

Cashing in on Criticism

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Outline

- Types of Criticism
- Role of Implicit Bias in Review
- Responding to the Review
- Best Practices in Responding to Criticism

Types of Criticism

- Collegial
- Nit-picky
- Biased
- Hostile/Hangry

Collegial

- Respectful
- Sticks to facts
- Offers advice for improvement
- Clear statements for revision
 - Figure 2 needs to be clarified with respect to . . .
 - NOT: I do not like figure 2. It needs to be changed.

Nit-Picky

- Focused on trivial things
 - Use of language
 - Formatting of figures
 - Not done according to instructions to authors or as done in final published article
- Elevates trivial to fatal flaws in the manuscript

Biased

- Non-substantive arguments against findings in paper
 - “No one believes that x could possibly impact y”
 - “Other researchers have been unable to repeat these analyses”
 - “This work was controversial when presented at a meeting”
- Unsubstantiated criticism on lack of suitability of experimentation or data analyses
- Questions if methods were performed correctly given the outcome
- Opinionated comments not backed up by fact
- Biased against the work itself

Hostile

- Uses negative/insulting language
- Questions validity of previously published work by the one or more authors implying misconduct
- Dismissive and non-respectful comments
 - Adequate controls were not considered by the authors
 - Authors did not conduct analysis properly
- Clearly biased against the people

Role of Implicit Bias in Review

- Several studies show that the gender of an author impacts review
- Implicit bias may be evident in comments - downplaying of role of underrepresented group members in the author list
- On-line commentary: more negative for women and URM scholars?

Responding to Review

Upon receipt of a review . . .

- Read it over quickly
- Do nothing for at least 24 hours, then read it again more carefully
- Make note of what the editor suggests should be changed
- Talk openly with other authors about it
- Have others read it “peer review the peer review”
- Pick your battles wisely

DO NOT Feed Your Imposter Syndrome

Do not think of the review as a confirmation of your innate deficiencies, rather than suggestions for improvement of the body of work

DO NOT Respond in Anger

- Take the high road at all times
- Have peers review the comments with you

DO:

- Critically review the review
- Share the review with all co-authors
- Discuss the review with colleagues
- Discuss your response to the review with colleagues
- Respect the reviewer
- Respect the formatting issues even if trivial

Best Practices in Responding to Review

Understand the Review Process

- Reviewers were asked to be critical by the editor
- Reviewers were told only a certain % can be accepted
- Reviewers likely told to make sure article conforms to journal standards
- Reviewers may have been told to assess compliance with instructions to authors

Response to Reviewers

- Take the high road
- Pick your battles
- Think "teaching moment"

Response to Reviewers: Take the High Road

"It is this letter that will get your revised paper accepted not the revised manuscript itself."

- David Huron in discussing the letter of response in his "Some Advice About Interacting with Journal Editors and Reviewers"

Taking the High Road

- Do not dismiss “bad” comments, figure out why they were made and address issue
- Assume responsibility for misunderstandings
 - NOT: “Reviewer 1 completely misunderstood our clear explanation of the protocol.”
 - RATHER: “We thank reviewer 1 for pointing out the lack of clarity in the explanation of the protocol and have revised as follows . . .”
- Even “off-the-wall this reviewer knows nothing about my field” comments are useful
 - You learn to write for a broader audience
 - You attain “moments of clarity” from figuring out how someone could misinterpret what you said in the way that they did
- Acknowledge and thank reviewers for good ideas/suggestions
- Do a point-by-point response so you do not miss anything

Pick Your Battles

- It may be nit-picky but make the change anyway: this respects the time of the reviewers
- Read not just the reviewer comments but the comments of the associate editor to know what is important and what is not
- Be sure to thank the reviewers even when you disagree with them- address the reason that you disagree respectfully (in doing so you will improve your manuscript)

Teaching Moments

- When faced with a hostile review - consider submitting somewhere else
- Really bad reviews (hostile, angry, biased) should be approached as a “teaching moment”
 - Point out in a kind way your surprise at lack of professionalism in the review process to the editor
 - Point out clear evidences of bias and lack of factual documentation of negative comments

Final Comments

- Teach your students and postdocs how to handle negative reviews
 - Help them put it in perspective and to not take it personally
 - Address issues with imposter syndrome
 - Have them aid in the response process
- Teach your students to be good reviewers
 - Respectful
 - Fact-based comments
 - Helpful advice