the strengths and weaknesses of your article. Reconsider your title and abstract to make sure you are selling your article. Choose the next journal on the list and submit the article.

The second type of rejection follows the comments and recommendations by the reviewers. It does not help fighting with the editor. Unless a reviewer has made a serious mistake the editor is going to back the reviewers. Read the reasons for the rejection carefully. Put the article aside for a day or three and then follow the process required for a major revision. After the article has been revised and all the authors agree with the revised version it is ready to resubmit to the next journal on your list.

Please do not resubmit without careful consideration of all the reviewers' points. Save yourself the pain of getting another unfavourable review.



All articles of scientific merit will get published: do not give up.

Gie, R., & Beyers, N. (2014). *Getting started in clinical research: Guidance for junior researchers*. Cape Town: Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University.