

## How to respond to reviewers in the publication process

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\*\*\* Note: We have made this document based on personal experience. The response to reviewers, or rebuttal, can be journal specific. However, we believe many of the tips here can be applied generally. \*\*\*

In this guide we show:

1. The typical structure of a reviewer response.
2. Describe the best way to address the reviewer's comments and requests.
3. Provide flavors of starting sentences when responding to reviewers.
4. An annotated example of a previous reviewer response is given at the end of the suggestions.
5. Case specific examples
  - a. How to challenge a reviewer respectfully.
  - b. How to address an unfair review.

## What does a typical response look like:

Before knowing how to properly respond to reviewers it is important to fully read through the reviewer's criticisms and suggestions, as every point made needs to be addressed. The structure of a typical review can be observed below and an example from the Raj Lab given at this link.

The typical structure is:

1. A short (1-2 paragraph) summary of the paper from the reviewer's perspective.

*Here, Burnham et al. describe a novel technique to ...*

2. A short (usually one paragraph) assessment of the work's relevance, clarity, and novelty, and possibly a recommendation of whether or not the journal should publish the work.

*The work described shows significant progress in the field, though several questions need to be addressed in order to validate the proposed method....*

3. A numerical list of major criticisms and questions. These are typically fundamental to the understanding of the work and its logical flow. It is also the area where a reviewer can request more experiments.

*1. It was not clear that the experiments described in the results (In 128-130). Ans shown in Fig. 2, show a proper negative control to rule out the effect of ....*

4. A numerical list of minor criticisms and questions. Sometimes reviewers will also point out typographical errors in this area.

*1. In Fig. 3b, the colors of the culture-positive and culture-negative points in scatterplot are indistinguishable in a print out. Please use a different choice of colors...*

5. A short paragraph summarizing concerns and again describing the novelty, relevance, etc... of the work. This part (#5) is often missing from many reviews.

This process will then be repeated for each subsequent reviewer (usually 3 total reviewers).

### General tips for the rebuttal process:

1. It is important to note that (unfortunately) reviewers like it when we generally agree with their suggestions. Some of the examples of how to address this aspect are provided in the next section.
2. It can not be stressed enough the importance of reading the reviews in entirety. The review process can be stressful and, at times, demoralizing. However if your work was reviewed that was already a positive sign about the importance and value of your work. Even in the case of a rejection by reviewers, the process is your chance to improve the work and revise it to make it more understandable to the proper audience.
3. Often reviewer comments can be tricky to understand. If you aren't sure, definitely ask someone else to read it and get their perspective.
4. If you are submitting revisions, be sure to download the reviewers' responses and put them into a google doc for you and your collaborators to work. Each point from the reviewers needs to be addressed (even if you don't agree with their suggestion). A good way to keep track of this in the google doc is to highlight every question/concern/criticism by reviewers, and subsequently unhighlight them when they have been addressed in the response.
5. Format your rebuttal as a point-by-point reply to reviewers (as opposed to a document following the entire review). We show this example below:
  - a. Following the reviewer's summary and assessment sections (sections 1 and 2, above), thank the reviewer for their assessment of your work and say something regarding their review.

A few sentences that will come handy when writing a response:

### **General letter to editor:**

#### Beginning:

*Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to submit a revised version of our manuscript, “XXX” for further consideration at YYY. Both you and the reviewers raised several important and insightful points, and we have performed additional XXX that we believe address their major concerns. Specific highlights of our revision include: [typically 3-6 points]*

#### End:

*The text in the revised manuscript and response letter is marked in red and magenta, respectively.*

*Thank you again for your consideration, and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.*

### **Response to reviewers:**

*We thank the reviewer for the positive comments and interest in our work.*

*We thank the reviewer for raising these conceptually deep and important discussion points.*

*We thank the reviewer for the critical reading of our manuscript and providing insightful comments. We believe that their comments and suggestions have greatly strengthened our revised manuscript.*

*We have made substantial efforts to address most of the reviewers’ comments and we believe that the revised manuscript is substantially improved as a result.*

*We completely agree with the reviewer’s suggestion on XYZ.*

*The reviewer has raised an important point about XYZ.*

*We thank the reviewer for pointing out the potential issue with XYZ.*

*The reviewer has also asked us to XYZ.*

*The reviewer is absolutely correct in pointing out that XYZ.*

*We thank the reviewer for their encouraging comments, and also for their suggestions that we believe have significantly improved our revised manuscript.*

*We next hypothesized, partly inspired by the reviewers previous comment, XYZ.*

*Thanks to the reviewer for drawing attention to XYZ.*

*We thank the reviewer for catching these errors in XYZ.*

*We thank the reviewer for pointing out the XYZ and apologize for this oversight.*

Example annotated Response Letter from our recent paper which had 1 very favorable review; 1 decent/OK review; and 1 terrible review. The paper got accepted after this round of revision.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/17f4pyQ1kowgTOIM7mazbXV8uzp2Ev8jaDOYp7MPnYF8/edit?usp=sharing>