



## Responding to Reviewers: Tips for New Authors

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Throughout my professional career, I've submitted many articles to be considered for publication. Each undergoes a peer review from which I'm sent the reviewers' feedback. Responding to the reviews has become second nature to me now, but I distinctly remember a time when it wasn't.

At first, I didn't know what to expect to read in a review, or how to respond to the given feedback. In fact, my misperception of the first manuscript review I ever received was that the reviewers didn't like the article. Out of frustration, I temporarily ceased work on the manuscript and stuffed my work away in a desk drawer.

Fortunately, my dissertation chairperson later asked me about my reviewed manuscript. She read the review and explained I'd received a conditional acceptance, a good review for a first submission. She encouraged me to make the changes and resubmit the document. I did just that, and the article was accepted and published later that year. I've since observed that although we're encouraging each other to write and disseminate our knowledge and expertise, we don't always teach new authors how to respond to the reviews they receive. If we focus on coaching new authors through the process, they too can achieve their publication goals and mentor others in the process. Here are some suggestions for new authors.

### The proper mindset

Remember that it's the reviewer's job to look for areas where your manuscript is unclear, inaccurate, or irrelevant. Before publishing, it's always best to make sure someone else with expertise on the topic also gives your work the okay.

Reviewers frequently find areas for improvement in manuscripts. Don't take the criticism or feedback personally. A review that simply says "Good article" doesn't help you learn or grow as a nurse-author nearly as much as a detailed review with constructive feedback. Understand that for this reason, most of the comments you may receive will likely indicate areas the reviewer feels should be edited prior to manuscript acceptance.

Some reviewers may point out strengths in the article, but many approach the review process under the assumption that you're already an expert on the topic of your manuscript. In this case, reviewers will most likely point out only areas that need improvement. Even when the journal would really like to

publish your manuscript, the feedback will probably still take the form of a list of suggested improvements.

### Three-Step Response

**Step One:** *Begin your response with a statement of appreciation and maintain this polite and appreciative tone throughout your response.*

**Step Two:** *Itemize the reviewers' concerns and clearly respond to each one.*

**Step Three:** *Include a summation thank-you statement at the conclusion of your response.*

Begin by appreciating the work that went into the review, even if the prospect of revision seems challenging. The time and energy involved is voluntarily committed by the reviewer and should be appreciated, even if you disagree with some of the feedback.

### Composing your response

Sometimes reviewers make many minor editorial suggestions or grammatical corrections. These can be grouped into one statement and responded to with the following statement: "Suggested grammatical changes noted and made throughout the document." Make sure you do go back and edit the indicated text. Experts suggest including the line numbers where you made changes to ensure you haven't missed a requested edit and to quickly draw reviewers' and editors' eyes to the updates.<sup>1</sup> Other statements relating to revisions in specific areas of the document should be restated or quoted. Follow these with explanations of how you changed your manuscript as per reviewer suggestions. Follow the reviewers' suggestions for anything that seems reasonable and/or is an easy change to make. If it doesn't hurt the manuscript, make the suggested change.

### In cases of disagreement

If the reviewers include feedback you don't agree with or are unwilling or unable to change, you can approach the situation in a few different ways, depending on the circumstances. If the suggestions would be too much work or impossible with your data, you can note that by responding with a statement such as "I agree that XYZ are interesting points; however, this content would require additions beyond the scope of the article."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes a requested edit may significantly increase your article's word count. The editor of your article can help clarify if you should stick to the word count or if additional content space is available. Just because the reviewer suggests it, doesn't mean you have to make the change. On the other hand, if you think a reviewer is wrong, it doesn't mean that you're right.<sup>3</sup>

You can also agree that a suggestion is interesting but the data available doesn't allow you to determine the answer at this time. When you respond in this manner, you may wish to also mention that you've noted this constraint in the limitations of your study and appreciate the reviewer noting it. Reviewer confusion may be directly related to information you didn't explain thoroughly or completely. Look closely at the content you provided to ensure that you've clearly explained the information that may have been misinterpreted. You can then respond that after reading the reviewer feedback, you realized

you didn't fully explain XYZ and you've clarified the content. Note the line numbers where you did so. If you feel that you need to further explain why you're correct, you likely need to include that explanation in the manuscript as well, so do it there instead of in your response to the reviewers.

### Alternate reviewer opinions

Sometimes reviewers will make conflicting suggestions. If so, don't panic. Reviewers may be looking at your article from very different perspectives. You should politely respond to both reviewers and provide a reasonable explanation for your decision and how it will improve the manuscript.<sup>3</sup> If one suggested adding a table while the other suggested including additional content, you may be able to merge the suggestions and respond to each reviewer that you've added additional content in the attached table. Maintaining a good working relationship with your manuscript editor(s) is extremely helpful in situations like this. Don't be afraid to reach out to the editor for direction if your reviewers disagree.

### Revision is a good thing

Remember that if you're being asked to revise your article it means the reviewers see some value in your work. Otherwise, they would have rejected it outright. Take a moment to enjoy getting that far, and then work on getting your revisions done as thoroughly and precisely as possible. Make sure you're timely as well. Prompt revisions ensure the content is fresh and current. Delaying revisions can provide an opportunity for someone else to submit similar work or for information in the manuscript to become outdated. With your first few responses to reviewers, ask a respected coach or mentor look at your work before you submit. Your responses are frequently seen only by the editors but they may also be sent back to the reviewers, which is another reason to respond in a professional manner.

### Next steps

Once you've completed your revisions and resubmitted your manuscript, you may receive a rejection, another request for revision, or, hopefully, an acceptance letter. Acceptances are big accomplishments, but they aren't the end of the road to publication. As the journal prepares the article for publication, you'll hear again from the editors, who will send you an updated copy of the article to review before it's published. If any additional revisions, changes, or clarifications are requested, respond in a very timely manner; a delay at this point may prevent your article from going to press. Finally seeing your article in print makes the entire review process worthwhile. Being the author of a published manuscript means you've made a significant contribution to the professional nursing literature, a highly rewarding accomplishment on both a personal and professional level.

### References

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